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Project Insights Report

Bridging the Gender Gap: Skills for the Advancement of Women



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Executive Summary

Systemic barriers stemming from institutional and cultural biases continue to put equity-deserving groups at a disadvantage across the Canadian labour market. Despite having in-demand skills and high education levels, research shows that women’s careers continue to stall before senior leadership, leading to a significant lack of diverse representation on boards and at executive levels. Disadvantages are compounded for individuals with intersectional identities, such as women who are also members of other equity-deserving groups (e.g., Indigenous Peoples, racialized people, persons with disabilities, those who identify as LGBTQ2S+ immigrants and others). While the existence of the “glass ceiling” effect—the idea that barriers prevent women from advancing into senior leadership—is well established, little is known about the career trajectories and experiences of those senior women leaders who actually make it to the top. Insights into their experiences can help organizations and policymakers develop specific actions and initiatives to support the advancement of diverse women into senior leadership positions.

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of diverse senior women on boards and in executive leadership in private sector corporations in Canada to better understand the roles of barriers, enablers and skills development in their leadership trajectories.

Findings from interviews with 50 diverse senior women leaders show that the women overcame a range of barriers on their way to leadership positions by developing social-emotional skills; acquiring advanced credentials; and leveraging specialized coaching, mentorship and networks. Participants shared innovative approaches in seizing opportunities to bypass or push through the glass ceiling. Findings also indicate persistent gender pay inequity. Participants highlighted that even identifying these inequities is challenging, partly because salary discussions are often taboo, making it difficult to compare earnings and identify disparities. Additionally, organizational culture and entrenched systems further exacerbate the issue.

Based on the insights gained from this study, the report provides a set of recommendations to improve diverse representation and inclusion on boards and at executive levels. For example, boards are encouraged to set targets, to develop skills matrixes that include gender and diversity knowledge and lived experience, and to provide onboarding support for new members.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** The women interviewed for this study identified unspoken rules, conformity culture and care-giving responsibilities as major barriers to advance to senior leadership positions.
- 2** Women made it to the senior executive level through developing advanced social and emotional skills; pursuing additional education, training and credentials; and strategically accessing coaching and mentoring to receive specialized and individualized advice.
- 3** Despite impactful efforts to improve the representation and experience of diverse women in senior leadership positions, much remains to be done to reduce barriers, diminish the gender pay gap, and increase access to and quality of enablers for the advancement of women into senior leadership.

The Issue

The representation of women in corporate senior management in Canada is dramatically low, ranging from 21.3% in Vancouver to 26% in Montreal. Those women who make it to the board of directors or senior corporate leadership positions earn 56% less than their male counterparts, and racialized women executives earn 32% less than their white women counterparts. It is well known that women face stereotypes, bias, discrimination and systemic barriers in their careers. Although policies and regulations such as the Employment Equity Act shift away from traditional, often man-centric corporate leadership, and growing emphasis on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in organizations attempts to address these issues, progress to increase diverse representation in senior leadership remains slow.



What We Investigated

To generate recommendations for policy, organizational capacity building and skills development for the advancement of diverse women leaders, this study aimed to examine the experience of diverse senior women on boards and in executive leadership positions in private sector corporations in Canada with respect to the barriers, enablers and skills development related to their career trajectories. A further objective was to explore the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the advancement of women in corporate leadership, and those women's perceptions about the impact of corporate EDI policies and practices.

To explore these questions, researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 50 women who held directorship on executive boards, were in executive positions, or were managing partners. All participants worked in private sector corporations from various industries across Canada that had at least 30% representation of women in executive positions or on their corporate board. The study also considered the unique intersectional experiences of women from a variety of backgrounds regarding race, Indigeneity, disability and sexual orientation.

What We're Learning

The experiences of diverse women senior leaders revolve around five key themes.

Barriers

Major barriers to advancing senior leadership positions include being different; facing unspoken rules within organizations; facing corporate cultures that favour employees who conform to normative behavioural expectations; and having caregiving responsibilities. These barriers are exacerbated for women who identify with additional equity-deserving groups, making it particularly hard to “fit in.”

Pay gap

Persistent gender pay inequities prevail, and challenges remain to even identify these. Issues relating to organizational culture and entrenched systems that prevent the pay inequities from changing further exacerbate these struggles.

Enablers: The presence of effective sponsors and supportive networks (including supportive men who can act as mentors and allies) enables success. Further, having more women in senior leadership is helping to shift corporate culture.

Skills development

Researchers gained four key insights related to skills development. The following can assist in career advancement:

- development of advanced social and emotional skills;
- education and training that highlights the importance of credentials;
- coaching to get individualized advice;
- specialized mentorship for career advancement.

Innovation and resilience

Women take innovative and resilient approaches to advance into senior leadership. Earlier in their careers, women accept opportunities that are given to them, create their own opportunities, and choose opportunities strategically either inside or outside their organization. To step into senior leadership, women bypass the glass ceiling because their company is supportive, they are hired externally, or they are sought after due to their level of specialization. Others push through the glass ceiling through sacrifice, endurance and mental fortitude, or move on to another company to move up in the hierarchy there.

Why It Matters

Despite existing important and impactful measures to increase diverse representation and support diverse women in their advancement into executive leadership positions, findings from this study show that much remains to be done at the societal, organizational and individual levels.

At the societal level, it is critical to challenge stereotypes that shape aspirations but also bias in systems at every level. Policies, infrastructure and supports are also needed to reinforce the importance of women’s leadership and success—legislation such as Bill C-25, securities commission requirements and voluntary codes such as the [50 – 30 Challenge](#) are among the policies that shape organizational norms and behaviours in addition to broader social supports, such as childcare.

Organizational strategies, processes and practices across the entire organization, including governance and leadership, human resources, culture, target setting, transparency and accountability must be informed by critical gender and diversity perspectives and expertise to support women’s advancement. Improved strategies are needed to build pathways to women’s advancement, fix leaks in the talent pipeline that reduce the pool of qualified women, and ensure that women leaders who break through the glass ceiling continue to be supported.

On the individual level, women who aspire to hold senior leadership positions should strategically develop advanced leadership skills, find effective sponsors and networks, and engage in specialized coaching and mentoring. Allies and decision-makers can support women leaders by advocating for inclusive policies and practices, facilitating access to networks and sponsors, and functioning as mentors and sponsors.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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