Fashion has made progress on diversity, but still has a long way to go

By Robin Driver - February 1, 2021

A new study published by the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) and Tommy Hilfiger parent company PVH Corp reveals the recent progress made by the American fashion industry in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and highlights six key areas for future growth: awareness, access, promotion, advocacy, compensation and belonging.

Building on research started in 2019, the “State of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in Fashion" report highlights that meaningful advances have been made in the sector, but also emphasizes that fashion still needs to take considerable steps if it hopes to become a truly equal and inclusive industry.

In terms of progress, the report highlights that 60% of respondents felt that their companies have undertaken internal or external DEI actions, while four out of five said that they believed that this response was authentic.

78% also said that they think their companies value the differences that diverse teams bring to the workplace.

However, the report also found that 50% of employees of color feel that the fashion industry is not equally accessible to all qualified candidates, with one in four articulating serious questions about the existence of meritocracy in the sector.

In particular, 68% of Black employees reported greater inaccessibility to the fashion industry, compared to just 37% of white employees. Furthermore, 38% of Black employees said that they felt they were “not at all equipped” for their first job search, compared to 19% of white employees.

LGBTQ+ employees also reported accessibility issues, with 51% reporting greater inaccessibility vs. 41% of heterosexual employees.

“The inclusion and diversity challenges in the fashion industry are real,” commented newly appointed PVH CEO
In the areas of awareness and access, the report pointed out problems including a lack of information available about the breadth of different opportunities in the fashion industry for people living in lower-income areas, citing interviewees who said that companies could do more to reach out to these communities.

As for promotion and advocacy, the study highlights the perception shared by people of color, women and older survey respondents that they were not fairly considered for promotion, while also pointing to mentorship as a possible area of improvement that could foment further opportunities for these employees.

Insufficient compensation was also identified as a “significant barrier” to entering and remaining in the fashion industry, with 42% of respondents saying that they had considered leaving the sector because they could find better pay elsewhere.

Finally, the report states that many employees of color do not feel a sense of belonging at their companies, with two in three Black employees saying that they were frequently the only Black person in the room, a fact which led to them feeling an increased pressure to perform.

The CFDA and PVH’s report is based on a survey conducted by McKinsey & Company of 1,000 working industry professionals across 41 companies, 20 stakeholder interviews, and three focus groups held with college students and emerging designers. This research was carried out in fall of 2020.