

What It Means to Live as a Woman of Color in the U.S.

*Insights from conversations with women of color across the
United States.*

**Report Series No. 1
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all the women who participated in this project. This report would not exist without you. Thank you for trusting me with your stories. It was an honor to listen to your experiences and witness how they have shaped who you are today. I truly appreciate each of you.

This report is built from those moments.

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Executive Summary

This report is part of the Brown Girl Project, an ongoing research initiative centered on the experiences of women of color in the United States.

In 2022, Brown Girl Project conducted a pilot investigation through conversations with women of color about their lived experiences. This report builds on that initial work, focusing on how women identify as women of color.

Across conversations, similar experiences began to surface, and patterns emerged. While identity was the central focus, it became clear that identity is not formed in isolation. Participants described navigating their lives through their upbringing, culture, relationships, and work, all of which shape how they understand themselves.

A key finding was that many participants described their experiences as neu--

tral or unaffected, and at times were not fully conscious of how they felt. However, through the conversations, many began to question and reflect on their identity in ways they had not before.

This reveals a gap in how women of color are currently understood and supported, particularly at the level of everyday lived experience.

These insights suggest the need to look beyond institutional frameworks and consider support at a cultural and psychological level – how beliefs are formed, how behaviors are shaped, and how people learn to navigate their lives over time.

This work aims to use these findings to inform more accessible, relevant, and meaningful forms of support.

About Brown Girl Project

Who are we?

Brown Girl Project is a research and dialogue initiative that brings women of color together to reflect on lived experiences and build shared understanding.

Through facilitated conversations, participants are invited to speak openly, listen to one another, and engage in collective reflection. These conversations are documented, and insights are shared back with participants for further dialogue and exploration.

Rather than extracting stories, this work focuses on shared interpretation – identifying patterns, tensions, and questions that emerge individually and collectively.

Brown Girl Project operates as both a research initiative and a community space. It is grounded in ongoing inquiry, shaped by participant feedback, and centered on creating spaces for connection, reflection, and understanding.

Who is a brown girl?

Brown Girl Project understands “Brown” as a relational and identity shaped by histories of marginalization rather than by rigid racial or gender categories.

It names a shared space shaped by lived experiences, cultural complexity, and exclusion, while honoring fluidity, self-identification, and intersectionality.

Context: Women of Color in the U.S.

The term “women of color” is commonly used in the United States to describe women whose racial and ethnic identities exist outside of whiteness. While it can serve as a unifying category, it encompasses a wide range of lived experiences shaped by race, ethnicity, class, and social context (Catalyst, 2022).

Women of color represent a significant portion of the population, yet continue to experience disparities across areas such as economic security, health, education, and political representation (Catalyst, 2022; Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2015).

These disparities are shaped by broader historical and social structures that have positioned whiteness, particularly white womanhood, as the standard within institutions and cultural norms (ten Brink, 2020).

At the same time, the category of “women of color” is not internally uniform.

Differences in ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education, and cultural background create varied experiences, which can sometimes lead to division or misunderstanding across communities (Yoo, 2013; Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2015).

Research has shown that comparing groups based on measures such as income or education can obscure the distinct challenges faced by different populations, while also reinforcing hierarchies within marginalized groups (Yoo, 2013; Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2015).

Much of the existing literature focuses on structural inequalities, systemic barriers, and theoretical frameworks. While these perspectives are critical, they do not always capture how these dynamics are experienced in everyday life (Center for American Progress, 2022.)

This report builds on examining how broader social and cultural forces are reflected in the ways individuals think, behave, and navigate their lives.

Why This Project Exists

Much of the conversation around women of color is already shaped by systems, inequality, and oppression. While these frameworks are important, they do not fully capture how these dynamics are experienced in everyday life.

What often remains less understood is how these forces show up in daily decisions, relationships, work, and internal experiences, and how they shape how women of color move through the world.

Brown Girl Project approaches this work through participatory, conversation-based research, focusing on listening to how people describe their own lives, rather than starting from predefined narratives.

This investigation is grounded in a central question:

How are women of color actually experiencing their day-to-day lives, and what kind of support would meaningfully improve their quality of life?

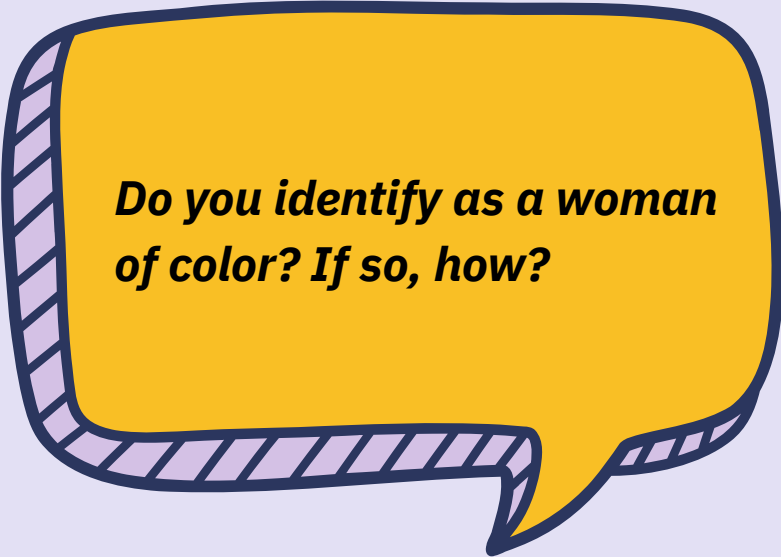
Note from pilot investigator

The themes presented in this report first emerged during early group conversations. While these initial discussions were exploratory and not intended to be representative, the repetition of certain experiences pointed to shared patterns that warranted further exploration.

This project began as a pilot phase grounded in open dialogue rather than predefined research questions. These early conversations highlighted the value of creating space to listen before defining outcomes.

Rather than presenting fixed conclusions, this report builds on those initial insights as part of an ongoing inquiry. The patterns identified here serve as a starting point for deeper exploration, continued conversation, and future phases of this work.

The Question



Do you identify as a woman of color? If so, how?

Women were asked the central research question. Each interview started with this question and naturally expanded into broader themes based on participants' responses and reflections.

Approach

Facilitated Conversations

This research was conducted through a combination of group and individual conversations. The term is intentionally framed as “conversations” to reduce the formality of traditional research settings and create a more open, comfortable environment.

Participants were recruited through social media and personal referrals. In total, three group conversations were held (4-6 participants, 1-2 hours), along with seven individual conversations conducted over the phone (1-2 hours each).

Participant Experience & Ethics

Each participant completed a consent form before participation and was informed that their responses would remain anonymous. Participants were free to share as much or as little as they felt comfortable.

Participants were also given the option to complete a post-conversation reflection form, reflecting on their experience, how the conversation felt, and what they would like to explore further.

Approach

Scope of Study

This report focuses on “everyday” women, not those selected based on crisis or extreme circumstances, but those simply navigating their lives.

The intention is to understand how broader social and cultural dynamics are lived in subtle, often unspoken ways, and to use that understanding to inform more grounded and relevant approaches to support.

Data & Interpretation

The insights presented in this report are based on notes and reflections from each session.

Rather than focusing on extraction, this approach centers on interpretation, identifying patterns, themes, and shared experiences across conversations.

This work does not aim to capture every detail or produce definitive conclusions, but to identify patterns in how participants described and understood their experiences.”

Participant Overview

AGE RANGE

Early 20s to early 30s

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Participants identified across a range of sexual orientations, including heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, and queer identities.

CULTURE/ ETHNICITIES

- African American
- Latina
- Middle Eastern
- South Asian
- East Asian
- Mixed Identity

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUNDS

Students, working professionals, creatives, service industry, and individuals navigating transitional stages of life.

MIGRATION & IDENTITY

- First- generation (born in the U.S., parents immigrants)
- Migrants (born and raised elsewhere)
- Early migrants (moved at a young age)
- Multi-generational U.S. backgrounds

*****Demographic and background information was collected not to achieve statistical representation, but to reflect the diversity and range of participants included in this project.**



A Central Observation

What emerged from these conversations suggests how women of color move through their lives.

While this research began with a focus on identity, what became more visible was how participants described navigating their everyday lives through relationships, work, responsibilities, and self-perception.

Over time, similar experiences started coming up across conversations.

Common patterns included:

- **Navigating relationships through compromise or tolerance**
- **Overworking or accepting less in professional and personal spaces**
- **Describing themselves as highly independent, responsible, or driven**

Emotional patterns also surfaced, including anxiety, guilt, and internal pressure, often shaped by upbringing, environment, and cultural expectations. For many participants, these experiences were not named or analyzed in that way. They were understood as normal, simply, **part of life.**

Most were just living their lives, not necessarily thinking of themselves through the lens of being a woman of color, even while identifying as one.

This suggests that identity is not always consciously expressed, but is embedded in how people think, behave, and move through the world.

What Emerged

Theme 1: Disconnection from Identity

All participants were open to having a conversation and were curious to engage. However, many were unsure if they had anything meaningful to contribute. Some questioned whether they were “enough” of a woman of color, especially if they had not experienced overt racism or had grown up with certain privileges.

“I don’t know if I have anything to say.”

“I’m down to help, but I’m not sure if I have anything useful to say.”

Some participants who hesitated shared backgrounds such as growing up affluent, being mixed, having lighter skin, or feeling culturally closer to whiteness.

“I’m not sure about my reflections as a woman of color... although I do identify as a woman.”

“I don’t know if I really experienced life as a woman of color like that.”

When asked directly whether they identified as a woman of color, many participants hesitated. The question itself felt difficult to answer. It required people to separate parts of their identity that, in everyday life, do not feel separate.

As conversations shifted away from the label and toward everyday life, dating, work, and family, participants opened up more easily. When speaking about specific experiences, many began recalling moments from their childhood or past that they had not previously reflected on.

It became less about defining themselves as a “woman of color” and more about describing how they had moved through the world.

One participant described being extremely anxious about how she smelled due to stereotypes about her ethnicity, constantly applying perfume and using words like

“disgusting”

without fully realizing how strong that feeling was at the time.

For others, there was very little to say. They acknowledged their identity, but had not connected their personal experiences to it in a direct way. There was a sense of acceptance rather than reflection or analysis.

“That’s just how it was.”

“Wait...I never really thought about that before.”

Theme 2: Upbringing and Cultural Formation

Upbringing emerged as a major influence in how participants understood themselves and moved through the world.

It came through in how people described their environments, their families, and the beliefs they were raised with.

Many participants spoke about becoming aware of stereotypes at a young age and actively trying not to fit into them.

“My family reflects the stereotype... but I was different.”

“They would get labeled a certain way, and my parents wanted something else for me.”

This often shaped how participants presented themselves and how they wanted to be seen.

Cultural practices also came up frequently, especially things that were once stigmatized but are now more accepted.

“We used to get made fun of for oiling our hair... and now it’s like, cool?”

Language and culture were also important points of connection.

“Latinas all look different... so language is what connects us.”

“Do you speak Spanish?... and then I know, okay, you’re my people.”

At the same time, some participants described a disconnect between how they are categorized and how they understand themselves.

One participant who identified as Persian shared how, on official forms,

“On forms I had to check ‘white’”

because there was no other option, even though she felt deeply connected to her culture.

Others described growing up in environments where they were surrounded by people of color, which became part of their everyday experience.

“All my friends are people of color... it just happened like that.”

Theme 3: Internalized Pressure and Responsibility

As participants shared their experiences, they were also asked to reflect on how those experiences made them feel.

Many described internal feelings such as pressure, obligation, and responsibility, which shaped their decisions and beliefs over time.

Several participants spoke about taking on responsibility early in life in ways that were not fully recognized at the time:

“I raised my sister.”

“I feel like I had to raise my mom.”

This often showed up as a strong sense of independence. Participants described learning how to handle multiple responsibilities at a young age, often without asking for support.

“I’ll just figure it out.”

“I can juggle 10 things.”

At the same time, there was a consistent underlying pressure.

For some, this came from family expectations or financial circumstances, creating a sense of responsibility not just for themselves, but for their families.

“My parents were like, take any job... and I’m like, no, you moved here for more.”

Others described pressure shaped by cultural expectations around hard work, obedience, and success.

“We were taught to work hard, be submissive, and just follow orders.”

These expectations often led to patterns of overextending, overgiving, and difficulty taking up space.

“You have to learn to take up space... you can’t do all the roles.”

Participants also described navigating multiple cultural expectations at once, which created an ongoing internal tension.

“I had to grow up in the patriarchy of India and also the patriarchy of the US.”

Moving between different cultural values, family expectations, and social environments required constant adjustment, often without being explicitly acknowledged.

Participants describe these pressures as shaping how they made decisions and moved through daily life.

Theme 4: Relational Identity and White Space Dynamics

Almost all participants had something to say about their experiences with white people. These interactions were not described as hatred, but more as discomfort, frustration, or a sense that interactions didn't feel natural.

Participants described it as:

“It feels like they’re trying too hard.”

“White people want culture so bad.”

“They don’t know how to just sit down.”

There was a recurring sense of difference in how people experienced these interactions, often described as a lack of ease or mutual understanding.

“It’s like they speak another language.”

In contrast, many participants described feeling more comfortable around other women of color. These connections often felt more natural, without needing explanation.

“It just feels easier.”

“There’s a common understanding.”

In predominantly white spaces, participants became more aware of themselves and how they were perceived. This showed up through code-switching, adjusting how they spoke, acted, or presented themselves depending on the environment.

There were also moments of disconnect, such as not understanding cultural references but feeling the need to go along with them:

“They’re quoting stuff and I have no idea what they’re talking about.”

Practices or features that were once criticized or made fun of are now often seen as trends, which created a sense of discomfort or contradiction.

“We got made fun of for this... and now it’s a trend.”

“America loves Black culture more than they like Black people.”

At the same time, participants acknowledged differences within communities of color, including class, upbringing, and what some described as “white-adjacent” experiences, which shaped how individuals moved through different spaces.

Despite these differences, one pattern remained consistent:

“I feel more relaxed around people of color.”

What this Reveals

The Gap between Recognition and Identity

Many participants had difficulty fully accepting or articulating their identity as women of color, even when they were aware of it. There was often a mix of eagerness and hesitation. This hesitation did not appear tied to specific characteristics, but was common across participants.

Many minimized their experiences, expressing that they “didn’t go through that much” or that others had it worse. Others acknowledged their identity but struggled to expand on it, as if the connection between the label and their lived experiences had not been fully made. Responses were often short, direct, and matter-of-fact, without deeper reflection.

As conversations developed, participants began to open up more, showing curiosity and a growing willingness to reflect and share. In group settings, hesitation was often more visible, shaped by comparison and the perception that others’ experiences may have been more significant.

Upbringing and Environments

Participants came from a wide range of backgrounds that shaped how they understood themselves and their experiences. Many from immigrant backgrounds described coming to the United States for opportunity, exposure, and diversity, while also navigating the realities of adjusting to a new environment.

Across conversations, there was a strong recognition of a shift between childhood and the present. Participants reflected on growing up in environments where stereotypes were more prominent and cultural differences were more stigmatized. These early experiences often required them to hide aspects of themselves or navigate feelings of being different.

Over time, increased visibility and openness toward different cultures created a new context, but also introduced complexity. Participants described having to reconcile earlier experiences of stigma or shame with a present where those same identities were more accepted or even celebrated.

Culture, religion, and tradition remained influential, continuing to shape how participants understood belonging, identity, and self-acceptance.

Subconscious Processing

Many of the patterns described appeared to operate at a subconscious level, shaped by culture, family, environment, and community. Participants shared experiences of feeling less than, unseen, or not enough, often in relation to dominant Western standards of beauty, desirability, and success.

These influences shaped behavior in different ways. Some described becoming more reserved, apologetic, or smaller in how they presented themselves, while others described becoming highly independent, driven, or high-achieving.

Stereotypes played a significant role in this process. Participants were often aware of them from a young age and actively worked to avoid being associated with them. While these moments were sometimes dismissed or laughed off, they had lasting effects on self-perception and behavior.

This was also reflected in early awareness of appearance, including concerns around hair, body, and presentation, shaped by consistent messaging tied to dominant beauty standards.

These experiences were internalized and carried forward. Impact did not require recognition. Experiences did not need to be explicitly named to shape how participants saw themselves, behaved, and what they accepted as normal.

Limitations

Scope and Funding

This project was conducted as an independent research initiative in its early stages without external funding. This shaped the scope and scale of the work.

Participants

The investigation included 22 participants. Due to scheduling and availability, a mix of formats was used.

Participants were primarily recruited through personal networks and direct outreach. While this supported trust and openness within conversations, it also means the sample is not intended to be representative of all women of color.

Sampling

Participation was voluntary and based on availability. While efforts were made to include a range of backgrounds and experiences, the findings reflect patterns within this group rather than generalizable conclusions.

Data Collection

Conversations were not recorded. Insights are based on notes and reflections from each session.

This approach prioritized participant comfort and openness, but may not capture every detail or exact phrasing.

A small number of participants completed post-conversation reflection forms, which were used to support the analysis but were not a primary data source.

Implications for Support and Research

Role of Conversations, Connection, and Shared Experience

These conversations not only provided insight into how women of color are feeling and living, but also created space for participants to reflect on their own experiences.

By asking specific questions and creating a more open environment, many participants began thinking more deeply about their identity, often in ways they had not before.

Several participants shared that they were looking for a sense of community that felt different from the spaces they were already part of. While some initially approached the conversation with hesitation, many expressed that they were simply happy to be there.

Connection played an important role in how participants understood their experiences.

Participants described feeling more at ease when hearing others share similar experiences. These moments of recognition often changed how participants understood themselves.

Many also described a sense of ease around other women of color, where less explanation was needed, and experiences felt more naturally understood.

This suggests that support may not always begin with intervention, but with creating spaces where people can reflect, recognize patterns, and make sense of their experiences over time.

What Comes Next

Brown Girl Project is grounded in listening, not just to understand, but to collectively think about what people actually want to see in their lives. These conversations were a first step.

What emerged shows the complexity of women of color's lives. Culture and systems shape how people move through the world, often in ways that are not always fully conscious or named.

Research has often approached women of color through a marginalized lens. While those realities exist, this work aims to move beyond that lens by focusing on how people are actually experiencing their lives day to day.

If the goal is to improve quality of life, then our approach has to meet people where they are.

The next step is to return these findings through group conversations, creating space for participants to reflect, respond, and shape what comes next.

This work will continue through a deeper exploration of the themes that emerged, while also building community and sharing accessible, relevant resources for women of color.

Author's Note

I feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to have these conversations with these women.

Creating this kind of space and speaking with them taught me a lot, and also allowed me to reflect on my own experiences. This project is deeply personal to me, especially as a first-generation woman.

It was meaningful to see how willing people were to show up, participate, and be open without anything being transactional.

I was reminded how powerful it is for women to speak openly with one another. In creating space to listen, reflect, and share, people felt less alone.

This kind of space already exists. Learning how to create and hold it more intentionally feels like an important part of what comes next.

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