

Project Insights Report

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



PARTNERS

Divity Group Inc.
(Accelerate Her Future)



LOCATIONS

Across Canada



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Executive Summary

Despite growing organizational commitments to gender equity, systemic barriers persist for Indigenous, Black and racialized women in Canadian workplaces. In 2024, Canada slipped to 36th place on the Global Gender Gap Index, largely due to the underrepresentation of women in leadership. Although white women have made some gains in board representation, disaggregated data reveal that Indigenous, Black and racialized women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles. These disparities point to deeply embedded, systemic inequities in Canadian workplaces.

This research project, led by Accelerate Her Future, centres the voices of Indigenous, Black and racialized women to explore how systemic inequities shape career development and advancement experiences of Indigenous, Black and racialized women. The research also includes in-depth interviews with human resources leaders; equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and people leaders; employee resource group chairs; and career advisors who play a role in career development and advancement systems. The study aims to shift the narrative away from placing the burden exclusively on Indigenous, Black and racialized women and instead examines how career systems and workplace cultures must change to support their growth and leadership.

Participant insights reveal that career development processes remain deeply inequitable. These processes are marked by unclear pathways, offer limited access to mentorship and sponsorship, lack tailored career and leadership development, and fail to recognize the critical role of leaders and direct managers. The findings offer a powerful invitation to reimagine workplace systems toward models that are relational, human-centred and equity-affirming. The recommendations, grounded in the voices of participants, are mapped across the employee life cycle, including recruitment, onboarding, development, retention, advancement and exit. Through Accelerate Her Future's calls to action, we offer pathways for women, leaders and direct managers, human resources and EDI professionals, government and academia to take meaningful steps. This is not about placing the burden of change on individuals; rather, it's about co-creating workplace cultures where Indigenous, Black and racialized women do not navigate barriers but thrive, lead and shape the future of work in meaningful ways.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** Mentorship, sponsorship and access to influential networks are critical but inequitably distributed; many participants report having had to seek out mentors with similar lived experiences on their own.
- 2** Many career and leadership development programs are designed with dominant workplace norms, including Eurocentrism, individualism and competitiveness, often failing to take into account the unique needs and lived experiences of Indigenous, Black and racialized women.
- 3** Direct managers play a pivotal role in shaping the career experiences of Indigenous, Black and racialized women, yet too often, they lack the equity literacy, feedback skills and cultural humility needed to support their team members' growth and advancement.

► The Issue

While employers increasingly express commitment to EDI, the advancement gap for Indigenous, Black and racialized women remains stark. These women remain underrepresented in leadership and overrepresented in early-career roles, facing an invisible concrete ceiling of barriers that often go unnamed or unaddressed.

Career development is often framed as an individual responsibility rather than an organizational imperative. Existing systems prioritize dominant leadership norms and overlook the lived realities and systemic challenges faced by Indigenous, Black and racialized women, especially within the career development and future-of-work domains.



What We Investigated

The researchers conducted Sharing Circles with Indigenous, Black and racialized women, and semi-structured interviews with HR and EDI professionals, employee resource group chairs and career advisors, asking:

- What are career development barriers experienced by Indigenous, Black and racialized women at all stages of their careers within Canadian workplaces?
- How do workplaces understand and address the career development needs of Indigenous, Black and racialized women?
- What are the gaps in career development initiatives and supports? (i.e., What is working or not working with existing initiatives, supports and solutions?)
- What preliminary career development recommendations do Indigenous, Black and racialized women offer in terms of needs/wants in order to advance their career goals?

The study was co-designed and facilitated by a research team of Indigenous, Black and racialized women, using a culturally informed, trauma-aware approach rooted in equity and community.

The Sharing Circles were designed to provide safe spaces for Indigenous, Black and racialized women to tell their stories. Sharing Circles balance power dynamics between researchers and participants. The approach was trauma-informed, and the researchers were transparent with participants about methodology, data collection and usage and the presence of health professionals. An Elder attended Sharing Circles with Indigenous women.

Individual interviews were conducted with human resources professionals, EDI experts, people leaders, employee resource group chairs and career advisors.

✓ What We're Learning

The researchers conducted 21 Sharing Circles with 63 Indigenous, Black and racialized women, and 59 semi-structured interviews with human resources and EDI professionals, employee resource group chairs and career advisors.

Career development must be reimagined as a collective, systemic responsibility, not an individual burden. It requires shifting away from deficit-based narratives that imply Indigenous, Black and racialized women need to be “fixed” to fit dominant norms.

One-size-fits-all programs fall short. Participants called for holistic, culturally grounded and equity-centred career development approaches that are co-designed with equity-deserving groups and rooted in intersectional awareness.

Direct managers play a pivotal role in enabling or obstructing career growth. Yet most are unequipped to lead inclusively, often lacking the cultural competency, feedback skills and accountability needed to support Indigenous, Black and racialized team members.

Transparency remains a major gap. Participants described unclear career pathways, nomination processes shaped by affinity bias, and systems that exclude them from succession planning and sponsorship despite high performance.

Human resources and EDI professionals must deepen their systemic literacy. Many white practitioners lack the knowledge of structural racism, colonialism and intersectionality needed to disrupt systemic inequities and harmful practices, risking the reinforcement of exclusion under the guise of inclusion.

Truth and Reconciliation must move beyond statements to structural change. Across the employee life cycle, Indigenous cultural frameworks are generally absent, as are Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing, the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions' 94 Calls to Action (especially Call to Action 92) and the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

★ Why It Matters

When Indigenous, Black and racialized women thrive in the workplace, everyone benefits from stronger teams and more inclusive leadership, increased innovation and deeper community trust. Their leadership brings distinct ways of knowing, relational approaches to problem-solving and a bold commitment to equity and belonging.



Yet career development systems in Canada have not been built with these women's realities in mind. Too often, the voices and aspirations of Indigenous, Black and racialized women are absent from the decision-making that shapes who advances and how. Career development conversations often focus only on skill development, as if Indigenous, Black and racialized women are held back only because they are not ready for the next step. This prevailing view ignores the bigger systemic and structural inequities that affect their experiences in workplaces and subsequent career growth. Without addressing these realities, organizations risk reinforcing a cycle where women are expected to "fix" themselves, and fail to introduce accompanying structural changes. This results in missed talent, stalled potential and inequitable workplaces that reinforce rather than disrupt systemic barriers.

State of Skills:

Working with Black Communities

Black peoples in Canada experience widespread systemic anti-Black racism in education systems and the labour market. More needs to be done to name and address anti-Black racism in the skills ecosystem, including efforts to change employer behaviour to make workplaces more inclusive.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

This research calls leaders across sectors to rethink what equitable career development truly requires: not one-size-fits-all programs or performative EDI efforts, but systemic, co-created and culturally grounded solutions that apply an intersectional lens and reflect the lived experiences of those most impacted.

If we want future-ready workplaces that are inclusive by design, career development must become a shared responsibility, not an individual burden.

► What's Next

Building on this research, Accelerate Her Future has launched a [website](#) for the report. It is also launching a cross-country series of in-person roundtables with human resources, EDI and people leaders in partnership with organizations committed to EDI to discuss key findings, and to identify leading practices and preliminary solutions to address the systemic inequities. Accelerate Her Future is also seeking funding to design a career development program for Indigenous, Black and racialized women who are below director-level. The program will test the extent to which a targeted and tailored program can positively influence participants' ability to navigate their career development in workplaces.

Finally, Accelerate Her Future is working with another community partner to propose a knowledge-to-action consortium titled "Intersectionality + Future of Work." The consortium would explore how the future of work must centre the needs, experiences and voices of Indigenous, Black and racialized women. These next steps aim to move this research into action, building workplaces where *all* women can flourish, lead and shape the future of work.

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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