Executive Summary

Career Development & Experiences of Indigenous, Black, and Racialized Women in the Canadian Workplace

accelerate her future

Future Skills Centre

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FSC is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada

Introduction

Despite its global reputation for being progressive, Canada is falling behind on gender equity, defined as practices and processes designed to enable fair access to opportunities and resources, regardless of gender. In 2024, the World Economic Forum ranked Canada 36th in its gender parity index, down from 16th in 2018, exposing the growing gap between aspirational rhetoric and lived realities. Particularly in economic participation and opportunity, which tracks women's labour force participation, wage equality, women's earned income, and percentage of women in management, Canada is underperforming. The disconnect is stark for women and gender-diverse individuals whose experiences reveal the systemic failures beneath public policy commitments.

Gender equity efforts with a narrow focus on white women fail to recognize the intersecting oppressions faced by Indigenous, Black, and racialized women. Gaps in the representation of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women permeate all levels in businesses and institutions across North America. Looking specifically at corporate director roles in Canada, the Prosperity Project reported that in 2024, women held 37.7% of corporate directorships, but the disaggregated data showed that the representation of Indigenous women is 0.4%, Black women is 0.8%, and "women of colour" (as a collective category) is just over 5%. The underrepresentation of women from systemically marginalized groups becomes even more pronounced when considering Canada's diverse demographic landscape. Data from the 2021 Canadian census speaks to the racial and ethnic diversity of Canada's current population. Five percent of the population identify as Indigenous, 23% identify as foreign-born immigrants, 26.5% identify as racialized people. Representation gaps are not due to lack of ambition or capability; they are the outcome of systemic racism, colonialism, and patriarchy operating in tandem.

Mainstream career development models often place the onus on individuals to "self-manage" their careers, ignoring structural inequities that limit access to growth opportunities. These models do not serve everyone equally. They fail to consider culturally-specific needs, lived experiences, and systemic exclusions. When career advancement becomes a "do-it-yourself" project in a biased system with inequitable support strategies, those already marginalized are further disadvantaged.

This research was born from a gap, and a commitment. Funded in part by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Centre as well as Accelerate Her Future, we launched this study to examine how career development systems serve, or fail to serve, Indigenous, Black, and racialized women in Canada. Through sharing circles and interviews, we gathered insights on what's broken and what's possible. The findings call for a reimagining of career development rooted in cultural inclusion, shared responsibility, and intentional action.

Equity without accountability is performative. It's time to move from promise to practice.

Sharing Circle and Interview Findings on Career Development

From May to August 2023, Accelerate Her Future conducted 21 sharing circles with 63 Indigenous, Black, and racialized participants. The sharing circles offered a powerful, community-driven lens into the lived experiences of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women navigating Canadian workplaces. We also conducted 59 semi-structured interviews with HR and EDI professionals, people leaders, Employee Resource Group (ERG) chairs, and career professionals to explore how Canadian workplaces understand and approach the career development needs of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women. While the criteria to participate was open to individuals of all genders and racial/ethnic backgrounds, the majority of interview participants identified as women (with a smaller portion identifying as gender diverse), and as Indigenous, Black, or racialized people. A small number of interview participants identified as white; therefore, it should be noted that the data set for white interview participants was significantly smaller than the other three sets despite broad recruitment efforts.

Together, these conversations reveal an urgent need for systemic change. Participants, across industries, career stages, and sectors, described how organizational cultures, career development practices, and leadership behaviours often exclude, silence, and marginalize them. While themes overlap across groups, each community also faces distinct barriers shaped by intersecting histories, identities, and values. The insights below surface the core barriers and workplace gaps preventing equitable career growth. The following high-level summary outlines high-level findings. You can access the full report on our website for more comprehensive findings in June 2025.

Insights from Sharing Circles & Interviews: Indigenous Participants

Systemic Racism and Tokenism

Indigenous women reported anti-Indigenous racism, microaggressions, and tokenism in their workplaces. Participants provided examples such as colleagues perpetuating stereotypes and appropriating language that may be insulting to Indigenous Peoples or routinely being excluded or feeling invisible in the workplace, or they were expected to minimize themselves by being quiet or non-confrontational to "fit in". These experiences resulted in distrust and emotional exhaustion, undermining their confidence and sense of belonging. Participants described feeling invisible, treated as tokens during Indigenous focused events, or expected to act as spokespersons for entire communities regardless of role, interest, or even expertise.

Underrepresentation of Indigenous Women

Indigenous participants highlighted a persistent underrepresentation of Indigenous women across all workplace levels, particularly in leadership, mentorship, and decision-making roles. This lack of representation not only limits access to Indigenous mentors and role models, but also narrows the pool of internal Indigenous candidates eligible for promotion. Participants further noted that underrepresentation can discourage the development of Indigenous-focused supports, initiatives, or ERGs, perpetuating exclusion and limiting opportunities for culturally informed career development.

Lack of Holistic and Tailored Career Development

Formal career development initiatives were largely perceived as one-size-fits-all and culturally misaligned or inaccessible by Indigenous participants. Indigenous participants shared they rarely had access to structured mentorship, guidance, or feedback on growth. Furthermore, it was shared that these programs fail to account for Indigenous values, cultural practices, lived experiences and needs. Programs often centre dominant workplace norms, including eurocentrism, individualism, and competitiveness, which Indigenous women must conform to in order to succeed. Even when programs are labeled as "for women", participants noted they tend to disproportionately benefit white women, overlooking intersectional experiences.

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Inability to Access Mentors

Indigenous participants noted an inability to access Indigenous mentors or structured mentorship programs as a barrier to career development. Some participants noted having experienced allyship as an especially powerful practice when demonstrated by a white man in a managerial or leadership role, who tackled systemic inequity by pointing out gender or racial gaps (e.g., pay discrepancies) or recommending an Indigenous woman for a promotion. While participants did not use the term "sponsorship" specifically, the allyship behaviours they described are rooted in public and action-oriented advocacy which are cornerstones of sponsorship. Since men are often predominantly the ones occupying positions of power and hold decision-making authority, it is essential for men and others in privileged positions, especially senior leaders, to continuously demonstrate active allyship and sponsorship behaviors to effect changes in the workplace.

Lack of Understanding of Needs and Lived Experiences

Indigenous participants emphasized that many workplaces are ill-equipped to support their needs because leaders and managers lack understanding of their histories, values, cultural responsibilities, and lived experiences. Indigenous participants noted that their voices were not being heard or recognized in the workplace, especially by colleagues who failed to understand or represent their perspectives which made participants feel like they were wasting their time trying to advocate for their needs. Most leaders do not share their background or demonstrate cultural competency, which leads to misinterpretation or dismissal of Indigenous women's realities.

Participants also pointed out that Indigenous Peoples contend with the emotional tax of having to go above and beyond typical workplace duties and responsibilities by advocating for and representing all Indigenous Peoples, calling out equity issues, and educating their non-Indigenous colleagues, which can lead to increased rates of burnout and impact their psychological safety. The emotional burden associated with a lack of psychological safety, coupled with experiencing racism and microaggressions in the workplace, means that Indigenous women often face compounding hardships.

Performative Inclusion and Values Misalignment

Indigenous participants emphasized a fundamental misalignment between dominant corporate values (centred on individualism, competition, profit, etc.) and Indigenous values rooted in community, reciprocity, and connection to land. This disconnect not only creates discomfort but also discourages some Indigenous women from pursuing careers in organizations where their values are neither reflected nor respected. Participants further shared that white-dominant workplaces often resist meaningful change, relying instead on superficial EDI activities that fail to address root causes of exclusion. Gaps in anti-racism, anti-oppression, and cultural competency persist across leadership and HR, reinforcing performative approaches. The absence of tangible commitments, such as integrating frameworks like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, signals to Indigenous employees a lack of genuine accountability, often compounded by leadership's failure to acknowledge privilege or engage in allyship.

Self-Directed Career Development as a Response to Systemic Gaps

Indigenous participants explained that they have relied on self-directed career development as a result of shortcomings with formal and informal career development opportunities (lack of tailored career development programs, unsupportive leaders, psychologically unsafe work environments, and misaligned organizational) offered in the workplace. In many cases, participants indicated they looked to their community of Elders, mentors, and external networks, as well as internal and external volunteering opportunities to support their personal and professional development. While it appears that self-directed career development can provide space to improve skill sets, access value-aligned opportunities, and self-empowerment, it was taken up by Indigenous participants due to the overwhelming barriers impeding their participation in more formalized advancement opportunities at their organizations.

Photo by CIRA.CA

Insights from Sharing Circles and Interviews: Black Participants

Anti-Black Racism and Misogynoir

Black participants described navigating persistent anti-Black racism and misogynoir (unique burden of racism and sexism experienced by Black women) that shaped their workplace experience, from hiring to daily interactions to advancement. They shared how racialized stereotyping and cultural invalidation often left them feeling scrutinized, misunderstood, or invisible. Being perceived as lazy for staying quiet or aggressive for speaking up exemplified the double standards they faced. These daily indignities, combined with being “the only” Black woman in predominantly white spaces, contributed to hypervigilance, internalized racism, emotional exhaustion, and a constant need to outperform peers just to be seen as competent. Despite strong credentials, their contributions were often undervalued or overlooked, with many reporting being told they needed more experience.

Underrepresentation of Black Women

For many participants, the underrepresentation of Black women as managers, in senior roles, and leadership positions was flagged as a significant barrier. Specifically, participants shared that the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership roles sends a message to

Black women employees or prospective candidates that their ambitions to reach an executive level may be unattainable or that there are no opportunities for career advancement, which can lead to higher rates of Black women leaving workplaces or feeling that they do not fit in. Black participants pointed out that being "the only" in an organization or meeting room can lead to alienation, their voices going unheard, their needs not being addressed, othering, and self-doubt, reinforcing a cycle of exclusion and invisibility. Furthermore, given the high demand for Black mentors and sponsors in the workplace, this lack of representation in senior roles can negatively impact retention, advancement, and growth for Black women.

Cultural Dissonance and Family Expectations

Participants highlighted the weight of familial and cultural expectations. Many were raised to keep their heads down and work hard, behaviours that clashed with Canadian workplace norms that reward visibility and self-advocacy. Rooted in collectivist values, these teachings, while affirming in community, became barriers in corporate cultures shaped by individualism and performative confidence. For immigrant Black participants in particular, these challenges were compounded by navigating culture shock, language barriers, and unfamiliar expectations around professionalism, all while lacking networks or recognition of international experience. Participants emphasized that immigration status and racial bias further diminished how seriously they were taken as candidates, requiring them to find community among other Black immigrants to learn how to navigate systemic hurdles in Canada's labour market.

Lack of Tailored Career Development

Black participants shared that career development programs often lack both transparency and relevance, reinforcing their exclusion from critical growth pathways. Many programs were designed with a gender-first lens that disproportionately benefits white women, while race-based initiatives often failed to account for gender, leaving Black women overlooked. Participants emphasized that one-size-fits-all approaches are not designed with an intersectional lens and therefore lack relevance for Black women. Compounding the issue, organizations rarely communicate nomination processes for leadership development programs or high-potential talent opportunities, making access heavily reliant on insider networks.

Gatekeeping or Growth: The Pivotal Role of Direct Managers

Black participants described direct managers as powerful enablers or gatekeepers to career growth, especially when they lack the cultural competence, accountability, or intentionality to support their development. When feedback was offered, it was often vague which created confusion rather than providing guidance. Even when managers expressed appreciation for participants' contributions, they rarely took action to advocate for advancement or create visibility.

Black participants emphasized that direct managers hold significant power over their workplace experience and career development. While a supportive manager can be a critical enabler, many described their managers as gatekeepers who lacked the cultural competence, accountability, or skill to support their growth. Black participants also pointed out that managers are often ill-prepared to deliver consistent, effective, actionable, timely, and constructive feedback or make promotion pathways clear. Managers appear to be uncomfortable delivering direct, critical feedback that is integral to career progression or growth. Even when managers praised their work, they seldom translated that into advocacy for advancement. The tendency of direct managers to avoid constructive feedback and forgo formal promotions or advancement in favour of informal recognition has dire consequences on Black women's career development.

Affinity Bias Reinforces Exclusion and Unequal Access to Sponsorship

Black participants described how affinity bias, where those in power gravitate toward individuals who look like them or share similar cultural backgrounds, reinforces exclusion and unequal recognition in the workplace. Participants also shared that traditional standards of professionalism often reflect white norms in dress, speech, work style, hair, and behaviour, which can marginalize Black women who do not conform to these expectations.

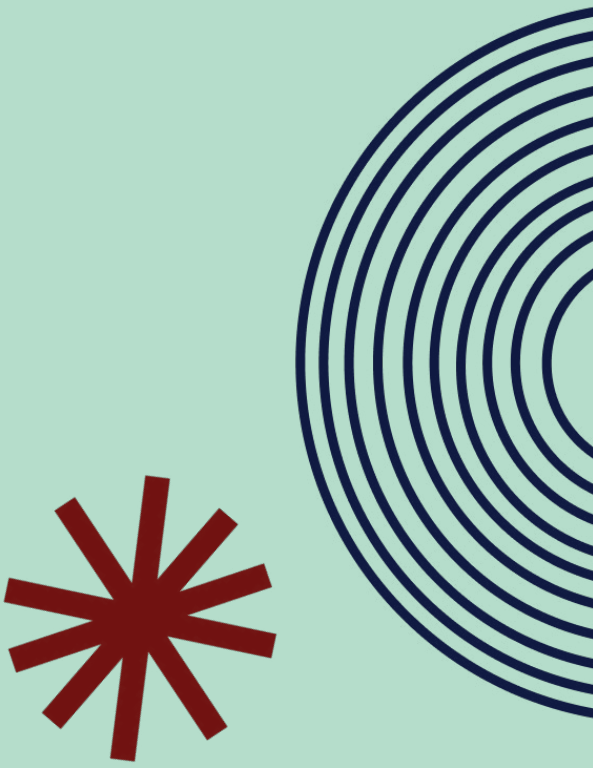
Many recounted microaggressions tied to language and perceived professionalism, including surprised remarks from colleagues about their communication skills. These dynamics and interpretations led to Black women being passed over for promotions, awards, and visibility, and further entrenched the perception that they were not "natural" candidates for leadership, despite evidence to the contrary.

White women, often perceived as more relatable to white leaders, were more likely to receive mentorship, sponsorship, and career opportunities, while Black women were overlooked despite high performance. Black participants concurred that the encouragement and support provided through effective mentorship can create the conditions for them to overcome self-doubt and self-limiting beliefs that hinder career growth. Participants also indicated the sponsorship of Black women by those in positions of power was especially impactful when leaders recognized their privilege and used it to advocate for their sponsee's needs. According to participants, sponsorship in the workplace coupled with self-promotion and self-advocacy are essential for career development and growth.

Lack of Understanding of Needs and Lived Experiences

According to participants, one of the reasons that organizations fail to support Black women's career development is that leaders and managers do not understand the needs, values, and lived experiences of Black women. Black participants reported that they were either invisible in their workplace or seen to be an aberration due to their gender and race, which meant in order to get ahead, they had to work twice as hard and learn to function in spaces that did not align with their values.

The additional effort Black participants put in to overcome systemic barriers often went unrecognized by leadership, who failed to understand the manifestations of anti-Black racism and were frequently uncomfortable creating space for Black women to share their feelings and experiences. Participants indicated that when leadership fails to create a psychologically safe workplace by neglecting to understand Black women's personal issues, career development needs, or how their gender, race, other identity dimensions, and culture influenced their lived experience, they felt isolated and excluded.



Self-Directed Career Development as a Response to Systemic Gaps

Black participants described how unclear advancement pathways, limited recognition, and transactional relationships with managers forced them to take charge of their own career development. Black participants pointed out that managers are in positions of power and have the discretion to uplift and promote those they favour or, conversely, hold back those they do not favour which leads to inequities. For example, participants highlighted that Black women are commonly told they need more work experience or additional skills or qualifications to receive a promotion. However, when they attempt to justify their credentials and skills, their managers may gaslight them or tell them they "just aren't ready" without providing clear, actionable feedback. Other barriers that led Black participants to self-direct their career include gender and racial wage gaps and a lack of recognition. This self-direction is exacerbated by inadequate access to mentors, sponsors, and coaching, which led some participants to seek out career advancement services specifically designed for Black people external to their workplace or establish stronger connections with their community to access mentorship and coaching. To prevent professional stagnation, Black participants shared they have to work "twice as hard", "develop thick skin", take charge of their own careers, and/ or self-advocate to ensure their contributions are acknowledged and valued. Participants reported proactively seeking professional development opportunities outside of their organizations and taking initiative to find mentors and coaches, forging their own paths to success.

Insights from Sharing Circles and Interviews: Racialized Participants

Racism and Mistreatment

Racialized participants described experiencing racism, exclusion, and mistreatment (i.e., microaggressions, stereotyping, harassment, gaslighting) that harmed their wellbeing, confidence, and career progression. Several described being bullied, undermined, or having their work appropriated by peers and even managers. Many felt pressured to filter their opinions or conform to dominant workplace norms to avoid being penalized, while others internalized mistreatment, questioning their own actions in response to harmful behaviour. Participants noted that microaggressions were also triggered by their competence or success, which some colleagues perceived as threatening.

Underrepresentation of Racialized Women

Racialized participants emphasized the persistent underrepresentation of racialized women in leadership, executive, and decision-making roles, often confined to lower-level positions despite qualifications and contributions. They described hitting a glass/concrete ceiling while white colleagues advanced through long-standing systems designed to support their success. Some shared they were expected to be grateful simply for having a job or moving beyond entry-level roles.

Participants also reflected on how dominant racial and class ideals continue to shape benchmarks or perceptions of who “looks like” a leader, typically white, middle- or upper-class, and male. This lack of relatable role models contributed to feelings of isolation and diminished belonging. When organizations fail to address biased hiring and promotion practices, or engage in diversity efforts without structural change, it reinforces a narrative that racialized women do not belong at the top or that they must conform to white-dominant norms to get there.

Cultural Dissonance and Family Expectations

Racialized participants shared that cultural values and familial expectations, particularly for those from immigrant and collectivist backgrounds, significantly shaped their workplace experiences and career decisions. Many described being raised to prioritize academic success while also carrying caregiving or financial responsibilities at home, leading to trade-offs in job choices and advancement opportunities. Racialized women also tend to be taught to keep their heads down, not speak up, avoid disrupting norms, and blend in to be professionally successful, which may not align with expectations from employers. The dissonance between these cultural or familial values and corporate culture often means that racialized women face difficulties balancing their own values with the need to be highly visible, opportunistic, and self-promoting to advance at work. The need for flexible work arrangements to meet caregiving responsibilities also meant that some participants remained in roles they disliked, declined promotions, or exited promising jobs altogether.

In addition, immigrant racialized women described facing steep barriers when transitioning to the workforce, including limited guidance, unfamiliarity with Canadian workplace norms, and the devaluation of international credentials and experience. Without recognition or support, some were forced to restart their careers through entry-level work or additional schooling. Participants noted that Canadian-born colleagues often had implicit knowledge of informal rules and workplace codes, such as small talk, self-promotion, or navigating identity politics that immigrant women had to learn on their own, often without a professional network to support them. Others emphasized that racialized people are not a monolith, and the needs of newcomers, first-generation, and second-generation women differ widely. Still, the absence of a support network or community role models in corporate spaces left many feeling disconnected and underprepared, reinforcing a sense of exclusion and contributing to feelings of being a “second-rate Canadian”.

Lack of Tailored Career Development

Many racialized participants described organizational career development programs as exclusionary, generic, and culturally misaligned, failing to meet their unique needs or support meaningful advancement. Programs were often designed without an intersectional lens, did not include racialized facilitators, mentors or coaches, lacked psychological safety, and prioritized traditional leadership ideals that reflected white norms of success. Participants noted that such programs were typically inaccessible to mid-career professionals due to a focus on senior-level staff or excluded racialized women altogether due to unclear nomination processes.

Gatekeeping or Growth: The Pivotal Role of Direct Managers

Direct managers once again emerged as powerful gatekeepers to career development, either enabling growth or reinforcing systemic barriers. Many racialized participants described managers who lacked cultural competency, emotional intelligence, and the training needed to support talent from diverse backgrounds. These managers often failed to provide actionable feedback, withheld nominations to career development programs, or dismissed ambitions altogether.

Participants also recounted experiences of microaggressions, stereotyping, misogyny, and sexism from managers who questioned their capabilities, withheld opportunities, assigned menial tasks, or undermined their work. Many felt that because they did not fit the mold of traditional leadership, they were overlooked in succession planning or required to prove themselves in ways their white counterparts were not. Racialized women were penalized for being quiet, seeking flexibility, or for non-linear career trajectories, while white male colleagues were promoted based on potential. These dynamics led to feelings of confusion, burnout, and, for some, the difficult decision to leave organizations entirely.

Affinity Bias Reinforces Unequal Access to Mentorship & Sponsorship

Participants expressed that racialized women were often excluded from sponsorship opportunities as well as accessing mentors or coaches who shared their lived experience, leaving them without trusted guidance or culturally resonant support. These workplace development supports not only help racialized women develop leadership skills and advance their career aspirations, but they forge connections between racialized women and those in decision-making roles which can foster greater understanding of their needs and lived experiences. Mentorship was identified as a critical tool to increase racialized women's representation by creating space for career conversations, leadership development, and expanding access to networks. While sponsorship was not always named directly, participants spoke to the importance of senior leaders advocating for racialized women or making introductions, actions that define sponsorship.

Racialized women reported that white employees, particularly white women, had easier access to mentorship, sponsorship, and promotions due to shared backgrounds, interests, and communication styles with those in power. Several participants explicitly noted that white women were better positioned to build rapport with white male leaders and more likely to be perceived as "natural fits" for leadership. In contrast, racialized women had to work harder to prove their worth, and often received less recognition despite equal or stronger credentials and performance.

Lack of Understanding of Needs and Lived Experience

Participants described a pervasive lack of understanding and acknowledgement in workplaces about the unique needs, values, and lived experiences of racialized women. Many leaders lacked cultural competency and failed to acknowledge how intersecting identities shape women's career experiences, reinforcing unconscious bias and exclusion. Programs and policies, often framed through a narrow, gender-only lens, overlooked the intersectional realities of racialized women, while dominant norms around leadership (e.g., extroversion, assertiveness) penalized those whose values or behaviours diverged from white, individualistic standards. Racialized participants also expressed discomfort opening up to mentors, managers, and leaders who, they felt, did not genuinely care about their careers, or they feared that their manager or mentor could use their vulnerabilities against them by removing them from projects or avoiding assigning them certain types of work.

Self-Directed Career Development as a Response to Systemic Gaps

Racialized participants described having to take charge of their own career development in response to systemic gaps, lack of support, and exclusion from formal pathways. With limited access to mentorship, networks, and consistent performance feedback, they were often left to navigate unclear systems on their own. Participants shared that career conversations were rarely initiated by managers, forcing them to self-advocate, seek mentors externally, and build informal support systems to advance. Despite taking on additional responsibilities, many reported being overlooked for promotions, title changes, or pay increases. The self-directed approach was both a survival strategy and a reflection of broader institutional failure. For some, it was a way to prevent stagnation or find alignment with values outside the organization; for others, it was a necessary workaround in systems that ignored their potential and contributions. While these efforts revealed deep resilience and determination, participants emphasized that the burden of navigating inequitable systems should not solely fall on racialized women.

Insights from Interviews: White Participants

Visibility, Self-Promotion, and Confidence Gaps

White participants commonly framed the challenges faced by Indigenous, Black, and racialized women as stemming from a lack of visibility, reluctance to self-promote, or feelings of imposter phenomenon. While some recognized systemic inequities, some viewed these barriers through a behavioural lens, emphasizing the need for women to develop soft skills or apply them more often, without equal attention to the systems limiting access and recognition.

Racism and Bias

Several white participants acknowledged the existence of racism, microaggressions, and bias in the workplace, especially the unequal burdens faced by racialized women who are expected to prove themselves and navigate invisible barriers. There was general recognition that these experiences lead to burnout and limited advancement opportunities, but some admitted they lacked the knowledge or lived experience to speak confidently on these issues.

Lack of Tailored Career Development

Participants shared that career development programs in many workplaces fail to meet the unique needs of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women. Opportunities like mentorship and sponsorship were either unavailable, informally structured, or inaccessible, often shared only within small, exclusive networks. Even in organizations with formal programs, access was skewed toward senior-level staff, where few racialized women are represented, reinforcing inequities in visibility, participation, and advancement.

Managerial Limitations

Participants highlighted that many direct managers lack the necessary skills, training, or cultural awareness to support the growth of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women. In some cases, managers promoted for technical skills were unprepared to lead people, while others penalized women for voicing their career needs. Because managers hold disproportionate power over advancement decisions and resources, unchecked bias can lead to exclusion from critical opportunities, especially when organizational processes lack transparency.

Affinity Bias and Unequal Benefits

Affinity bias was cited as a persistent barrier, especially in hiring and talent identification. Participants noted that informal referral systems and closed-door advancement discussions tend to favour white employees, replicating homogeneity at all levels. Without transparent systems and accountability, these practices marginalize Indigenous, Black, and racialized women and limit access to mentorship, sponsorship, and career growth.

Lack of Understanding of Needs and Lived Experiences

Several white participants in the study acknowledged that they were not equipped to speak about the needs of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women due to their lack of lived experience. They also indicated that many organizations lack a deep understanding of the unique needs, values, and lived experiences of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women, which leads to inadequate career development policies, programs, and managerial support. They observed that managers, especially white men, often struggle to connect with or support equity-deserving employees due to discomfort, lack of cultural competency, or fear of saying the wrong thing. This gap contributes to exclusion and missed opportunities, particularly for newcomers or those navigating race- and gender-based barriers as “the only” in a space.

Rethinking Career Development as Collective Responsibility

Indigenous, Black, and racialized participants called for career development approaches that are holistic, culturally grounded, and rooted in equity, not solely focused on individualism. They emphasized co-designing programs with women from equity-deserving groups and shifting away from one-size-fits-all models that ignore structural oppression. While mentorship, sponsorship, and leadership development remain essential, they must be reimagined to address systemic racism, bias, and reflect design through an intersectional lens.

Career development is not about “fixing” Indigenous, Black, and racialized women to fit dominant workplace cultures. Instead, it is about transforming workplaces to ensure women have the opportunities, support, and recognition they need to thrive. Career development should be an active, continuous, equitable, and co-created process leading to improved career outcomes where Indigenous, Black, and racialized women have ownership over their career trajectories and workplaces actively dismantle systemic barriers, foster inclusion, and create meaningful, tailored pathways for advancement.

Participants also identified direct managers as pivotal actors who either enable or block growth. The role of direct managers must be redefined with responsive career development at its core. Inclusive managers must take time to understand and revisit employees’ individual career goals rather than assume linear, hierarchical ambitions. For example, participants noted that those who advocated and offered clear, respectful, useful, culturally responsive feedback made a significant difference, yet most described experiences of being unsupported, misjudged, or ignored by managers who lacked cultural competency. To address this gap, participants called for tying equity outcomes to leadership accountability, embedding anti-racism and decolonization into training, and increasing representation at senior levels.

Photo by CIRA.CA

Across the board, participants spoke to the persistent lack of transparency in career pathways and the emotional toll of having to self-direct their development in systems that excluded them. Many were denied access to succession planning, mentorship, or sponsorship, despite outperforming peers, and told to “speak up” or “build confidence”, reinforcing deficit narratives that blame individuals rather than systems. This cycle is unsustainable. Career development must be reframed as a shared, structural responsibility, one that acknowledges the impact of white supremacy, proximity to whiteness, and systemic exclusion.

Findings also revealed that many white HR and EDI professionals still lacked systemic awareness, often framing barriers as individual shortcomings rather than organizational and structural failures. Their limited understanding of racism, colonialism, and intersectionality, compounded by the lack of racial diversity in the HR field, risks perpetuating exclusionary practices. To move from good intentions to meaningful change, white HR and EDI leaders must engage in sustained deeper learning, confront their privilege, and co-create strategies with those most impacted by inequities.

Most importantly, there is a need for meaningful relationship building with Indigenous Peoples and advancing truth and reconciliation. Superficial efforts, such as EDI statements or checkbox training, are not a substitute for organizational commitment and accountability rooted in truth, reconciliation, and sustained engagement. Participants highlighted the absence of Indigenous cultural frameworks in career development programs, a lack of leadership commitment to Indigenous advancement, and the emotional burden placed on Indigenous women to educate others.

To move from rhetoric to transformation, organizations must embed Indigenous ways of knowing into all facets of the organization while working collaboratively with Indigenous communities, employees, partners, and clients. This work must be embedded into the employee lifecycle, from recruitment and onboarding to advancement and retention. This includes co-developing career pathways in partnership with Indigenous communities, investing in the development of Indigenous team members, and ensuring culturally safe mentorship, sponsorship, and feedback systems. Fostering trust with Indigenous Peoples requires more than representation, it demands structural change that honours Indigenous identities, histories, and values as central to career success. Creating inclusive spaces, delivering comprehensive Indigenous cultural awareness education, and integrating truth and reconciliation frameworks such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) Calls to Action (specifically Call 92), as well as UNDRIP into organizational strategies are foundational to building workplaces where Indigenous women can thrive.

Recommendations Shared By Research Participants

Sharing circle and interview participants provided recommendations for individuals and organizations looking to enhance their support of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women's career development. These are only highlights; more detailed and actionable recommendations can be accessed on our website in June 2025.

Recommendations for Individuals

Across the board, participants emphasized the importance of taking ownership of one's career development despite the structural barriers. This includes self-advocating, documenting accomplishments, seeking mentors, sponsors and coaches, positioning one's self for stretch assignments, and voicing professional aspirations. Indigenous women highlighted the value of connecting with Elders and others in their community, while Black women underscored the importance of discerning allies, protecting mental health, and leaning into intuition when facing discrimination. Racialized women emphasized building both cross-cultural and lived experience-aligned networks and seeking exposure to diverse pathways and role models. Across all groups, prioritizing mental and emotional wellbeing, and finding or building support systems were central to sustaining career growth.

Recommendations for Organizations by Employee Lifecycle Phase

Attraction & Recruitment:
Organizations must adopt equitable hiring practices by removing biased language, expanding definitions of qualification (e.g., valuing international experience, adopting skills-based hiring practices), diversifying interview panels, listing salary bands, and providing transparent communication throughout the process. Set representation targets without tokenization.

Onboarding:
Ensure new hires feel a sense of belonging from day one through intentional onboarding. Implement buddy systems, provide clear role expectations, and initiate early career conversations. Equip HR and managers to orient new employees to inclusive policies and support systems.

Performance Management:
Redesign performance management to reduce bias and subjectivity. Managers must be trained in delivering timely, actionable, and strength-based feedback and held accountable for equitable performance reviews. Incorporate KPIs related to EDI and career support.

Development:
Design tailored, culturally informed programs for mentorship, sponsorship, coaching, and leadership development. Build flexible pathways that reflect lived experiences and career aspirations. Fund ERGs and career development initiatives, provide inclusive learning opportunities, and ensure managers are equipped to support the career growth of equity-deserving employees.

Advancement:
Establish transparent succession planning with multiple decision-makers and clear criteria for advancement. Provide access to tailored leadership tracks and early-stage development programs that do not rely solely on managerial discretion or network proximity.

Retention:
Embed culturally relevant and trauma-informed wellness benefits and implement flexible and family-responsive policies. Use disaggregated data to inform strategy and address inequities. Managers must build meaningful relationships grounded in empathy, feedback, and trust, without placing the burden of education on the employee.

Exit:
Conduct psychologically safe, culturally sensitive exit interviews, ideally led by external facilitators or panels including ERG leads. Use exit data to understand attrition trends, especially related to equity-deserving groups, and inform changes to retention and leadership practices.

Accelerate Her Future's Calls to Action

This research makes clear: meaningful change in the career development ecosystem for Indigenous, Black, and racialized women will require shared responsibility. The following section provides high-level calls to action that are intended to inspire reflection and catalyze action across systems. These are only highlights; more detailed Calls to Action can be accessed on our website in June 2025.

For Indigenous, Black, and Racialized Women

- Take ownership of your career planning and self-advocacy with the support of mentors, sponsors, and trusted networks.
- Leverage ERGs and external communities for connection, guidance, and career navigation.
- Seek out career coaching and mentors (including culturally competent or identity-aligned supporters) who understand your lived experiences.
- Practice strategic self-promotion while balancing your values, and build both self- and collective advocacy to challenge internalized and systemic bias.
- Push for transparency and accountability in career development programs and pathways at your workplace.

For Employers and Organizations

- Embed anti-racism, decolonization, and intersectional equity into your mission, strategy, and systems, not as side-of-desk efforts but core business functions.
- Move away from deficit-based approaches that expect women to adapt to white-dominant norms; instead, redesign workplace systems to be inclusive.
- Collect and use disaggregated data to inform tailored career development programs and close advancement gaps.
- Fully resource and integrate ERGs into business structures, tying their work to EDI metrics and providing compensation.
- Commit to systemic reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, aligning strategies with TRC Calls to Action and UNDRIP.

For Leaders and People Managers

- Model inclusive behaviours daily and take responsibility for advancing equity, not just in policy but through mentorship, sponsorship, and advocacy.
- Create psychological safety, engage in meaningful career conversations, and challenge dominant leadership paradigms rooted in hierarchy and individualism.
- Ensure career development resources, feedback, and promotion pathways are transparent, actionable, and inclusive.

For HR and EDI Professionals

- Use disaggregated data (aligned with privacy and trauma-informed practices) to identify how inequities show up in your talent systems.
- Conduct audits of policies and practices to assess gaps in recruitment, promotion, and retention.
- Ensure HR teams are equipped with the knowledge and training needed to lead inclusive work; this may require investing in EDI training or partnering with experts.
- Collaborate with communities and women from equity-deserving groups to co-create career development strategies that reflect their needs and aspirations.

For Academic Institutions

- Advance intersectional research on career development, leadership, and equity in the workplace.
- Partner with Indigenous, Black, and racialized women in research design, curriculum development, and career programming.
- Support Indigenous students with access to Elders, career coaches, and inclusive pathways; ensure diverse representation in faculty and student services.
- Create hubs that centre research and dialogue on equity, and ensure inclusive access to co-op and internship opportunities.

For Government

- Align public policies with TRC and UNDRIP to advance reconciliation and workplace equity.
- Mandate pay transparency across sectors and require disaggregated reporting on wage gaps and career outcomes.
- Establish and enforce stronger workplace equity standards, including protections for whistleblowers.
- Fund intersectional research and community-led initiatives, especially those that address systemic barriers to career advancement.
- Provide tailored supports for newcomers and expand access to affordable, culturally responsive childcare to support workforce participation.

Meet the Research Team

The research team encompasses Dr. Golnaz Golnaraghi (Principal Investigator), Dana Carriere (Sub-Investigator), Seema Taneja (Sub-Investigator), Deborah Eliezer (Research Assistant), and Natasha Sidi (Project Manager). This team's persistence, dedication, and expertise have been the driving force behind this research project and report.

Dr. Golnaz Golnaraghi

Lead Investigator & Researcher

Dr. Golnaraghi is an Iranian Canadian first generation immigrant and an award-winning social entrepreneur and leadership, equity and inclusion expert. On a mission to advance corporate representation and leadership of Indigenous, Black and racialized women at all levels in workplaces, she is the Founder of Accelerate Her Future, a leading career accelerator offering tailored programs by and for Black, Indigenous and racialized women while creating networks of solidarity, allyship and action. With an MBA from the UBC Sauder School of Business and a DBA from Athabasca University, Dr. Golnaraghi has held positions in marketing management with large multinational consulting firms and was a professor and scholar in the postsecondary sector for a number of years. Dr. Golnaraghi's research interests include racialized women in the workplace, racialized immigrants and the labour market. This project directly aligns with Dr. Golnaraghi's hopes and goals to advance Indigenous, Black and racialized women in their careers of choice while addressing the gap in career developing research through an intersectional lens. A key insight Dr. Golnaraghi has had from this project is the critical need for people leaders, senior leaders and organizations to understand and acknowledge the unique experiences and barriers faced by Indigenous, Black and racialized women and take meaningful actions through allyship, sponsorship, and solutions that create more equitable outcomes.

Dana Carriere

Sub Investigator & Indigenous Researcher

Dana Carriere, a proud Swampy Cree/Métis woman from Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation with a strong connection to her Cree culture, values, and worldview. She is the Indigenous Engagement Lead at Accelerate Her Future. She is also the Director of Indigenous Business Education and Engagement at the Edwards School of Business. Through her work, Dana hopes to inform and empower individuals to be socially conscious professionals that advance their commitments to truth and reconciliation and engagement with Indigenous Peoples and communities in meaningful, authentic ways. A key insight Dana had from this project is realizing that her experiences in the workplace as an Indigenous woman are not unique, and that there are many Indigenous women and women of colour with similar lived experiences. By coming together as Black, Indigenous and racialized women to share our experiences, this project aligns with Dana's hopes and goals to use our voices to create awareness and make a difference.

Seema Taneja

Sub Investigator & Researcher

As a senior researcher, Seema Taneja is a community-based consultant that works to advance a balanced understanding of people's experiences and needs through research, metric development, engagement, and evaluation. Seema combines both her training in community psychology and her experience with diversity in communities to find new meaning and perspectives. She owns Taneja Consulting Inc., a consulting firm that prioritizes

both qualitative and quantitative research while keeping the needs of the stakeholder at the centre of its work. Through her work, Seema aspires to bring people together; to bring a newfound appreciation of people's experiences that can be weaved into community-based approaches in programming, planning, and policies. This project directly aligns with Seema's hopes and goals of advancing a nuanced understanding of the needs of Black, Indigenous, and racialized women for employers to engage with. A key insight that Seema had while participating in this project is the need for employers to be responsive, accountable, and targeted in advancing women's careers. Employers are at the centre of developing the careers of racialized women and it is essential that they sponsor these women so they can get a seat at decision-making tables.

Deborah Eliezer

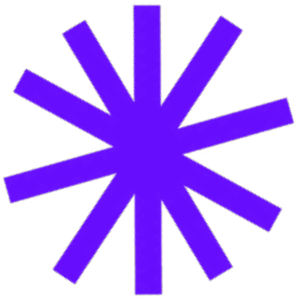
Research Assistant

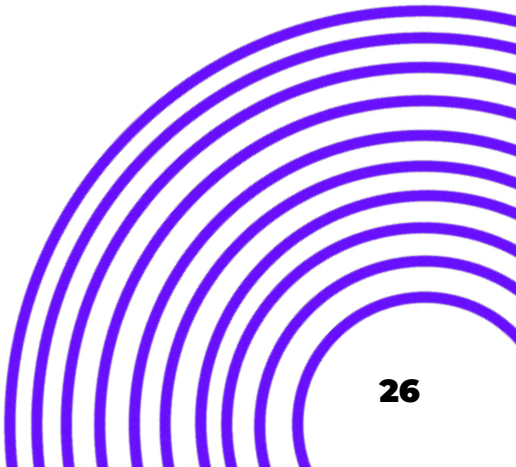
Deborah Eliezer recently graduated from the Bachelor of Commerce program at MacEwan University with a focus in marketing. She joined Accelerate Her Future in 2021 and is currently working as a Research Assistant. She values utilizing her research skills to deepen her and other people's understanding of the various barriers equity-deserving groups face due to power structures, and how we can all promote equity. This project directly aligns with Deborah's hopes and goals to advance the understanding of the lived experiences of Indigenous, Black and racialized women, breaking down barriers and advocating for change. A key insight Deborah had from participating in this project is the urgent need to humanize workplaces and foster cultural shifts away from individualistic mindsets.

Natasha Sidi

UX & Project Management

Natasha Sidi is the Operations and UX Lead at Accelerate Her Future. An advocate for gender and racial equity, she began her career as an educator and further pursued her advocacy work in the non-profit, for-profit, tech, and social enterprise sectors. At Accelerate Her Future, she provides design and tech expertise, and is co-creating programs that centre the voices of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women in business and STEM across Canada. This project aligns with Natasha's background and values of her advocacy work for Indigenous, Black, and racialized women in the workplace. A key insight Natasha had from participating in this project was the lack of awareness and foresight within workplaces, notably among leaders, who disregard the critical importance of ensuring the psychological safety of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women. This oversight can perpetuate significant harm to their health in the long term, and their careers, a reality that demands immediate recognition.





Accelerate Her Future is a purpose-driven virtual career accelerator tackling intersectional gender equity from both sides. We partner with organizations to address workplace barriers holding Indigenous, Black and racialized women back. Our tailored programs support self-identified Indigenous, Black, and racialized women pursuing careers in business and STEM to navigate the system they live in today.

The Future Skills Centre (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. They believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, they are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada, and is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

Accelerate Her Future's Career Development & Experiences of Indigenous, Black and Racialized Women in the Canadian Workplace research project was partially funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Centre. This study was approved on ethical grounds by Veritas Independent Review Board.