

Smashing the 'concrete ceiling': Black women are still missing from corporate leadership

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While white women may speak of breaking through the "glass ceiling," for many Black women, it's more like a "[concrete ceiling](#)." Black women experience unique and formidable barriers in the workforce that are not

only difficult to break, but also obscure their view of career advancement opportunities.

[A comprehensive study in 2020](#) exposed the harsh reality of Black representation on Canadian corporate boards: Out of 1,639 board positions across eight major Canadian cities, only 0.8% were occupied by Black directors.

According to the report, in Toronto, where the Black community makes up [7.5% of the population](#), Black people hold a mere 0.3% of corporate board seats.

These statistics become even more disheartening when compared to the representation of Black women on corporate boards. As of 2020, although [women held about 21.5% of directorship positions](#) in Toronto Stock Exchange companies, Black women held less than 0.8% of these positions.

The numbers paint a clear picture: there need to be continued efforts to enhance [diversity](#) and inclusion within Canadian corporate boardrooms.

There are measures Canada can take to crack the concrete ceiling, including establishing racial diversity quotas specifically for Black women, collecting disaggregated racial diversity data, providing mentorship opportunities and raising awareness of unconscious bias among recruiters. These are all critical steps toward achieving equitable and inclusive corporate governance in Canada.

The problem with the term 'visible minorities'

The term "visible minorities" is quite a broad category that obscures the representation of Black women, making it difficult to ascertain how and to what extent they are actually represented.

In 2018, [significant amendments](#) were made to the [Canada Business Corporations Act](#), which regulates Canadian business corporations at the federal level.

These changes came into effect in 2020 and require companies to report on the inclusion of four equity-seeking groups: women, visible minorities, Indigenous people and persons with disabilities. The goal of these amendments is to improve the diversity at board and senior management levels.

In October 2023, [reporting based on this requirement](#) revealed that 10.2% of corporate board members were visible minorities, 0.7% were persons with disabilities, 0.9% were Indigenous people and 28.5% were women.

While mandatory disclosure of representation across these equity-seeking groups—each grappling with their unique challenges—is a commendable step towards transparency, we also need to ask a critical question: "Who are the women being appointed to these boards?"

Anti-Black racism is a distinct issue

About seven years ago, [the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent visited Canada](#) and emphasized the need to address the unique challenges faced by Black people due to a history of enslavement, [racial segregation](#) and marginalization.

It is important to recognize that [anti-Black racism is a distinct issue](#) that demands dedicated attention, going beyond the scope of current social justice frameworks. What particularly sets Black women apart is [how they face overlapping discrimination based on race and gender](#).

Black women often grapple with the "angry Black woman syndrome"

stereotype that characterizes them as ["combative, easily angered, overly aggressive, and difficult to work with."](#) despite their undeniable competence.

This stereotype does not bode well for a candidate's perceived interpersonal skills and their ability to contribute effectively to boards, or to even secure mentors. Consequently, even when Black women are highly qualified, they face systemic biases that hinder their progress.

Making corporate diversity real for Black women

Canada's approach to fostering diversity on corporate boards has largely taken the form of ["comply or explain" diversity rules and disclosures](#), where companies either follow the rules or explain why they don't.

However, these measures are clearly not working, as they have not effectively addressed the under-representation of Black women at the corporate level. What we need are [specific quotas set by both corporations and governments](#) dedicated to the inclusion of Black women. We also need to collect detailed data on the racial distribution of corporate boards, rather than relying on broad categorizations of "visible minorities."

Even still, quotas and racial diversity data are not enough; we must combat the [deeply ingrained racism entrenched in recruitment processes](#) to ensure that Black women are not mere tokens, but have meaningful roles and opportunities to influence decisions.

Achieving this requires heightened awareness of biases and continuous anti-racism training for recruiters and board members. It also requires establishing and supporting organizations dedicated to providing specialized training, mentorship and coaching sessions tailored to helping Black women succeed in these positions.

Racial justice movements like Black Lives Matter have shone a spotlight on systemic racism across various facets of society, including the issue of diversity on corporate boards. Current measures to enhance gender parity and racial representation often overlook the unique challenges faced by Black women, resulting in their continued under-representation, or even absence, from corporate boards.

For authentic inclusivity and equity to blossom, we must cultivate a corporate culture that robustly champions, supports and amplifies the voices and contributions of Black women.

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