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Project Insights Report

Diversity Leads: Diverse representation in leadership – A review of 10 Canadian cities



PARTNERS

Diversity Institute
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LOCATIONS

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Executive Summary

Research consistently shows the positive outcomes that emerge when organizations have diverse boards of directors and senior managers. These outcomes include improved organizational performance, access to talent and markets, innovation, and risk management. This diversity encompasses a broad spectrum, including equity-deserving groups such as women, Indigenous Peoples, Black and racialized people, persons with disabilities, those who identify as LGBTQ2S+ immigrants and others.

While research indicates progress is being made for diverse groups in leadership roles, there are significant gaps in representation relative to the labour market and diversity in workplaces, likely due to the barriers equity-deserving groups face, such as discrimination, racism, stereotypes and a lack of mentors and role models. Despite progress, gaps exist in the availability of data on diverse representation in leadership in Canada, especially sectoral differences and the regional context. This gap in data limits the understanding of the role of systemic barriers in advancing diversity in leadership roles, which are often deeply rooted in the historically formed structure of each sector and influenced by unique local policies to incentivize diversity and inclusion. This report examines the representation of women, Black people, and non-Black racialized people among 18,544 individuals holding leadership positions in 2023, focusing on various sectors and 10 Canadian cities. Representational data was also compared to demographic statistics at the population level to understand disparities in the regional context.

The results highlight persistent gender and racial disparities in the representation of women, Black people, and non-Black racialized people on boards of directors and senior management teams across sectors and cities. For example, none of 10 Canadian cities have achieved gender parity on boards. Non-Black racialized people and Black people also remain underrepresented. For instance, racialized people (excluding Black people) account for 10.5% of directors, which is a fraction of their representation in the Canadian population (21.9%). These findings suggest that representational disparities are not necessarily an issue related to the talent pool, but policies and processes organizations employ. This underscores the need for more targeted solutions, strategies and actions to address these representational issues and create more equitable leadership in Canadian organizations.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** Women account for 50.7% of the Canadian population, yet only 41.4% of directors and 39.5% of senior managers across sectors in the 10 Canadian cities.
- 2** The corporate sector has one of the most acute deficits of diversity for women, Black people, and non-Black racialized people.
- 3** Cities with highly racialized populations have a stark underrepresentation of racialized and Black people in leadership roles. For example, only 15.2% of senior manager roles are occupied by racialized people in Toronto, where 48.6% of the population is racialized.

The Issue

While research suggests progress is being made, persistent gaps remain, resulting from barriers limiting participation and advancement into senior-level roles, such as director and senior management roles. For example, women are more likely to hold lower-paying jobs and experience more challenges being promoted into senior management roles. They also experience discrimination, stereotyping and bias in board elections, further perpetuating a cycle that limits their advancement into leadership roles.

Racialized and Black people experience high rates of discrimination in the workplace. Due to systemic biases, they also have limited professional networks and role models, and do not receive sufficient training to be considered for senior roles. Policies and regulations such as Canada's Employment Equity Act and Bill C-25 attempt to address barriers by advancing equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) efforts in organizations; however, disparities in representation persist.



What We Investigated

To understand the relationship between EDI and the challenges in Canada's mTo address gaps in our understanding of diverse representation across Canada, this project used an innovative data collection and analysis method to investigate the representation of women, Black people, and non-Black racialized people among 18,554 individuals on boards of directors, senior management teams and municipal councils in Calgary, Edmonton, Halifax, Hamilton, London, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver and Winnipeg. Sectoral analyses were also completed for the corporate sector, provincial and municipal agencies, boards and commissions, hospitals, police services, the voluntary sector, municipal governments and the education sector.

The report addresses the following questions:

- What is the representation of women, Black people, and non-Black racialized people on boards of directors and in senior manager positions in the corporate sector, in provincial and municipal agencies, on boards and commissions, in hospitals, in police services, in the voluntary sector, in municipal governments, in the education sector and on municipal councils in 10 Canadian cities?
- How does the leadership representation of these diverse groups compare to their representation in the local city population?
- What differences exist between sectors? For example, what is the difference in representation between the corporate sector and the voluntary sector?

- What does looking through an intersectional lens tell us about diverse representation across Canada?

To answer these questions, researchers analyzed publicly available information on the membership of boards of directors, senior managers and municipal councillors found on organizational websites across 10 Canadian cities. A pre-existing selection of organizations from previous iterations of this research was used to gather data for various sectors; however, since Edmonton and Winnipeg were not previously included, a new master list of organizations for each sector was created for these cities. Researchers collected information about the individuals, including name, position title and photograph. They coded captioned photographs and biographies to determine gender and racial status. A sample of 10% of each city and sector was coded a second time by a different researcher for inter-coder reliability. This process reduces bias and, therefore, increases the reliability of the coding.

✔ What We're Learning

Advancing representation of diverse leadership will continue to be a work in progress, and action at societal, organizational and individual levels is required to advance equal opportunities for equity-deserving groups from a human rights perspective and to advance outcomes and results across organizations. Important learnings from this research are as follows:

Considerable differences remain in the representation of diverse groups between sectors

For example, the corporate sector lags in diverse representation, with women, racialized people and Black people specifically, holding 34.3%, 7.6% and 2.8% of director roles, respectively. The police sector also shows a lack of diversity, having the lowest representation of women and Black people on both boards of directors (32.6% for women and 6.3% for Black people) and senior manager roles (29.8% for women and 0% for Black people). However, this trend did not apply to non-Black racialized people, who, across all sectors, had the highest level of representation on boards of directors (17.9%) and among senior managers (19.3%) in the police sector.

Differences exist between cities, and these are often a function of each city's history and context

We compared the proportion of women, Black people, and non-Black racialized people within the general populations of Calgary, Edmonton, Halifax, Hamilton, Toronto, London, Montreal, Ottawa, Vancouver and Winnipeg to the representation of these groups on boards of directors and in senior manager positions. We found that while the proportion of women was relatively consistent across all 10 cities (approximately 51% in 2021), the proportion of racialized and Black people varies considerably. For example, non-Black racialized people range from 11.3% in Halifax to 52.2% in Vancouver and Black people range from 1.6% in Vancouver to 7.9% in Montreal and Toronto. When compared to the population, considerable representational differences were found. For example, only Ottawa is close to achieving gender parity on boards (47.2% of Ottawa's directors and 51.1% of its general population are women). Halifax has exceeded gender parity in senior management (55.9% of senior managers vs. 51.0% of the population are women). Non-Black racialized people fare much worse on boards of directors and in senior management. For example, in Toronto, 48.6% of the population consists of non-Black racialized people, yet they only occupy 15.9% of boards of directors. The smallest gap was in Halifax, where 11.3% of the population consists of non-black racialized people, yet they only account for 4.0% of boards of directors and 3.3% of senior managers. Black people are also underrepresented, with their population representation generally being higher than their representation on boards. For example, in Montreal, Black people account for 7.9% of the population, but only 4.6% of Black people occupy board of director positions. Vancouver is an exception, with a higher proportion of Black people on boards (2.1%) compared to the population (1.6%).

Intersectionality remains important

For example, while in Toronto half of the population are women and half are racialized, white women outnumber both racialized women and Black women specifically on boards. Overall, across all sectors in the 10 Canadian cities studied, non-racialized women account for 31.9% of directors, which is considerably higher than racialized women and Black women specifically (4.9% and 1.9%, respectively). The corporate and police sectors exhibited the lowest levels of diversity. For example, 28.9% of non-racialized women were on boards of directors in the corporate sector compared to 2.8% of non-Black racialized women and 1.5% of Black women.

Some progress was made in the representation of diverse groups from 2020 to 2023

Results from 2020 and 2023 show that some progress has been made across sectors. For example, the representation of women in the corporate sector has increased from 25.3% to 34.3%. Similar upward trends were also observed for non-Black racialized people and Black people.

Representational disparities are not related to the pool of available talent

Within sectors we see significant differences even within the same city when we compare organizations. Some corporate boards, for example, have 40% women and others still have none. This reinforces that the issue lies in priorities, policies and practices, not the pool.

Why It Matters

Research consistently shows that fostering diversity in leadership roles improves organizational performance; however, gender and racial disparities persist on boards of directors and senior management teams. Continued representation gaps are underscored in this report, highlighting how equitable representation of women, racialized people and Black people is still lacking across all sectors and in all cities to varying degrees. Several evidence-based strategies are offered to help advance EDI.

At the societal level, legislation and voluntary codes, such as the [50 – 30 Challenge](#), [30% Club](#), and [BlackNorth Initiative](#) reinforce norms but also promote tracking and record keeping. The fact that many large corporations are required to track and report on representation, but publicly funded nonprofits and charities are not should be carefully reconsidered.

Organizational strategies, processes and policies across six dimensions, including governance and leadership, recruitment, selection and promotion, values and culture, measurement and tracking of EDI, diversity across the value chain, and outreach and expanding the pool can help organizations advance their EDI strategies and drive diversity across leadership teams.

At the individual level, organizations that engage in capacity building among prospective employees, senior leaders and board members through training, mentorship and sponsorship can create inclusive opportunities and maintain a more diverse talent pool.

► **What's Next**

The research provides a picture of patterns but not the explanations for regional, between-sector and within-sector differences. Further research is needed to understand concrete and effective actions used by organizations with diverse leadership and how they might be replicated and scaled.

The findings highlight considerable disparities in representation among different racialized groups, some of them intersecting, for example, with immigrants. Additional research is needed to understand the root causes and develop potential solutions.

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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