

Bridging the Gender Gap

Skills for the Advancement of Women



Partners



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Executive Summary

The study of gender barriers in the workplace and how to overcome them is critical to move toward gender parity in Canadian corporate leadership. This report details the results of a unique qualitative study based on 50 interviews with some of Canada's most senior executive women. It aims to understand their lived experiences and perspectives on skills, enablers and barriers to women's advancement to senior leadership in corporate Canada. It also makes recommendations for change on societal, organizational and individual levels.

Context

Fair and equitable participation for all groups is a cornerstone of a strong and growing economy. However, systemic barriers stemming from institutional and cultural biases continue to put equity-deserving groups at a disadvantage across the Canadian labour market. Research shows that women face ongoing inequities in employment and career progression, even with in-demand skills and education. Women's careers continue to stall at senior leadership, which contributes to reports of less diverse representation at the board level, C-suite and executive tables. Disadvantages are compounded for

individuals with intersectional identities, such as women who are also members of other equity-deserving groups. Thus, while the case for increased gender representation in leadership roles is well-documented—and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) has seen increased prioritization by governments, organizations and the public—progress remains uneven.

Barriers to corporate advancement for diverse women in Canada exist at societal, organizational and individual levels. Stereotypes and biases contribute to the gender gap, alongside other barriers. Enablers for women's leadership include sponsorship and mentorship, leadership development training for women, inclusive executive leadership and methods to improve work flexibility, as well as capacity building at societal, organizational and individual levels.

Research objectives and methods

This study had five objectives, which were to do as follows:



Examine the lived experience

of diverse senior women on boards and in executive leadership in private-sector corporations in Canada through a focus on barriers and enablers of their careers



Understand the role

of skills in their leadership trajectories



Explore the impact

of the COVID-19 pandemic on the advancement of women in corporate leadership



Identify implications

and make recommendations for skills development and organizational capacity building for advancement of diverse women leaders



Examine the role

of corporate EDI policies and practices

To reach these objectives, we conducted in-depth interviews with 50 senior executive and C-suite women from across Canada representing different industries and with diverse backgrounds (i.e., race, culture, Indigenous identity, religion and sexual orientation). We analyzed these interviews using rigorous qualitative data analysis methods and arrived at five key themes: barriers, gender pay gap, enablers, skills and skills development, and approaches to overcome the glass ceiling.



Findings

The report presents five principal sets of findings from the interviewees' lived experience.

First, it identifies barriers to advancement. The women interviewed for this study identified being different, unspoken rules, conformity culture and caregiving responsibilities as major barriers to advance to senior leadership positions.

Second, the interviewees shared their experience with persistent gender pay inequities. Results indicate that differential compensation based on gender is experienced, including at the executive level, and challenges remain to even identify these compensation inequities. Issues relating to organizational culture and entrenched systems further exacerbate these struggles.

Third, the report presents enablers to women's advancement to executive positions. The most discussed enabler to success was the presence of effective sponsors and supportive networks, including supportive men as mentors and allies, that made critical connections for advancement. The interviewees also indicated that having more women in senior leadership was helping to shift corporate culture.

Fourth, the discussion of key skills that assist in career advancement and how to acquire them revolves around four themes: leadership skills and development focused on advanced social and emotional skills, education and training that highlights the importance of credentials, coaching to get

individualized advice and mentorship for advancement.

Fifth, the report summarizes approaches that the interviewed women took to overcome the glass ceiling. Earlier in their careers, women accepted opportunities that were given to them, created their own opportunities and chose opportunities strategically either inside or outside their organization. To step into senior leadership, women bypassed the glass ceiling because their company was supportive, were hired externally or were sought-after due to their level of specialization. In some cases, they pushed through the glass ceiling through sacrifice, endurance and mental fortitude, or moved on to another company to move up in the hierarchy there.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study concludes with a set of concrete recommendations for future action at societal, organizational and individual levels.

More action continues to be needed at the societal level. Policies and programs must challenge stereotypes to make it easier for women to thrive and advance.

Organizational strategies and practices around governance and leadership, human resources, culture, target setting, transparency and accountability can better embed gender through the organization's value chain to support women's advancement. Many of the suggestions, based on women's experiences, centre on ensuring that critical gender and diversity

perspectives and expertise inform leadership practices and improve organizational policies, process and culture. Strategies are needed to build pathways to women's advancement, to fix leaks in the talent pipeline that reduce the pool of qualified women and to ensure leaders who break through the glass ceiling do not get pushed off a glass cliff once they have advanced. On the individual level, recommendations include the strategic development of knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics for women who aspire to hold senior leadership positions and for leaders and decision-makers within organizations.

The report provides insights into the work needed to not only support diverse women leaders but also create a workforce of individuals with the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics to create an inclusive workplace. Professional development, mentoring, coaching, sponsorship and other supports are important to ensure women have the competencies, networks and understanding

of unspoken rules to rise to the top and stay there. However, the focus cannot be on "fixing the women." Tangible, measurable actions (with measurement, incentivization and reporting) are needed to shift hearts and minds at all levels of the organization and create meaningful inclusion.

This report provides a snapshot, and more research and analysis are needed. Companion pieces focused on the experiences of Indigenous women on boards, as well as women in sectors such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics, build on the intersectional perspectives shared in this report. Other research, such as the DiversityLeads report, offers more insight into the representation of women on boards and in senior roles across regions and sectors and how context plays a role. Finally, other reports on leading practices and the best practices database of the Diversity Institute offer practical examples of how corporations are advancing their EDI strategies for results.





Context

Introduction

Across Canada, systemic barriers rooted in institutional and cultural biases continue to put equity-deserving groups at a disadvantage in the labour market. Research shows that women face ongoing inequities in employment and career progression, even with in-demand skills and education. Women's careers continue to stall at senior leadership, which contributes to reports of less diverse representation at the board level, C-suite and executive tables.^{1,2} Among full- and part-time employees in Canada, women still make 89 cents of each dollar men make as of 2021.³ Disadvantages are compounded for individuals with intersectional identities, such as women who are also members of other equity-deserving groups. Yet, fair and equitable participation for all groups is a cornerstone of a strong and growing Canadian economy. A 2017 study from the McKinsey Global Institute found that improving gender equality in the workplace could increase Canada's gross domestic product (GDP) by as much as \$150 billion by 2026.⁴ The case for increased gender representation in leadership roles is well documented: accessing larger talent pools, serving diverse markets, driving

innovation and sustainability and avoiding risk. However, progress remains uneven. At the same time, equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) has seen increased prioritization by governments, organizations and the public, with new attention given to gaps and possibilities highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The evolving context of gender equity in corporate leadership

Considerable research has documented the underrepresentation of women in leadership in the corporate sector and factors shaping this gender gap at the societal, organizational and individual levels. Women are underrepresented as chief executive officers (CEOs), on boards of directors and as business owners. Despite making up one-half of university educated workers and participating in every industry, women lead only 8% of Fortune 500 companies in the U.S. Less than 1% are racialized women.⁵ Recent data from Canada shows that while progress is being made, a related gap is becoming wider: women earn less than men after post-secondary graduation.⁶ More recently, the Diversity Institute reported that despite women making up 50% of the population, their representation on corporate

boards in major Canadian cities ranges from a low of 31.5% in Calgary to a high of 39.7% in Vancouver. The representation of women in senior management overall is even lower, ranging from 21.3% in Vancouver to 26% in Montreal.⁷

Occupational segregation, where women are underrepresented in high-paying jobs, and underrepresentation in leadership roles contribute to wage and employment gaps.⁸ The wage differential between men and women is one of the clearest indicators of workplace gender inequity. Canada continues to have one of the highest gender wage gaps among countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).^{9, 10} In 2020, women earned 84% of what men earned in hourly wages.^{11, 12} The drop-off of women at senior levels is well documented in the literature¹³ and observed in the collective lived experiences of the participants in this study. There were still as many men named Mark as there are women among the top-paid 100 CEOs in Canada in 2023: four.¹⁴ Just as alarming, a recent study of women board directors and senior corporate leaders found that they earn 56% less than their men counterparts, and that racialized executives who are women earn 32% less than their women counterparts who are non-racialized.¹⁵ This shows that the inequities and barriers are exacerbated for women leaders who have intersecting identities, such as being Indigenous, racialized, living with a disability or identifying as 2SLGBTQ+.¹⁶



There is often an assumption that women opt out of leadership roles because balancing family responsibilities and working in a competitive corporate environment are not compatible. But were this a full explanation, women without children would experience a different career and pay trajectory than those with children. Instead, research has shown that women are typically held to higher standards and judged less often on their potential than men. One U.S. study suggested the gender gap in advancement is partly due to standard performance appraisal systems where women are receiving lower ratings because of time away for caregiving.¹⁷ Work-life balance is not the culprit. Rather, as another study suggests, the general culture of overwork encourages women to take “career-derailing accommodations to meet the demands of work and family.”¹⁸ Women and men suffer from these factors, but women pay much higher professional costs.

A cultural shift has been documented, with women making progress in the workplace (albeit slowly), through better representation in leadership roles and a diminishing wage gap.¹⁹ Yet institutionalized gender bias in corporate Canada persists, limiting the effectiveness of inclusive practices. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the substantial burden of unpaid work for women, especially for diverse and racialized women.²⁰ Despite progress in Canada with respect to child care, supports for women’s entrepreneurship and a heightened corporate focus on EDI programs, much remains to be done.²¹

Data on the representation of women and other equity-deserving groups indicate that organizational practices need to be improved, with greater emphasis on career advancement and mobility for these groups.²² In addition to the wage gap and underrepresentation in leadership roles, women experience overt discrimination (e.g., women engineers are paid less) as well as microaggressions in the workplace.²³

At the societal level, longer-term changes in the economic, political and corporate landscape have resulted in shifts in the landscape for women in leadership roles over time. With more women in the workforce, norms and expectations are changing. Policies like national child care and improved parental leave make a difference.

Legislative and regulatory frameworks that require reporting and organizational policies also have an impact. For example, Canada’s Employment Equity Act, Pay Equity Act and the more recent Act to amend

the Canada Business Corporations Act, in addition to provincial regulations, have increased requirements for reporting on the advancement of women.²⁴ Designated groups under the Employment Equity Act include women, Indigenous or “Aboriginal” Peoples, racialized people or “visible minorities” and persons with disabilities.¹ For this study, equity-deserving groups include these designated groups, as well as those who identify as Black people and persons who identify as 2SLGBTQ+.

Broad environmental and political shifts have also contributed to the evolution of EDI in Canada. Growing emphasis on environmental, social and governance (ESG) accountability often includes EDI and is shaping investor behaviour and thus the behaviour of corporations.²⁵ Policies and initiatives such as the 50 – 30 Challenge, the 30%+ Club and the BlackNorth Initiative have drawn new attention and action to the issue of the gender and diversity gap in corporate leadership. The 50 – 30 Challenge asks firms to make aspirational commitments to gender parity (50% women and/or non-binary people) and significant representation (30%) of members of other equity-deserving groups on Canadian boards and/or senior management. To date, it has garnered more than 2,500 signatories committing to internal policies and timelines for increased representation in leadership.²⁶ These voluntary codes also reinforce the importance of thinking beyond gender

1 Visible minority is an individual who is non-white in colour or race; this is distinct from Indigenous identities. This term is not widely accepted and can be replaced with “racialized.”

and applying an intersectional lens. The new public awakening on race relations in the wake of George Floyd's 2020 murder has also contributed to a more concerted effort to address anti-Black racism and urgency for EDI. Similarly, the discovery of unmarked graves of Indigenous children in Kamloops, B.C., reinforced new corporate efforts around Truth and Reconciliation. However, cultural stereotypes and gendered expectations remain strong, despite the business case for diversity in senior leadership.²⁷

At the organizational level, calls for more inclusion and a shift from traditional, often man-centric, corporate leadership²⁸ have not translated into substantive changes in terms of women's leadership representation. The shock of the COVID-19 pandemic drew attention to the burden of unpaid work for women and the need for a "she-covery," but that will soon fade without a focused movement toward gender parity and general equitable practices.²⁹ However, given this unique window for change, many firms are looking to examine their policies, practices and procedures with the aim of enhancing diversity in leadership.

Low numbers of women at corporate tables are a result of systemic barriers preventing promotion to executive levels, but also reinforce gendered notions of leadership.

A common argument is that there are not enough qualified candidates (i.e., women) for leadership positions because of gaps or "leaks" in the pipeline.³⁰ However there is research to suggest the issues are more related to the ways in which qualifications

and expertise are framed. Enough qualified women are in the pipeline; the issue is that barriers to advancement result in women being removed or removing themselves from the pipeline.³¹

Long-standing patterns show that women experience barriers in the form of biases, generalizations and stereotypes. This suggests that women do not advance because they are oversensitive and emotional or leave the workplace to start families.³² Gender incongruity theory tells us that societally accepted beliefs about men and women, including about men being seen as leaders, create a pre-existing workplace prejudice against women. Research is also clear that increased representation will serve to shift such beliefs and has an important influence on women's aspirations to lead.³³ In attaining such representation and cultural change, it is critically important that gender and diversity are considered as core within all dimensions of corporate strategy.³⁴ These dimensions include a range of organizational processes: leadership and governance, recruitment, selection and promotion processes, organizational culture, performance indicators, the value chain and community engagement.

At the individual level, perceptions, norms and stereotypes have held women back. Training for individuals has tended to focus on women themselves, following a "fix the women" strategy while ignoring the need to shift the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of others in the organization. Gendered notions of leadership often mean that women are caught in a double bind. If they exhibit traits associated with

masculinity they are criticized, while if they exhibit traits associated with femininity they are not considered “leaderly.”³⁵ There is also evidence that they are challenged not just by men in the workplace but by other women who may also hold gendered views of leadership.³⁶ Women are often blamed for not being more assertive and then punished when they are,³⁷ which is unsurprisingly challenging for navigating a corporate environment. The phenomena of the tall poppy and glass cliff are still evident. When women rise, they may be cut down or pushed off because they don’t belong.³⁸

While research on the impact of networking is not unequivocally positive, it can build reputation, create influence, offer social supports, provide feedback, improve the flow of information and referrals, and regulate access to jobs and promotions.^{39, 40} However, there are also concerns about

gender-segregated networks which, like employee resource groups, may constitute only a temporary benefit en route to true gender parity.⁴¹

Some research focuses on what are seen as gaps in women’s experience and competencies, suggesting that women need to become better versed in functional areas like finance or relational skills.⁴² As a result, many development programs aim to empower women to acquire such skills.⁴³ However, such an approach can backfire if it inadvertently perpetuates a masculinized view of leadership skills.⁴⁴

Through this unique interview study with 50 executive women in Canada, many of these issues are explored. New findings emerge that point to ways forward for women in corporate settings, policy makers and corporations aiming to value and advance talented women.



Methods

Research objectives and methods

We conducted the study with five objectives in mind:



Examine the lived experience

of diverse senior women on boards and in executive leadership in private-sector corporations in Canada through a focus on barriers and enablers of their careers



Understand the role

of skills in their leadership trajectories



Explore the impact

of the COVID-19 pandemic on the advancement of women in corporate leadership



Identify implications

and make recommendations for skills development and organizational capacity building for advancement of diverse women leaders



Examine the role

of corporate EDI policies and practices

We conducted in-depth interviews with 50 senior executive women in Canada to learn from their lived experiences of barriers and enablers to advancement, their perceptions of inclusive practices and their thoughts on necessary future changes.

Purposive sampling was used to identify women in senior roles who met the following criteria:

- > Their employer must meet the 30%+ Club criteria (i.e., have at least 30% representation of women in the C-suite or on their corporate board).²
- > Their employer must be a large partnership (e.g., law firms), private-sector firm or corporation with 250 or more employees, or high revenue.
- > Professional services firms, institutional investors.
- > Individual participants must hold executive directorship on a corporate board and/or be a managing partner with voting power (e.g., senior vice-president) or hold a current position or recent experience in the C-suite.

An intersectional perspective was used to consider the experiences of women who were racialized, Indigenous, living with a disability or were otherwise diverse, as well as white women. Women interviewed for this study also discussed their faith, immigrant and socio-economic backgrounds.

2 The 30%+ Club is a business campaign aiming to achieve at least 30% representation of women on boards and executive leadership teams all over the world.

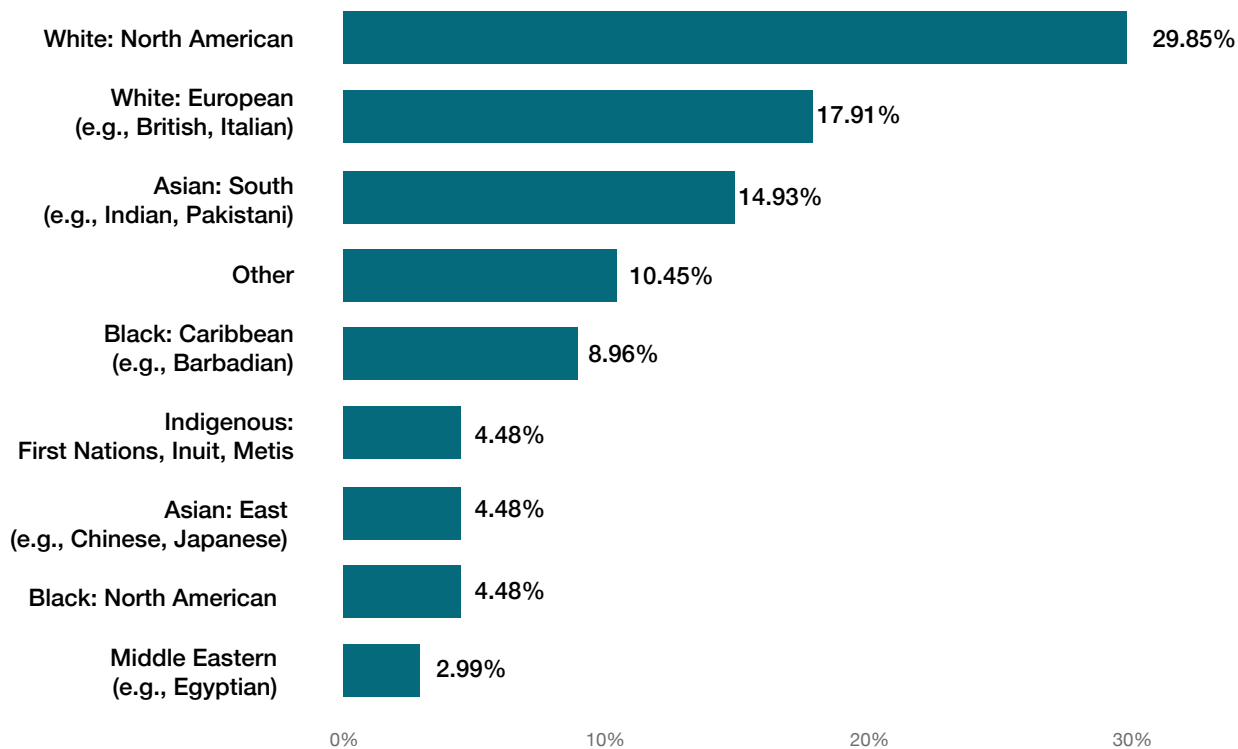


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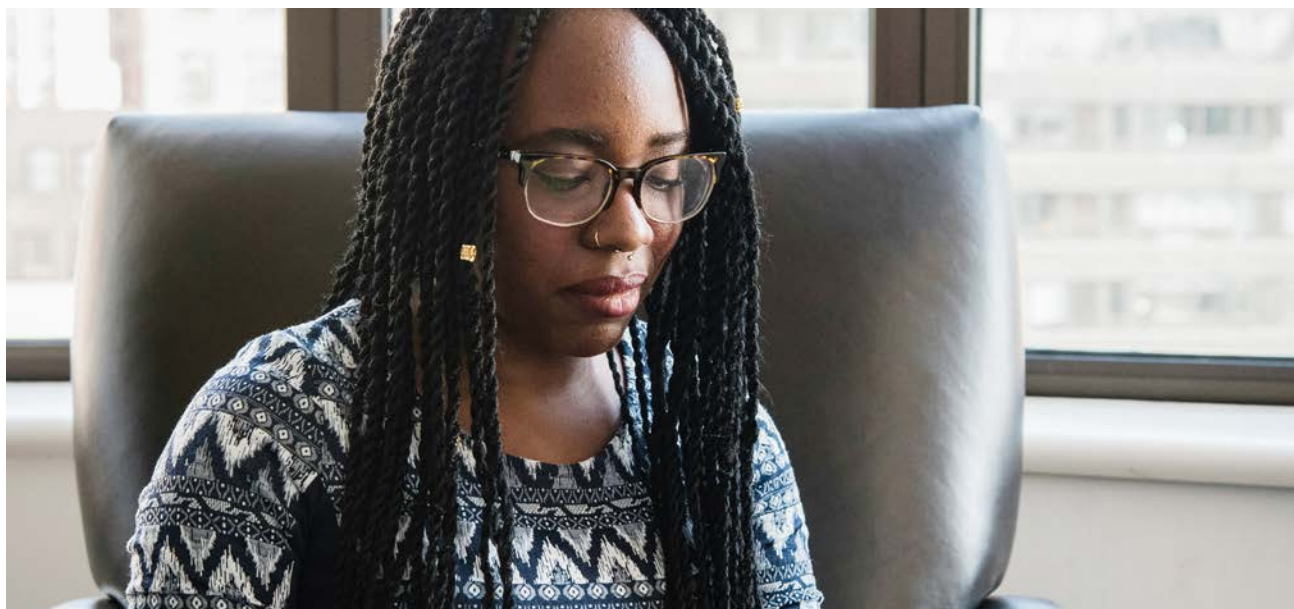
Additional experiences spanned gender and sexual identity, ageism, neurodiversity and mental health. Each interview captured demographic data and has been anonymized with all identifiers removed for this report. Figure 1 shows the ethnic self-identification of participants.



FIGURE 1.
Ethnic self-identification of participants



Note: n = 48; two of the 50 participants did not respond to the survey.



Interview questions addressed the following topics:

1. Personal career and leadership trajectory
2. Barriers to women's advancement in the workplace (e.g., Have you experienced or observed barriers to [women, Indigenous peoples, racialized or Black people, persons with disabilities or those who are 2SLGBTQ+] aspiring to leadership roles? How are different groups treated?)
3. Enablers to women's advancement in the workplace (e.g., What enabled your success in terms of organizational supports? Did or do you have a mentor(s), sponsor(s) and/or role model(s) who supported you in obtaining your current role? How important was this to your success and on your journey to executive leadership?)
4. Skills for leaders advancing to executive management and how to acquire these skills (e.g., What training, knowledge, skills or attributes do you think have made you successful, including in your current role?)
5. Individual skills of others/decision-makers and organizational practices related to building diversity and inclusion within the boardroom and C-suite
6. COVID-19 pandemic effect.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed, anonymized, coded and analyzed based on common techniques for qualitative data analysis. The researchers compared the analysis in the core areas of focus (barriers, gender pay gaps, enablers, skills and skills development, and approaches to overcome the glass ceiling) to the literature. This comparison helped to identify commonalities, divergence and gaps in the research, including prevailing practices and proposed solutions for improved practices as noted by the participants. It extrapolated from the data and the literature where appropriate.



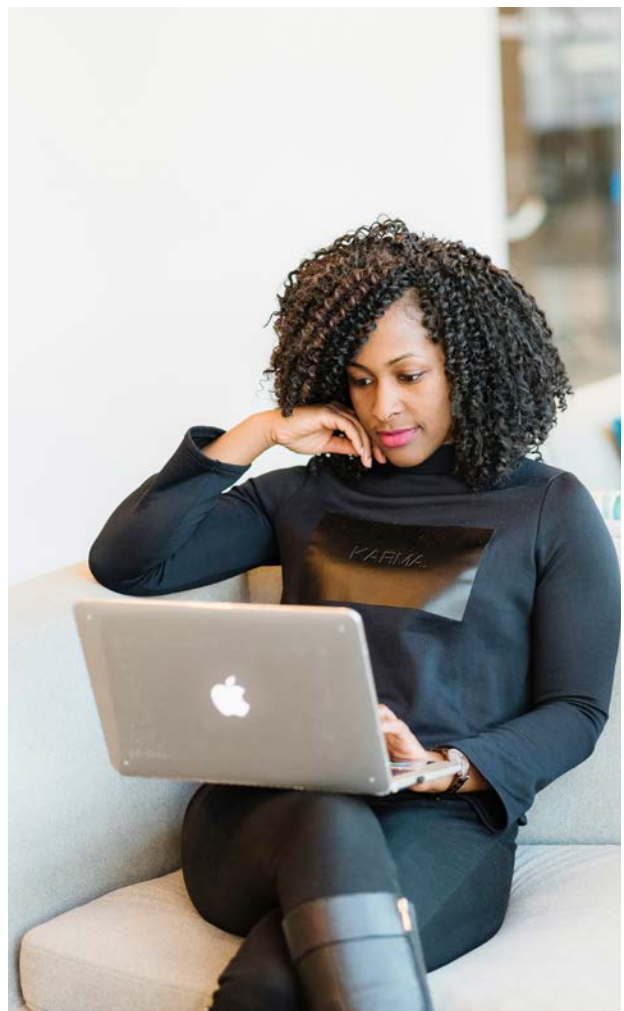
Findings

Findings were organized around the five major themes.

Barriers to women's advancement

In detailing their career and leadership trajectories, interviewees described the barriers and enablers that affected their own advancement, as well as the advancement of women more generally, into executive roles. Barriers related to being different, unspoken rules, a prevailing culture of conformity and caregiving responsibilities.

Many interviewees reported feeling excluded or “othered.” Some spoke about feeling out of place in their workplaces. While colleagues who were white men or others who “fit in” were provided instructions to navigate the corporate environment and careers, they were not. Respondents reported that this delayed opportunities to advance to the C-suite and denied them opportunities for executive leadership roles.



Being different

“... when you’re going in as a female, and a Black female, and working in an environment where you will be with all white colleagues, you have to navigate the system whereby your voice is heard, because sometimes managers overlook you because, guess what, you’re different.” (Subj_2-7)

A pattern emerged of interviewees feeling that they were regarded differently than colleagues by virtue of any characteristic that made them stand out. This had an overall negative influence on their professional advancement. The study participants reported barriers to their career trajectory based on characteristics such as gender, racialization, economic status, sexual orientation and age (being regarded as too young or old). Personal differences based on clothing, cultural background, accent, family status and lack of family connections also affected advancement. This theme was prominent among diverse executive women. Being perceived as different influenced women’s behaviour and identities, as well as how others relate to them and how they relate to others. This ultimately affected their journeys to success.

However, not all participants reported negative influences on their careers based on gender and a small number were adamant that their gender or race had no influence.

“You go in, you learn everything, you try to get an A+, and you move on to the next bigger, better thing. I went into corporate Canada with that mindset, without anyone having tainted it by telling me that wasn’t the way that worked.” (Subj_2-4)

“I’m not going to say that sexism doesn’t exist. I think people put too much emphasis on it and they use it as a crutch.” (Subj_2-9)

Those respondents who did not confirm a connection between having characteristics seen as different and limits to advancement opportunities still reported experiences of discomfort, bias, microaggressions, discrimination, lack of support and sabotage.

“I experienced every bias you can ever imagine. Too young. Not ethnic enough. Or the only ethnic person. Married, not married, kids, not kids, that whole stage of transition. There were people who thought I slept my way to the top, and the person they thought I had done that with, which was completely not true, would never deny it!” (Subj_1-4a)

Other interviews uncovered stories of women feeling like they were under a magnifying glass with how they dressed, spoke and wore their hair. They reported being held to higher standards than their men colleagues. Black women reported avoiding feeding into the stereotype of being angry. Others said they had overcompensated for general lower regard in the workplace (i.e., through amassing credentials or being excessively prepared for meetings). One participant suggested that the men with whom she worked were automatically given respect at the senior executive table, but that she had

to earn it as the only woman there (Subj_2-12). Further, it seems that “being different” can be an institutionalized practice:

“I was the only woman, and they had no clue how to work with a woman. I really felt like I had to go into every executive team meeting like I was going into a fight, right? Elbows up, really having to get my voice heard and lean into my point of view. It was exhausting. I had to really push to be heard at that time.” (Subj_3-26)

“... depending on the age group, a lot of [men] never had a mother who worked. For a lot of them, their wives don’t work. And so, the dynamic [of working] with a woman is different.” (Subj_3-15)

“... if you don’t exemplify what a leader looks like from 1960, you don’t get ahead. It’s uncomfortable for the leadership group to have someone different. And so, ‘I can’t possibly have a woman on my team; what’s my wife going to think?’ ‘What about when we go out and have drinks with the boys? She’s not going to fit in.’ It’s this whole thing about ‘fit’ and ‘culture;’ that’s what has held it back.” (Subj_3-14)

Being the only one

Women executives with intersecting racialized and 2SLGBTQ+ identities, as well as women executives more generally in business, finance and technology sectors, reported being the only one rather than part of a minority group.

“... you notice you’re different, right? There’s 20 people in the boardroom and I’m the only non-white woman.” (Subj_3-3)



“I was the only woman, and they had no clue how to work with a woman. I really felt like I had to go into every executive team meeting like I was going into a fight, right? Elbows up, really having to get my voice heard and lean into my point of view. It was exhausting. I had to really push to be heard at that time.”

“There [are] one or two other female partners that identify as LGBTQ+. But I am the only out one [who is] truly out. There are times where I feel like a population of one. And we have 600 partners here!” (Subj_2-20)

Being different simply by being the only one is a barrier for many women seeking advancement because it implies they have no moral supports. Interviewees spoke about a lack of community and a lack of understanding about the reality of being different.

“The more senior I get, I feel like the more alone I am becoming. I had lots of friends as a junior associate who were like me, then more at mid-level and other women with

children as I was coming up as a senior partner. But now, I am at a point where there's very few people like me at the level that I'm at, and I look around and I think, 'Something's gotta give. Either I'm going to turn into them or I gotta leave. I can't be here by myself and be myself.'" (Subj_2-8)

"... we're on a Zoom call over COVID, and three of [the clients] said to me separately, 'Wow, you must be so happy that you work for [such a progressive organization] and due to the success of affirmative action, you're able to be at this [executive] position.' And here I am on Zoom ... I still looked professional—hair, makeup, jewelry, clothes, done. And I do all of that as a defence mechanism, because I am tired of going into restaurants, tired of going into events and people asking me for the washroom, can I get some more water, my knife dropped—tired of it. If I am going to an event tonight, I am wearing a different colour so that I obviously am not a wait staff. But that still happens." (Subj_3-15)

When genders act differently than their prescribed roles

The prevalent biases reported by respondents were consciously and unconsciously exercised by all genders. Being penalized for being a woman was not only perpetrated by men, but sometimes by women as well.

"I saw some women who were successful at the bank and elsewhere, and they were the women where, there was a little bit of, 'I got here by myself; nobody helped me. I'm going to roll that ladder up behind me.'" (Subj_3-2)

"My colleague is a young Black biracial woman, and she experienced one managing partner who was a Black woman, who would not do anything to support Black women. She had this view of, 'I had it tough and I'm not going to make things better for you.' Whereas I'm of the belief that it shouldn't be tough: you shouldn't need 16 degrees, and you shouldn't have to experience trauma. I experienced it, but I never want anyone to go through that. And I'm trying to create a workplace that is going to not allow for that, but it's hard for one person to do that." (Subj_2-6)

Many participants spoke of incidents where they were not supported by other women colleagues as well as women who were senior to them. The senior executive professional women in our study have experienced poor and strong leadership throughout the span of their careers, and some named other women as a barrier in the workplace.

One respondent explained that the unsupportive senior women she worked with had "killed themselves to the top" and had bad experiences on the way. This engendered a mindset to make other women "pay." (Subj_2-15) Others witnessed competitiveness, hostility ("like she's ready to attack"), having to take care not to outshine other women, being viewed as a threat and "dragging [other] women down" (Subj_1-11b). Some racialized respondents identified a clear pattern of white women being problematic. They observed an insecurity among leaders they worked with who were white women. This translated into perpetuating barriers in the workplace that they themselves had experienced.

“... [the white woman leader] sits very comfortably in her white privilege. But my team is small and they’re also racialized women. Her team thinks she’s the best thing ever, because they are all white and blonde like her and she’s created that kind of environment that allows her to succeed in that way.” (Subj_2-6)

Another example of women reinforcing gender traditionalism comes not out of malice, but out of support and caring. One respondent recounted a woman colleague questioning her for accepting a promotion to vice-president: “Are you sure you want to take this promotion? You now have small kids at home; are you sure?” While well-meaning, this form of support contributes to undermining ambitious women and perpetuating societal gender roles.

Interview participants also experienced supportive men as C-suite leaders who leveraged their differences into success.

“One of [my past executive leader’s] theories was that for really, really complicated nuanced jobs, he liked hiring moms. He thought they had the ability to navigate ambiguity, the ability to prioritize one favoured child over another at times because it’s what was called for. To juggle all those responsibilities and balance many interests. So, in this chief operating officer role, I was the third mom of three to be in the role.” (Subj_2-1)

“There was a concerted effort by the president, who is a huge supporter of women and diversity. And, even though he is a white middle-aged man, he is a big supporter.” (Subj_3-6)



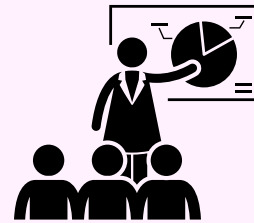
While the first example above is also gendered (in the sense that the executive leader evidently did not believe that dads would share these abilities), many interviewees were clear that their personal experiences of discrimination and barriers to advancement should not be framed as men versus women. They articulated that they know and respect very hard-working, cisgendered, able-bodied men with whom they work. They experienced supportive men and unsupportive women as corporate leaders. However, knowing individuals who respond differently than what is prescribed by society and organizational culture did not change the fact that interviewees identified reduced opportunities due to characteristics that singled them out as being different.

Unspoken rules

Participants reported unspoken rules in the workplace and referenced not having access to such rules, not knowing how to “play the game” or being ascribed gender roles that do not fit the rules.

The challenge of unspoken rules in the corporate world is not exclusive to equity-deserving individuals. However, interviewees’ responses provided evidence that navigating a corporate career without knowing the rules is more difficult for women than for men. One participant hypothesized that the reason the rules are not written down is to preserve power for a select few. In other words, the path to success is not supposed to be accessible to all.

We observed that these rules do not just govern how to ascend the corporate ladder but that the corporate world operates in favour of men overall. Respondents offered examples of how it remains an expectation in today’s corporate world for women to behave a certain way to fit a certain model of how executive leaders behave. That said, many participants noted an improvement throughout their careers as the acceptance of gender equity has evolved, but this has not erased what has become institutionalized practice.



“I was very careful to show up the way that they could accept me to be. Less: not too confrontational, easy to work with, solve all the problems, smooth all the edges, that kind of person.”

“I was very careful to show up the way that they could accept me to be. Less: not too confrontational, easy to work with, solve all the problems, smooth all the edges, that kind of person.” (Subj_2-4)

“I didn’t fit the mould of what they expected a woman in the workplace to be.” (Subj_2-18)

“Coming into the role, it very quickly became apparent that women aren’t really meant to speak. It’s kind of like this old-school environment. I’m talked down to, I’m treated as if I am very junior, whereas I’m probably more experienced and qualified than most of the executives in the organization.” (Subj_2-13)

Such unspoken rules also translated into gendered assumptions that limited women's advancement.

"Women can't be seen out for dinner with a man. As a one-on-one, I was told, no, that would be perceived wrong. But men have the opportunity for one-on-ones with males. I mean, you have to then change the system if it's that broken that I can't have a dialogue with someone without it being perceived like there is an affair going on, which is ridiculous, right? It is so frustrating having that inequality and [being prevented from] access to opportunity." (Subj_3-17)

Some unspoken rules were reported to be specific to individual firms or companies. At one organization, the accepted practice was that you couldn't apply for promotions within your first year of working there. However, the interviewee was unaware of this rule,

so she did it anyway and succeeded (i.e., ignorance was a strategy to advancement). Other rules are more general and rationalized through meritocracy. For example, if an overwhelming number of equity-deserving individuals happen to not make it through a rigorous hiring practice then the suggestion is made that they don't have what it takes to succeed. Yet, discussions with many of our executive participants uncovered that men receive more support from other men to climb the ladder:

"... there's a double standard that still very much exists for females. And this is just from the female perspective, I can't speak for other lenses of diversity. But there is a fast-tracking for men that happens because more men are leaders so they feel that they can



connect as mentors for other men. There are conversations that you're just not privy to, because you're not one of the guys having a beer." (Subj_3-17)

Table 1 lists examples of language with gendered hidden meaning.

TABLE 1.

Examples of "code words": language with gendered hidden meaning, expressing the unspoken rules

Code Words	Contextual Example	Hidden Meaning
"Executive presence" (Subj_2-20, 2-4)	Participants witnessed discussions about women or ethnic groups saying that they lacked interpersonal skills or an "executive presence" that is required for senior leadership roles. These individuals are denied promotions and not given the opportunity to be coached to rectify the presumed lack.	I don't relate to you. You don't represent the norm, and I will not hire or promote you despite your strong credentials.
"Presence" (Subj_2-12)	Refers to a negative review of a colleague, who was a gay man, as lacking "presence." The participant observed that being macho, passive-aggressive and loud was expected of men, but not welcome for her.	You don't have what it takes to be in a senior leadership role. I respect men taking charge more than women.
"Professional" (Subj_3-7)	Many participants were told they weren't "professional" in appearance and felt they didn't fit the "mould" of what is expected (e.g., hair is too curly, big or long; clothing is too bright).	I am unwilling to adapt to difference and will penalize you for an appearance that I am unaccustomed to.
"So nice" (Subj_1-8b) / "too nice" (Subj_2-19)	Participants were repeatedly told they were "nice" and experienced others' surprise when they made tough decisions. "I didn't know you had it in you," they were told, for example.	I suspect you may not be able to make hard decisions because you're a woman and will not be a strong leader. I view being nice as a weakness and a sign people don't stand up for themselves.
"Politics" (Subj_2-9)	A participant was told "it's just politics" when repeatedly denied advancement opportunities she had been promised, despite surpassing all goals. Blaming corporate culture as a mysterious entity transfers responsibility (i.e., decisions are out of our control).	Decisions for career advancement opportunities may be made based on gender, race or simply who I like best.
"Fit" (Subj_2-4)	A participant experienced a negative assessment of "fit" earlier in her career. This was based on who colleagues and leaders thought they could get along with, spend lots of time with, be comfortable with and trust.	I will hire, give opportunities to and promote people with the same life experiences, background, understandings and interests as me (e.g., golf).

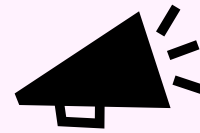
Other code words noted by participants to be reserved for women included: phase of one's life, prickly, sharp elbows, too polished and young.

Conformity culture

Most participants, including those who experienced intersectional barriers (i.e., more than one marginalizing characteristic like race, sexuality or religion, along with gender), reported a corporate preference for normative behaviour. Many reported feeling the need to cover or hide parts of themselves for the sake of their career trajectory. For some respondents, the systemic imperative to conform is a strategic choice to portray a different identity at work than at home. For too many women of diverse backgrounds, we observed they subvert part of themselves as a defence mechanism, so it would not become a barrier to fitting in and succeeding. Being visibly different is a big enough barrier without drawing attention to it.⁴⁵

“Bring your whole self to work’ is such a farce. Bring the part of you that we can tolerate in small chunks ...” (Subj_1-1a)

For the interviewees who identify with intersectional barriers, the notion of covering up part of themselves in the workplace was simply a necessary consideration. Interviewees with hidden characteristics, such as mental health struggles, did not disclose their needs to their leadership for fear of being judged and seen as weak or incapable of doing their jobs. Aspects of one's personality may be covered for fear of



“Bring your whole self to work’ is such a farce. Bring the part of you that we can tolerate in small chunks ...”

being seen as too emotional or aggressive. To conform, participants reported watching the hockey game the night before only to be able to discuss it at the office the next day or playing golf simply to fit in.

Such conformity was taken to further extremes. One participant recounted harassment on a work trip and then resigning rather than disclosing it. Another took a sick day when hospitalized for a miscarriage but did not share this with anyone at work. In all circumstances, these participants felt that disclosure would put their career progression at risk.



“With a Black woman, there’s always an issue of hair. I’ve worn my hair natural since law school, but there were years where I had to think about how I did that, because I knew I wouldn’t be accepted.”

Conformity in appearance, including hair and clothing, is a stressor for many corporate women. We find this to be persistent and strongly evident in our participants’ lived experiences. For Black women, hair may be the most commented upon characteristic by colleagues, coaches and senior leaders. Whether too big, too curly or the vague comment of too unprofessional, the message received is that looking different is not welcome. This can take a toll on one’s identity.

“... I didn’t wear any colour, you know. [I wore] beige and navy. I really didn’t want to stand out as a peacock, like something’s different. I wanted to look like a pigeon, like everyone else.” (Subj_2-6)

“As a woman, and as a minority, you do have to modulate who you are, depending on the circumstances.” (Subj_1-9b)

“With a Black woman, there’s always an issue of hair. I’ve worn my hair natural since law school, but there were years where I had to think about how I did that, because I knew I wouldn’t be accepted.” (Subj_1-8b)

Most participants downplayed their home life to ensure their professional visibility in the workplace. One participant pushed herself beyond medical recommendations during a high-risk pregnancy to make sure she was still seen as a superstar. Then, she recounted, she still had to start from scratch after the birth of her child, feeling as though all her hard work had been forgotten.

Such conformity culture creates unhealthy work environments that have had a harmful effect over time for the women we interviewed. That said, the study did not reveal that corporate experience equates to toxicity across the board. Many examples were provided of inclusive offices, progressive organizations and visionary leaders. Nevertheless, we heard several accounts of a single individual or team or division that perpetuated unhealthy circumstances for participants. We also heard accounts of overarching organizational cultures that perpetuated unhealthy environments for women.

“I think I’m more disappointed in the infrastructure and the system than any one person, because I think most people’s behaviour can be explained with insecurity, to be honest with you. People aren’t really monsters, right? There’s only a couple of really, really bad people out there. Those people just make bad decisions in a bad system.” (Subj_2-18)

“I also felt [my corporate experience] was a culture of, ‘I had it hard, so you will have it hard.’ It’s like a hazing culture.” (Subj_3-21)

“It was a microcosm of terrible culture within a company that had a great culture.” (Subj_2-17)

The old-school, traditional boys’ club culture is alive in many corporate contexts

and has previously shaped women’s corporate experience of advancement as observed in this study. The examples in Table 2 demonstrate the high expectations and stressors that women experience that could lead to them choosing to leave the workplace or opt out from promotions.

TABLE 2.
Corporate stressors that affect women’s retention and advancement

Stressor	Example
Overtime	“The job almost killed me. I left when I was 99 lbs. That is 30 lbs. less than I am now, and I’m still not a large person. I was working 80 hours a week and killing myself.” (Subj_2-13)
Expectation of sacrifice	“There is no question. My husband was in the hospital for four days and the managing partner basically said to me: If you leave this deal to go see him, don’t come back. So, it was pretty rough. I had partners that I worked with who missed the birth of their children because they were getting on planes to go to work in another province in Canada.” (Subj_2-12)
Lack of safety	“... the hostile environment for women on many dimensions, like, having at least one very senior management member who was a misogynist, but also having several people in senior management who were sexual harassers, and known to be. By that time, I was a vice-president so I could fend for myself, but there were so many women who couldn’t.” (Subj_2-17)
Competitive environment	“Unwritten rules, expectations, competing with other colleagues to be working at 11 o’clock at night, and be online, and make sure that you’re keeping everything going. It was very much an unwritten competition.” (Subj_3-7)
Lack of support	“I was performing well regardless of the fact that I had these people undermining [me]. But it was stressful for me, and it was a very difficult situation because I felt like I was around a pack of hyenas always, who were trying to rip me to shreds.” (Subj_2-6)
Pressure to be visible	“I shattered my wrist right when I started, and I didn’t take one day off. I was working the whole time, and I didn’t even feel pain in my wrist. I was so disconnected from my body that my doctor finally [said]: ‘You need to stop and give your wrist a break.’” (Subj_2-18)
Dismissive language	“I was infuriated with that type of dismissive language that would just keep me some place without ever a chance of promotion. The female COO kept people down with certain people in certain roles. A male CO told me I should manage the kitchen because I was so good at [organizing]. There was definitely a culture that kept people in their place.” (Subj_3-17)
Hoarding power	“I think it’s more about power and the fact that they don’t want to share it. I tried to really separate that this is not about me, personally. It’s about these broader power dynamics. This is about them wanting to hold on and maintain the power dynamics that they have had their entire career, right? So, I don’t blame anybody. It’s the system.” (Subj_3-4)

Respondents told stories of stressors that put their health and pregnancies at risk and caused personal commitments to be sacrificed. They also spoke of mental health stressors, discrimination, “more than gentle overtures” (Subj_3-26), lawsuits and choices that challenged their integrity and values. We find that such experiences aggravate the existing pressure of working in an environment that is not built for work-life balance.

Caregiving responsibilities

Participants commented on further institutionalized practices, suggesting that the workplace was designed for men rather than women. Women still assume more caregiving responsibilities, and interviewees who are parents identified long corporate hours that do not provide space for caregiving (e.g., after-school pick-ups) as a barrier to advancement.

“... the entire way corporate Canada works contradicts the way children’s school hours go ... so I think there is this imbalance.” (Subj_1-4a)

“I received negative comments about taking a few sick days, which wasn’t true. There were times when my son was sick, and I still worked through them. I worked late nights, weekends, everything. But I was always reminded that I have little kids. [I was told]: ‘You might want to consider alternate child-care arrangements because, you know, you did take some time off.’ But I was owed those days!” (Subj_1-11b)



“One of the biggest hurdles for the advancement of women in professional careers is the lack of availability of affordable and safe child care. This is a huge issue for women’s advancement.”

“One of the biggest hurdles for the advancement of women in professional careers is the lack of availability of affordable and safe child care. This is a huge issue for women’s advancement.” (Subj_3-13)

“I don’t think society is set up for two working parents. And there’s so much mental load that falls to the mother. And I do think as a working mom, you get stress from work, you get stress from home, and you don’t get a lot of self-care time, or even time to yourself, and I think that’s what hurts women.” (Subj_2-11)

For our interviewees who are parents, these practices were perceived as barriers to their advancement, along with pervasive negative attitudes from corporate leaders and colleagues (i.e., sick leave, maternity leave or stress leave being regarded as vacation time). Those who experienced negative interactions around parental leave felt as though their time away was being held against them. Expectations were sometimes lowered for women returning from leave even though they had previously been on the fast track to advancement. Conversely, some women were expected to keep working during their leave. Some mentioned guilt and many discussed sacrifices. Most felt that caregiving delayed their advancement, compensation increases and, for some participants, share increases. More than one respondent shared stories of being denied promotions for this reason, which were borderline or explicitly discriminatory.

“I was told that this VP position would be mine. So, I went on [maternity] leave, and during mat leave I received an email with an announcement stating another person got the VP role, who had no experience in the area and was a white man. ... I said, ‘Explain this to me.’ And he [my boss] said, and I quote, ‘If you’re on mat leave, you’re not considered. I only consider butts in seats for promotions.’ I have every single qualification for this job, I was told this was my job, so you’re telling me the only reason I didn’t get it was because I was on mat leave?”

(Subj_2-12)



“The second maternity leave, the day I had my son in the hospital, my boss phoned me and said, I hear you had a son, congratulations, now let’s get down to business. Two days from now is our AGM, you’re going to be here.” (Subj_3-14)

Participants identified that caregiving as a challenge in corporate careers is not unique to women. The unspoken rules of the corporate world may provide even fewer allowances for men who take on these tasks. The overwhelming expectation is that there should be a “wife” at home taking care of these tasks.

“I was married, I wanted to have children, and while the male partners were sometimes in the same circumstance as me, with young families, or wanting to have families, they set up their lives differently. They apparently got some sort of manual that I failed to get, which said you should get a wife. And I have a husband, who is wonderful, but a husband.” (Subj_2-1)

“I was telling my colleague after working late, ‘Oh, I still have to go home, do laundry and get my lunch ready for the next day.’ And he’s like, ‘Oh, yeah, that’s all done for me. You need a wife.’ This is the thing you realize right away, yeah, I do. Apparently having a wife is what is required to really make people successful.” (Subj_3-21)

Examples of caregiving given by participants included responsibilities for children, parents in poor health and the health of the respondents themselves. The work commitment at the executive level of our respondents required sacrifices whether they had children at home or not. These



“I missed my grandmother’s funeral. I missed my best friend’s wedding. My mom was sick; I didn’t help her throughout the years. None of that will ever happen again. As you get older, you start to understand that you shouldn’t miss things.”

sacrifices included personal relationships, work location (more than one participant commuted across country for work and home life), mental health and prioritizing global travel for career opportunities.

“I missed my grandmother’s funeral. I missed my best friend’s wedding. My mom was sick; I didn’t help her throughout the years. None of that will ever happen again. As you get older, you start to understand that you shouldn’t miss things.” (Subj_2-18)

Parenthood roles and added home responsibilities did exacerbate the toll of these corporate expectations. This was further increased if the stereotype of

gendered roles carried into one's home life. Almost all participants reported having exceptional family supports who they credited for contributing to their success. For those without home supports, caregiving was a significant barrier. Interestingly, one divergent experience was from a single parent who did not receive pressures or resistance in the workplace when she set boundaries around child-care duties (such as picking up her child from daycare), because it was understood that she had no other supports to rely on.

Study participants reported receiving messaging at work assuming they would want to leave the workplace to stay home with their children. They reported times when this was used as a rationalization not to promote women and times when similar messaging was used to attempt improved supports for women. Our analysis showed us several women who want both work and family.

"I do know about a year after my second maternity leave and last maternity leave, that's when something switched in me. All of a sudden, I knew I definitely wanted to do more. Maybe because I knew I was over that baby phase, but definitely wanting to do more." (Subj_3-17)

"It was really hard for me, I'll be honest. I was on maternity leave with my daughter, and I went back early because I was struggling. It's that whole thing of having to choose. I needed both. I absolutely had to have both. I had to have my family, but I also had to have work, because work was a huge part of who I was." (Subj_2-14)

Respondents also offered insights into the debate around whether women are opting out by choosing to leave the workplace, which results in a lack of gender parity at executive tables. Several respondents did not perceive barriers limiting their professional progression until a pivotal point in their careers when the barrier became insurmountable and therefore undeniable. While none of our study participants left the workplace, they shared their observations about the decisions other women around them make to stay in the corporate world or leave. Ultimately, there was no consensus among the respondents as to whether women who leave the workplace really have a choice.

One respondent spoke of being "gender-blind" throughout much of her success and advised that "you have to not let [gender] be the barrier. Because I think if that's your [mindset], that's what you see." However, this line of thinking can support the narrative that women are contributing to their own barriers by choosing to leave the workplace or that women need to change how they operate or somehow be fixed. Rather, systemic barriers prevent women from advancing in their careers.

The respondents observed that women leave the workforce either at junior or senior levels prior to advancement to the C-suite. Many respondents witnessed women opting out who didn't see a path forward with work and family life, turned down opportunities knowing they did not have supports in place to help them succeed, feared they weren't qualified or doubted themselves because of traumatic work incidents.

Barrier:

An unsupportive work environment resulting in women not advancing to the C-suite and leaving the workplace.

Perceptions:

- > The corporate world is not built for working mothers, so such women feel they must choose between family and work.
- > Societal pressures and expectations for mothers clash with high work pressures and expectations for executives.
- > Traditional gender roles within households combat with workplace ambition.

Prevailing practices:

- > Expectations to work weekends and evenings to advance.
- > Overlooking women who are on maternity leave for promotions.
- > Assumptions that working parents will not want stretch assignments.

Proposed improvements:

- > Offer “opt-out” versus “opt-in” mechanisms for promotions.
- > Have discussions with women early in careers to establish the feasibility of an executive track with families.
- > Assess and review maternity leave practices, while considering a redesign with increased flexibility or established onboarding for return.



Some interviewees spoke of reclaiming control by not letting their environment make a choice for them.

The perception of choice

“I looked back on that time, and I wished it wasn’t what I had spent my time doing. It was too long. And it just hit me like a ton of bricks: you don’t get that time back. I had just spent 15 years in one place—lots of promotions, lots of stuff. But if I was choosing what I would do with my life, that is not what I would have chosen, and that was the saddest thing to realize ever. So being forced to make a choice for myself, that’s been me on steroids ever since. I constantly look and see, if I was living my life like I was in charge of making my choices, because I am privileged enough to be able to make choices and not everybody can. I am going to make damn sure that I know what I’m getting out of today, because if it’s not what I want, then I gotta start figuring out what it is and make it happen. So, I try to live on the edge of discomfort all the time, because I realize that that’s my sweet spot where I’m learning, I’m challenged, I’m energized, I’m working super hard, but I’ve got my non-negotiables for my family. I started to make more purposeful choices, and that’s when everything really started to pick up for me.”

Gender pay gap

“Absolutely, men were paid more. For sure, and we knew that. Not on my team, they weren’t. But, across the organization, it was very well-known.” (Subj_3-7)

“There has been discrimination, there have been barriers because of who I am. I’m a female, Asian lawyer so, yeah, I paid for it in my compensation.” (Subj_1-9b)

The interviewees’ stories provide examples of inequity in compensation (see Table 3) and highlight discussions of where responsibility lies for correcting these inequities. Respondents’ narratives around gender pay gaps suggest that the inequity is a product of deeply entrenched culture that has become practice. The study results indicate less pressure for pay equity in corporate organizations that are not federally regulated.



Barrier:

Established system inequities and patriarchal work culture result in women being paid less than men in similar positions.

Contrasting interview findings:

- > “This is just how it is” vs. denial that a wage gap exists.
- > Improved pay equity for junior, but not senior levels vs. improved pay equity for senior, but not junior levels.
- > Resistance to addressing significant wage differentials vs. preference for incremental increases such that one can never “catch up.”
- > Systemically taking advantage of women who don’t ask for more vs. culturally vilifying women for asking or negotiating.
- > Challenge of linking compensation to individual contributions (equity vs. fairness of being paid the same, or less, than workers with lower productivity and revenue).

Prevailing practices:

- > Reliance on seniority and merit-based advancement systems.
- > Ineffective performance feedback that disadvantage women.
- > Informal practices advancing privileged candidates (i.e., undocumented verbal assurances with connected individuals, as well as inconsistency between divisions or units that have different practices for promotions and pay increases).

Proposed improvements:

- > Equity pay review³ (start one unit at a time).
- > Individual reassessment of classification band.
- > Speaking up.
- > Salary transparency.
- > Mentorship and supports for negotiation.
- > Don’t pass the buck (provide tools for HR to address these concerns).
- > Anonymizing promotion processes to remove names and genders.

3 Several respondents referenced equity tools such as an equity pay review or calibration of salaries. These tools are used to study systematically the pay structure at an organization with the goal of establishing pay equity.

Interviewees noted an increasing interest in policy and programs to achieve gender parity in leadership but a lack of understanding as to how to implement a solution to the gender pay gap. One participant stressed the importance of looking at the aggregate data alongside the individual because, while

one can always find subjective reasons to shift compensation, the true picture is found in the data.

Table 3 lists examples of the experience of wage differentials at the executive level for women.

TABLE 3.

Corporate stressors that affect women’s retention and advancement

Gender-Related Compensation Issue	Response
“There were two instances they didn’t want to pay me what I had earned.” (Subj_1-4a)	They admitted they never expected her to achieve the required deliverables for the promised pay increase.
“... you look at my track record, and I’ve been a GC of a billion-dollar company, so you should pay me that. That was a barrier I think I would not have faced—and I don’t have any proof of it—if I was white and male. And it took me ... three years to catch up [to where my pay should have been].” (Subj_1-9b)	Her boss revealed they wanted a white man who was a lawyer with less experience than she had. It took eight months to get to the initial salary point, and she was still unhappy.
“My boss said, ‘Before you look at this, I just want you to know the reason that male is getting paid more than you is because he’s been here for many years.’ I was like, ‘I’ve been here since I started my career, so I’m not sure how that justification works.’ ... and [the man] was not a partner; he was a director. He was getting paid more than me as a new partner.” (Subj_2-11)	She knew that the partner she spoke with worked directly with the man and was able to get him higher and higher pay. No recourse was available, and she didn’t want to rock the boat.
“... she accidentally attached something she sent to me that had my salary, and I was newly promoted to SVP [senior vice-president], along with salaries of male peers. So, I knew.” (Subj_2-17)	On the technology side of business this gender pay disparity was observed at all levels.
“There were individuals, specifically some of them women, where they were not even on the salary scale. And because they had been promoted from within, they were getting smaller adjustments, right? Meanwhile, you bring other people in and all of a sudden they are making more than these people.” (Subj_3-1)	She very vocally challenged human resources (HR) but was told there was nothing to be done.
“He was making way more than I was, and all the AVP [associate vice-president] guys were. And, you know, I kind of thought that, but I didn’t know it for sure until it was time for me to leave, when it came during this conversation around my settlement.” (Subj_3-2)	Later in her career, she implemented looking at individual contributions, shifting compensation to be fair, and understanding that women may not speak up for the adjustment as men do.

Gender-Related Compensation Issue	Response
<p>“I was the lowest paid vice-president on the team by a significant amount of money. I eventually got enough courage to go up to my CEO and say, ‘This doesn’t feel right.’ The head of communications in a similar position was making maybe 30 or 40 thousand dollars more than I was.” (Subj_3-26)</p>	<p>She was leading HR, and it took her a couple of years with this information before she brought it up to the CEO. When she finally told him this was wrong, the CEO agreed. It had never dawned on him until she pointed it out.</p>
<p>“... even though I was a VP, and at that point had already had a huge success in the first five months by getting this product listed, which was worth over \$50 million for the company ... he started talking about levels. He was a level 22 or something, and I was, like, a level 20. I went to the president after and said, ‘This doesn’t sound right to me. I’m bringing in the money, or words to that effect, and he is managing the HR function. At a minimum, we should be equal.” (Subj_3-6)</p>	<p>This happened systematically over the years based on when she received promotions and was unable to catch up to the men. She was unaware of this until she was leaving, even as an executive vice-president.</p>

A final observation by respondents around the gender pay gap is that pay is not always the entire issue. Job equity itself can be a problem. One C-suite participant spoke of reviewing the pay data and the workforce, and seeing women in lesser organizational positions when their roles should have been classified as equal to other roles (often held by men). In two years, this participant was able to level up many women to more substantive positions and shift leadership gender parity to 50-50. (Subj_3-11)

“... for a long period of time, I would sacrifice my pay for the opportunity to learn and grow ... just so that I [could] have the opportunity to exercise my brain and to become better.” (Subj_3-3)

“If a male has asked for a pay raise because of market, we will also raise the females at the same time, so there’s always a level of equity that’s maintained. But it’s harder when it’s a senior executive position. You only

have one head of whatever, right? In those scenarios, I have asked our CHRO [chief of human resources organization] to do a proper market evaluation for the different roles and for those discrepancies, and then we do our best with the budget that we have to make sure they reach it. But, as a human, I can’t help but have the chirp of the male colleague in my head, who has planted the seed, and said I’m expecting this, I’m hoping for this, and that chirp is loud because, at the end of the day, you want to see those results. And so, it is a thing that I, myself, have had to really balance and had to figure out, and I don’t have an exact answer except making sure we are at least evaluating and raising people where needed.” (Subj_3-12)

“I think all law firms have trouble with their compensation system because they incentivize the wrong behaviours, so I think now law firms are starting to evolve and are starting to pay people to work in teams, and to mentor, and to sponsor, and to close

their dockets, and do their proper admin. I think it's no longer the case that if you are a high revenue generator but you're an awful person to everyone else, you are no longer going to zoom in and be the most successful at the firm. I think that people understand that this is a team sport. Law firms can really help themselves with allocation principles, or the way they pay people, reflecting what they say they are all about." (Subj_2-18)

The data collected from our interviewees show that the gender wage gap remains substantial. Differential compensation based on gender is experienced, including at the executive level, and challenges remain to identify these inequities. Further, we found that issues relating to organizational culture and entrenched systems further exacerbate these struggles.

Enablers of women's advancement

In addition to the barriers mentioned in the previous section, respondents credited many enablers or facilitating factors for their successful careers. The interviewees reported that their most significant career advancements were due to active career supports, most prominently identified as sponsors and networks.

The impact of this finding is two-fold: First, these critical keys to advancement are consistent across decades of research. Second, despite programs built to foster these enablers, they are still lacking for women as equity in corporate leadership has not been achieved.



"Women and minorities need supports. They don't need help; they just need resources to make it a level playing field. Don't call it help, like they're somehow less than or inadequate."

Career supports as key enablers to advancement are not gender-specific. However, interviewee responses align with scholarly assertions that the access to supports, quality of supports and results of supports do differ between genders.⁴⁶ A 2008 Catalyst survey reported that more women have mentors but men are paid more and hold lower positions (confirmed in a 2010 follow-up survey) and that men had more senior-level mentorship.⁴⁷ This underlines the critical role that meaningful supports play in a woman's career trajectory to senior leadership.

"Women and minorities need supports. They don't need help; they just need resources to make it a level playing field. Don't call it help, like they're somehow less than or inadequate. It's more like they need the resources to make them succeed, and that may be different than the resources provided to the guys. That's all. It's not about helping these undeserving people to be successful. It's just about doing things in a different way." (Subj_2-18)

“I have a colleague who entered the company at a higher level. We have the same law degree from the same school, and we are the same age, as well. And, yes, he had a few different experiences, but we’ve been going along [in parallel]. I have had every operational job in the organization, he has had one senior role that did work with the executive and the board. And the organization would bend over backwards and stretch these things to give him operational experience.” (Subj_3-21)

“I think women are just now being given opportunities that they should have been given before. It’s not that all of a sudden they got really bright, right? It’s like, all of a sudden we realized, where the hell are they?” (Subj_2-18)

Sponsors

The most frequently reported enabler for career advancement involved sponsors and effective sponsorship. Many participants attributed active sponsorship as a critical factor in their personal advancement to executive leadership. Others named the lack of sponsorship as a notable barrier to navigating the corporate world.

“I’ve always learned from the mentors I was assigned to, but they were always a disappointment ... because mentorship alone without sponsorship is meaningless in an organizational setting.” (Subj_1-4a)

“Sponsorship. I’ve been very fortunate throughout my career to have the sponsorship of very powerful, to be very frank, Caucasian men. These are people who have coached me, more on the soft skills, less so on the technical skills. Primarily how to maneuver and understand corporate culture, how to build my own persuasive influence, and how to win people over and get things done.” (Subj_1-9b)



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We heard from participants that using technical skills as a competitive advantage will only influence corporate advancement up to a point. Those skills may be the key to promotion in junior positions, but to move up in more senior levels of an organization, individuals need sponsors.⁴⁸ Supportive literature also states that those who have mentors and sponsors earlier in their careers can be found following the C-suite track. Interviewees' sponsors acted as influential allies⁴⁹ who made key introductions, championed them to other executive leaders, guided them to strategic projects and endorsed them for promotions.⁵⁰

Participants said it was often more difficult for women than men to organically develop sponsors to help in their careers. A few participants also noted that they did not initially recognize people acting as sponsors until they reflected on their careers (“... he was going around and having those conversations about me, advocating on my behalf. I had no idea, and I only came to find out years later.” Subj_2-10) A sponsor differs from a mentor who may offer guidance and feedback but does not have the same level of investment and may not actively promote their mentee to the same degree.

“They saw something in me” was a repeated reflection around the beginning of a relationship with a key sponsor. “I have had sponsors who have seen things in me, sometimes when I didn’t even see it in myself. They were committed to my success and to helping me. You can’t advance beyond entry-level by yourself.” Subj_3-15



The interview data indicate key characteristics of a sponsor relationship that proved to foster executive advancement for participants:

The sponsor has the utmost belief in the individual.

Sponsors are willing to endorse and support the person because they know the individual can excel at the executive table.

The sponsor has influence.

Sponsors have the clout and seniority to be heard when advocating for the individual.

The individual leverages the sponsor relationship.

Not all sponsors will organically know how to support the individual effectively. The individual may also be able to convert people who know and like them into sponsors.⁵¹

The sponsor and the individual approach the relationship as a two-way street.

Individuals who cultivate this relationship will have better success and should not approach it passively.

The sponsor does not have to be specific to the individual's company or workplace.

Traditionally, this relationship will begin at the same business location. However, an influential sponsor will have connections across the industry and can make key introductions to enable other opportunities or may recommend the individual when they are at another company themselves.

The sponsor strategically challenges the individual.

Sponsors should know the individual well enough to find the right situations to push them out of their comfort zones as well as expose them to key executive leaders by bringing them to executive meetings and providing opportunities to speak at those meetings.

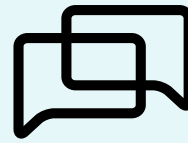
As a caveat, there were individual cases where participants did not give credence or value to the role of sponsors, mentors or coaches at all based on their own personal experiences.

Building your own career supports when sponsors aren't an option

Some racialized participants said career supports were not accessible to them and they had to make their own way. These participants reported making their own way to corporate success by using natural skills, leveraging resources to make the most of the supports they had, and requesting or demanding supports. In some cases, they created their own supports when these were not formally available to them. It may take a village to advance a career, but when one is not available, it appears that a solution is to create your own. (“I found people and built kind of a little village that became my people, but they were my friends and my family members that I look up to who became my informal mentors.” Subj_2-14)

“My most powerful career supports were always my peers, my colleagues, my juniors. Because, sitting where I am now, I realize that me and my colleagues at this level all fly at 10,000 feet. But if I actually need to drive transformation, I actually have to go deeper in the organization to someone who’s got their fingers on the keyboard and knows that business. So, my most powerful networks are people that are more junior than me, where I learn from them, or I want to hire them one day. My next most powerful networks are my peers who I have to collaborate with to actually get stuff done and build plans.” (Subj_ 2-19)

Ideally such networks would supplement other career supports, but this example offers a viable influential alternative when sponsors are not available.



“I believe that the way to move your career is, hands down, knowing people.”

Networking

“I’m on panels all the time, and often younger women are looking for advice, and networking is part of the job. You have to do networking; that’s how you get other jobs; that’s how you get opportunities; that’s how you will move up in your organization. I think too often women think you only have to work hard and be good at what you do, but if you’re not doing the networking piece, it’s almost impossible to move into senior leadership roles.” (Subj_1-2a)

“I believe that the way to move your career is, hands down, knowing people.” (Subj_3-9)

“I saw the few senior women that were there having a different experience than what I was seeing the men have. I think one of the most noticeable things was the women didn’t have the same access to social networks. At that time for [multinational technology companies], there were tons of opportunities if you were male. The men in the different divisions would play hockey against each other, there was a ball team, they would go

out for drinks, and women didn't have that. There were no equivalent women's sports teams, or women, generally, would leave the office for responsibilities that they had at home. So, I can't ever remember seeing women kind of go out for drinks or do any of that informal socializing that the men were just having a natural access to, and consistent engagement in." (Subj_3-25)

The second highest response rate around enablers to advancement in the workplace was the value of networks and the importance of networking. Networks were observed in formal and informal groups, housed internally and externally to a company. External networks may be needed if there is low representation of women in a company. This was reported to be of particular importance to equity-deserving individuals because they do not often have built-in networks by virtue of their family name, prestigious schooling or the ability to see themselves reflected in their work peers and executive leaders.

Few participants discussed involvement in employee resource groups or formal in-house networks. However, it is likely that such groups did not exist at the time that many of our respondents were in junior positions. Interviewees reflected that less access to networks can translate to fewer opportunities to learn and be supported, which can leave women at a disadvantage in career negotiations.

Other C-suite women participants reported significant interest in participating as a champion, or executive sponsor, of corporate women's groups, as well as

being involved in boards or initiatives related to women's empowerment. Some of these women pioneered formal women's networks with considerable influence in their organizations.

As with sponsors, respondents advised that networks need to be cultivated to be effective. One interviewee had 72 virtual coffee meetings in less than three months. The study responses indicate that relationships don't necessarily need to be strategic, however, because opportunities and relationships arise in unlikely places. Volunteering and board work were noted as sources of high-level connections. Follow-up and staying in touch created results ("I didn't accept his offer because I had already accepted another position. But he called me about a year-and-a-half later and said, 'Are you bored yet? Why don't you come and work for me as vice-president of [Multinational Biotechnology Corporation]?'") (Subj_3-6) Respondents gave examples of career advancement through leveraging a networking culture: job offers, referrals from casual coffee catch-ups and opportunities from former clients with whom relationships were maintained.

Subjects 3-3, 3-4 and 3-12 identified different individuals in their networks that they call on for different needs depending on their skill sets.⁵² This includes social connection and counsel.

"Don't say no to yourself. Why would you do that, let somebody else say no to you? If you really want it, don't talk yourself out of trying." (Subj_2-4)

“... all the connections I made along the way, all the relationships I had, it’s paying dividends now. And that’s not the intention you go into it with. I got into it because I actually like people. My view is that every single person that I meet has a personal and professional experience that I don’t know about. So, it’s something to tap into, and understand and get to know people, and it’s a benefit. So, your rank and role are kind of irrelevant. In lots of ways, it’s about who you are as a person.” (Subj_3-21)

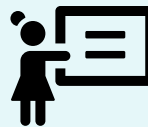
Skills for women advancing to executive leadership and how to acquire them

Another major portion of questions for interviewees was around skills development—skills that assist in the corporate context and how to acquire them.

The findings included the following themes



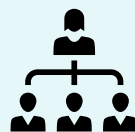
Leadership skills and development



Education and training



Coaching to the next level



Mentorship for advancement

These findings can inform individuals seeking executive advancement, as well as organizations seeking to bolster policies, practices and professional development offerings for women.

All participants prioritized and pursued additional learning, training and accreditations to get ahead and reduce the risk of being questioned about their capabilities or qualifications.

Leadership skills and development

Interviewees relayed preferred leadership skills learned from observing men and women leaders. They described positive experiences throughout their careers and negative experiences that were even more impactful. The leadership skills they developed and prioritized included competencies they gained through training, personal preferences, practices they learned through experience and skills they emulated from past leaders. Technical excellence or so-called hard skills are viewed as foundational and considered a requirement for advancement when in junior roles. However, participants described social and emotional skills as critical to succeed in senior roles.

Beyond important skills cited by respondents (including fundraising, budgeting, managing relationships with investors, business operations, business analysis, facilities management, human resources, financial reporting, metrics, sales, change management and equity literacy), social-emotional skills are in demand for leaders across industries. That is, leaders require

expertise in empathy, communication, flexibility, agility, resilience, and giving and receiving feedback. Subj_3-5 advised that, “(Senior) leadership is about managing your people who manage your business.”

The stereotype of the competitive corporate leader persists. (“Toughen up. Figure it out. Be resourceful. Appreciate that nothing is given.” Subj_2-9) Respondents experienced substantial corporate stressors earlier in their careers and later, with individual senior leaders they reported to as their careers progressed. Some still experience this today from corporate leadership or across the executive table. Participants referred to the stereotypical aspects of corporate leadership, outlined in Table 4. Their experiences indicate that these conventional practices persist and are commonly experienced.



TABLE 4.**Comparative practices to inform leadership skill development**

Stereotypes of Corporate Leadership Practices	Practices Preferred by Individual Participants
Negative, commanding	Positive, collaborative
Competitive mindset	Community prioritization
Top-down (“because I said so”)	Consensus modelling
Lack of transparency	Forthright, speak their mind
Task or output oriented	Empowerment, provide space for staff to grow
“Your job is not to ensure your team is happy, but that they are productive.”	“Your team will be more productive because they are happy.”
Gatekeeper mindset, hoarding talent	Helping others’ careers, support them to become leaders
Only want to hear solutions	Joint accountability shared between leader and staff
Charismatic	360-degree level of respect (supervisors, peers and staff)
Expectation of deference to leadership	Open to being challenged
Protective of power	Looking for successor
Success means working long hours and weekends, and sacrificing time with family	Success means modelling inclusive practices, such as taking breaks and being with family



Several interviewees reported that a ruthless corporate image may operate within internal silos in an organization that, overall, has a more progressive strategic direction.

Several interviewees reported that a ruthless corporate image may operate within internal silos in an organization that, overall, has a more progressive strategic direction. Inversely, others reported experiencing unhealthy or more autocratic organizational cultures but positive experiences within a more diverse and progressive team or branch. One interviewee experienced different corporate cultures within the same industry: “My new company was progressive. They saw opportunity. They were not interested in hierarchy; they were interested in potential.” (Subj_3-17)

A pattern in interviewees’ responses indicated that more progressive leadership practices, employing social-emotional competencies, better supported future company growth, equity mandates and targets, individual workplace satisfaction and improved organizational health.

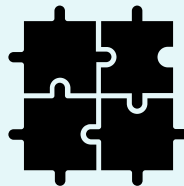
“ ... someone else who was in a leadership position was being described as a person who shines up. This is something that looks really good to the boss and their focus is on doing things that get noticed by higher-ups. I think that I am a shine-down person. My main goal as a leader is to help my team, and in my team I put a ton of thought and effort into how I develop them. I put a lot of resources into it and have done some pretty amazing stuff over the past nine months. I’m very proud of them.” (Subj_3-10)

“I consciously made the decision early in my career to not alter my [leadership] style or personality in any way. Despite being coached early on that I should be less feminine, not talk with my hands so much, be less friendly, I consciously chose to ignore all of that. My view was, if I was going to be successful, I had to be successful as myself. I didn’t want to change my personality to make something happen that didn’t feel organic or authentic to me, and I think it’s helped people connect with me more easily because the work I do is transformation and trust based.” (Subj_3-25)

Participants reported additional themes around leadership skills to which they credited their career success:



Leading with passion, curiosity and values



Strategic skills and combining skillsets for niche expertise (e.g., finance and technology, law and Indigenous development)



Supporting and learning from others



Surrounding oneself with a skilled team

Leadership through supporting others is a skill for advancement

“That was what I had been taught as a young woman coming into the workforce: You gotta stand your ground, you gotta be as tough as the guys, you gotta kind of live in that man’s world. And when I hit my 40s, I realized that no, no, no. You need to be authentic; you need to be genuine; you need to be results-oriented—but you don’t have to be fear-based or cold or put your personal world in a box over here so that you can perform in

the organization. You could actually engage and get better performances out of people by also showing people how you feel and showing some level of vulnerability. So that’s how I developed my executive leadership, through looking at things like the “good to great” structure around level-five leadership, the humble leader, the service-oriented leader, the one that supports people growing and developing, versus taking credit for people’s work. So, I try to make sure that when things are going great, my team is getting all the accolades for it. And when things are going wrong, then it’s my job to kind of stand out front.” (Subj_3-26)

Another important skill identified by interviewees is emotional intelligence or emotional quotient (EQ). This is an aspect of social-emotional skills that has historically been referred to as “soft skills.” Prioritizing development of these critical skills allows executive leaders to amass the right information, allocate budgets appropriately and make better informed business decisions by employing nuance to their leadership style. A respondent gives an example of using her empathy to think of herself as someone who is leading a program. She asks herself: What would I need to motivate me to do this? What are the required skills? Who in this team has those skills? She is then able to select people based on their skill sets rather than on seniority. She notes that they can then start working together and teach each other for better results.

“I think the powers of observation are really important, and people need to use them to see how people react to other people. How do you change your style to make it feel good to you, but also to help get the most out of everybody else? The different style works differently with different people.”
(Subj_3-21)

Education and training for skills development

The second theme within this area involved education and training. Interviewees shared a focus on education and continuous learning as key characteristics. Nearly all are self-described lifelong learners. Some of the most beneficial skills development was experienced on the job rather than formally, with a few exceptions. However, accreditations and additional higher education appeared to be favoured over specific skills as a route for women to bolster their credentials in compensation for a lack of other privileges. Participants reported requiring accreditations to mitigate barriers to advancement. Even for many highly educated respondents with decades of experience, amassing accreditations is seen as a career survival strategy. One respondent spoke of her designations to overcompensate because she was not Ivy League-educated. The most reported continued higher education credentials were the Master of Business Administration (MBA), Chartered Professional Accountant (CPA), Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA), law courses, leadership courses, finance courses and the Institute of Corporate Directors (ICD) certification. Another interviewee said, “The more education you got, the more successful you’d be, and the less racism would impact you.” (Subj_1-8b)

Building skills as a strategy to get into the room

“It was about learning the key things, assimilating. Learning how to ski, learning how to play golf and having an education were ways to get in the room and stay in the room. And so, I play every instrument possible, and I have the highest credentials possible. I also felt I needed it, not because I cared about doing a PhD, but it was so no one could question my credibility when I walked into a room. And I did my PhD at a main academic institution that was known, because you couldn’t question me. I could walk in the room, and they were like: ‘OK, she has the academic credentials to be here.’ Most people didn’t; I was the only one who had the credentials. But I knew I needed that to get into the room, at least to get a seat.” (Subj_2-6)

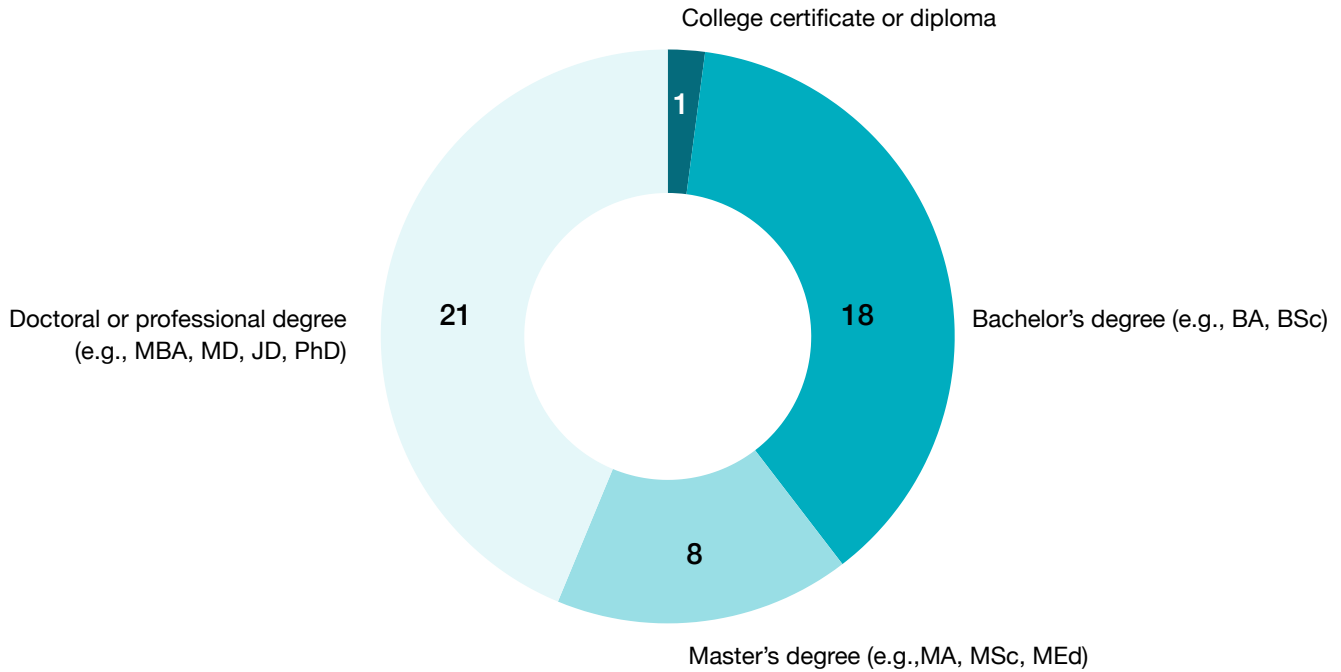
Some organizations require higher education for advancement, participants reported. One respondent was unable to breach the glass ceiling at one company without a master’s degree. Similarly, another respondent required an MBA to advance to the vice-president level at her company. An MBA was seen as pivotal to leadership development for most participants, providing skills and knowledge that influenced their success. While several organizations paid for further education and training, the funding was not consistently available. Many participants had to research these options and advocate for themselves to make it happen. One interviewee referred to this level of education as a “baseline” to enter the desired professional space.

Leadership training and courses were pursued by many respondents. Some noted how important this was in the law field because lawyers were not trained to be leaders. A smaller set of participants reported not being interested in senior leadership in the past. These “reluctant leaders” were drawn into opportunities due to strong sponsors who saw their potential.

Despite these realities, participants reported that learning and growth were most often experienced through on-the-job and often self-directed development. Another valuable method of informal training was found by taking career breaks from an industry to do something else, such as consulting, before returning to one’s field. This provided a deeper knowledge and understanding of business analysis and client management than one may normally have access to in a corporate entity.



FIGURE 2.
Highest level of education of study participants (number)



Note: n = 48; two of the 50 participants did not respond to the survey.

Despite slow progress to gender parity in the C-suite and boardrooms, the results show that women candidates, especially diverse women, are more likely to be overqualified than underqualified for executive advancement.

Acquiring skills through executive coaching

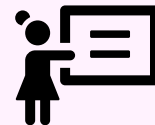
The third and fourth themes speak to the acquisition of skills for executives beyond general skills development. At the executive table, acquiring skills can be approached in different ways. Executive coaching, for example, was often reported as highly regarded to help build the leadership and social-emotional skills specific to corporate leadership. Not all participants had this experience, but a clear pattern emerged of participants using executive coaching

when they progressed to senior leadership. Corporate organizations commonly have budgets for this purpose. Several respondents spoke of having to request this support, while for some it was offered automatically. Others chose to seek out coaches on their own.

“Executives and everyone need coaches. We need coaches when we learn a new sport, when we learn a new skill. Leadership is a skill that is learned. Management is a skill that is learned, and I think it’s important to recognize that you’re not born with it, necessarily. Someone helps you through it. There are all these people in your life, but there’s also a professional that you can pay to help you manage that.” (Subj_3-12)

Respondents were not as receptive to coaches or sponsors who were assigned to them by virtue of their seniority. A lack of relatability to coaches is not new for racialized or culturally diverse individuals, and interviewees reported the coaching to be less effective when the assigned coach is unable to adapt to diverse needs or perspectives.

Coaches were reported to be useful at different times in one’s career, but especially during transitions, when becoming an executive and during career breaks. Mentors and sponsors may also offer informal coaching. In these cases, participants appreciated a range of company-specific coaching topics including actionable feedback, how to navigate corporate culture, translation of unspoken rules, when to put one’s name in for a role, what types of clients to work with and on which strategic



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projects to work. Interviewees gave detailed and memorable examples, such as “(Name), when you made that presentation, you did a lot of talking to people versus asking people for feedback in the presentation, even if you knew all the answers. Give people an opportunity to feel like they are contributing to that, versus you just droning on and on Before you go to these executive meetings, especially as a junior person, you should meet with your key stakeholders in advance and solicit their input. Fine-tune, and let them check-in, in advance.” (Subj_3-15)

Acquiring skills through mentorship

Like coaching, mentorship is an executive-specific method for acquiring skills to succeed as a senior leader. While sponsorship provides opportunities and connections who facilitate access to the C-suite, mentors can recommend critical leadership teachings or industry-specific skills. Learning from an effective mentor has had a considerable effect for participants. The study found it is unlikely for mentors or other role models to reflect the gender and culture of mentees, but participants reported pivotal leadership skills they were able to emulate or avoid. Negative experiences can be important in instilling a “what not to do” mentality, as respondents referred to it.

One respondent gave an example of a mentor pushing her to have difficult conversations that were strategically beneficial. Another respondent reminisced about all the things she learned from a mentor about being a good people leader. “He was great at forming teams and delegating and stretching people, and developing people.” (Subj_2-17) Another woman leader pointed out the need to seek mentors and assignments that would help her “leap-frog” on her path. She found that mentors and sponsors are a product of relationship building, so it was important to ask for what she wanted.

We found that senior leaders will likely have several different mentors throughout their career progression. Formal mentors provided through employer programs were not consistently beneficial. In other cases,

mentors grew into sponsors and could help catapult respondents to the next level in their career trajectory.

“I’ve become just a little bit more savvy in understanding how, as you get more senior, the ‘what’ you do matters less than ‘how’ you do it. So, back to how you’re building relationships and building bridges, how you’re bringing people, how you’re meeting people where they are to move whatever you are trying to move ahead, whatever your agenda is. You can’t really go it alone at senior levels. How you actually get things done is really important, and relationships are really important.” (Subj_3-8)

Overall, respondents’ career trajectories were influenced by an interplay of enabling forces, a lack of supports, institutional barriers and unconscious biases—all of which affect one’s ability to advance into corporate leadership. Participants had developed skills to bypass these limitations to advance to executive management.

Social-emotional expertise (such as empathy, resilience and adaptability) was overwhelmingly reported as a critical skill set for executive leadership. Interviewees identified social-emotional and EQ skills as a foundation for supporting others within the workplace. Providing active support was seen as useful to meet organizational needs; it can also influence one’s advancement by building an efficient team and supporting good work. Many interviewees found it necessary to amass accreditations to prove they deserved to be at the executive level. Financial skills and duties, such as those found in roles with profit and loss (P & L)



These barriers delayed promotions, affected their pay, denied them stretch assignments, and were present in assumptions and comments (e.g., accusations of sleeping their way to the top or being asked to fetch the coffee).

responsibilities, were seen as important to advancement. Executive leadership development, like earning an MBA, was seen as foundational, although not critical. Many of the skills to overcome systemic barriers could be acquired by working with an executive coach and different mentors. Further, mentors have the potential of becoming sponsors that can help one reach the next level.

Overcoming the glass ceiling

The glass ceiling is a phenomenon whereby women face barriers to promotion into the C-suite. This study establishes that it persists to this day in corporate Canada. Respondents detailed overcoming pervasive gender stereotypes, institutionalized barriers, biases and discrimination in the workplace. These barriers delayed promotions, affected

their pay, denied them stretch assignments, and were present in assumptions and comments (e.g., accusations of sleeping their way to the top or being asked to fetch the coffee). One respondent said she felt like she was being “stopped at all angles” (Subj_3-17). Those respondents persevered, but many of the women interviewed were denied entry to the executive suite at some point in their careers.

“I think that [the] concrete ceiling, or glass ceiling, that people used to talk about when I was earlier in my career, that was all foreign to me. What is that? Never experienced it. I always got other opportunities to do other jobs but didn’t connect that that was happening because those jobs were not senior jobs, they were junior roles, and no one really feels like it’s a risk to give you that opportunity. But, when you reach a certain plateau, year after year, then you realize that, OK, there really is such a thing as a glass ceiling when you look around and see others who are less qualified getting positions.” (Subj_3-9)

“... I should have been made a VP five years earlier, to be honest ... I run, and I am the executive sponsor for [the company women’s employee group]. I would do work with DEI [diversity, equity and inclusion]. I would participate in sponsorship programs, mentorship programs. I did all these things, and always it was, oh, just one more year. Honestly, the catalyst for me becoming a VP is I went out for a drink with the person who was head of talent and I very nicely said, ‘Hey, if it’s never going to happen, I am happy to leave.’ ... And then, within three months, they made me a VP.” (Subj_3-18)

Barrier:

Bias and other institutionalized barriers prevent women from being promoted to the executive table or C-suite, resulting in women stalling at senior leadership.

Perceptions among respondents:

- > Women should be grateful for progressing as high as they have vs. having earned a spot in the C-suite
- > Being viewed as lower in seniority than other candidates
- > Poor supports around career breaks (i.e., parental leaves) resulting in lost opportunities for promotions
- > Optic of placement based on affirmative action despite being highly qualified and experienced for the position

Prevailing practices:

- > External hires
- > Promoting white men (affinity bias)
- > Assumptions that women wouldn't want the additional work, travel, hours, etc.
- > Hoarding talent at senior leadership
- > Promoting women into stereotypically gendered positions, such as HR

Proposed improvements:

- > Collect data on women stalling at senior leadership or exiting the company at the senior level.
- > Establish organizational accountability for increasing gender parity.
- > Set up sponsors and coaches for high-performing women.
- > Create assessments to review why women were denied promotions over men.
- > Create grievance policies for women who have been treated inequitably or were discriminated against—and follow through on them.



Below, we present three approaches that women executives identified as helping them advance earlier in their career, as well as three approaches that women executives identified to ultimately reach executive level positions.

Thinking ahead: Approaches to seize opportunities in early career advancement

Patterns emerged in the study participants' responses about different paths or approaches they adopted to overcome barriers in their career advancement earlier in their careers, before they reached the executive level. These can be organized into three subcategories: accepting, making and choosing opportunities. More detail is provided in Table 5, below.

Most organizations were described as embedding a natural progression to pursue pivotal opportunities, build key skills and work with the right people. Here, interviewees took the approach of accepting opportunities, a more organic approach. Other future executives were able to make their own opportunities by suggesting projects and building their own supports when opportunities were unavailable or couldn't be accessed due to barriers. Those using the third approach of choosing opportunities are not confined by a single company, industry or prescribed vocation. Rather these interviewees played the long game to make the best choices

for advancement and choose opportunities strategically. Sometimes, respondents used a combination of approaches.

"I have a job, good money, this is great. I'm really happy. And [my mentor] told me, 'No, that's not how it works. You're 26 years old; you're going to work for decades, and you're going to only do this?' I said, 'Yeah, isn't that what people do?' She says, 'No, you can move around; there's all these different departments and these different kinds of things you could be challenging yourself to do. Don't you want to do any of those?' And I think once we started having those conversations, there was no looking back. The day that I went from a 'job person' to a 'career person' was pivotal—they are totally different people." (Subj_2-19)



TABLE 5.**Three approaches by women executives to create their path early in their career**

Approach	Description	Examples
Accept opportunities	Seek and take opportunities for continued education, secondments, stretch assignments and big client projects. This can build your reputation and allow you to be tapped for roles and projects.	“I saw an environment where people who could learn really quickly and work really hard could do a lot of different things, and I remember distinctly being astounded that everybody didn’t do that and see that, and they would just go and do their job and wait for something to come to them, when there was so much there for the taking. There was a playground of opportunity, where you could master one job and then put up your hand and say, I’ve finished that, and I’ve learned that, can I do more?’ And just keep doing more and evolving.” (Subj_2-4)
Create opportunities	Be creative with the resources available. For example, identify and fulfil a need for a company. This requires self-promotion, risk-taking and initiative.	Subj_1-4a put together unrequested reports and proposals for projects during recruitment and it contributed to her bypassing standard corporate tiers as she propelled through the organization. Subj_1-12b made up a detailed proposal on the spot assessing areas of improvement and identifying integration opportunities. She was sent directly to the deputy CEO to pitch her idea.
Choose opportunities strategically	Make the best of opportunities that present themselves. For example, act like a leader when assigned the role of notetaker; choose a field where women are underrepresented, like STEM; and choose teams with supportive people.	“The world wasn’t a one lane; there were multiple lanes. So which lane do you want to work in now? Because everything you do is a part of your toolkit that you will continue on with. You will learn about yourself, you will learn about different aspects of the job, you will continue to engage with different people, and all of that is a learning that you will continue on and build on. This is not a one-off.” (Subj_2-7)

Approaches to move to the top

Executive women interviewed shared their experiences of how they overcame the glass ceiling to reach executive positions. While interviewees spoke of initiatives for employers to commit to diversity in executive positions (like the 50 – 30 Challenge)⁴ and an increased corporate commitment to diversifying and achieving gender parity, the analysis did not identify any one successful strategy to overcome the corporate glass ceiling. There are many uncontrollable variables that range from market trends to luck. However, patterns emerged from the executive women interviewees who found their careers stalled at some point in their leadership journeys. These approaches—bypassing the glass ceiling, pushing through and moving on to move up—are discussed below.

Bypassing the glass ceiling

We observed that some women can bypass the glass ceiling phenomenon because it didn't exist at their company, and they advanced without incident, they were an external hire or they had a level of specialization.

Different industries and corporate cultures approach advancement for women differently, so there may not be a gender

hurdle to overcome at all. Some women interviewed did not perceive any barriers to their own skill development or career advancement but may have observed such barriers for others along the way. A few respondents admitted they did not believe in the glass ceiling phenomenon because they advanced easily in their careers through hard work—until they didn't and were suddenly stuck.

We observed that some women bypassed the glass ceiling by coming in as an external hire. Some were headhunted to return to a company they previously worked for as an executive. Another respondent found herself unable to advance as desired, so she left for consulting before returning to another major financial organization as an executive. This is in line with literature stating that women are seldom able to reach upper executive levels unless the position was attained by a woman who was hired externally.⁵³

Businesses may seek specialized qualifications or diverse candidates with specialized qualifications, which can be another route to bypass the glass ceiling. Interviewed respondents in the manufacturing, technology and corporate social governance fields all credited their niche capabilities for providing advancement opportunities. (“Diverse women—we are a niche within a niche” Subj_3-15.) There were varied experiences for respondents on the corporate director track, as there is not an established path or well-documented understanding of how to get onto corporate boards. Yet there were participants who found that their demographic representation and specialized skillsets have afforded

4 The 50 – 30 Challenge calls for Canadian organizations to increase representation and inclusion of diverse groups within their workplaces, aiming for 50% gender parity and 30% diverse representation. Retrieved from <https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/ised/en/50-30-challenge-your-diversity-advantage>

them opportunities in corporate directorship (Subj_2-7, Subj_3-2).

Pushing through the glass ceiling

Respondents gave personal accounts of overcoming the glass ceiling. These required sacrifice, endurance and mental fortitude. While these are requirements for everyone with executive ambition, the act of pushing through is more difficult for women and especially racialized women, as observed in this study. One interviewee identified challenges in advancement but said she kept adding value to her work, leaving no room for anything but success in advancement. Another respondent credited some of her success to branding herself as the person who would do the hard work and make the hard calls. A third experienced duress to the point of almost quitting but was mentored to stick it out past the temporary experience of having one problematic leader. Now, she is the CEO of her company.

Some respondents claimed they did not experience barriers to advancement but would later reveal significant hardships. Having a “winner’s mindset” might mean pushing away traumatic experiences and difficulties to make it through.

Moving on to move up

Leaving an organization where respondents began their careers or put considerable time into is a route to career progression. This is the most frequently documented method within this study for overcoming the glass ceiling and is related to the strategy of bypassing the barrier as an external

hire. Most participants found themselves at a crossroads where they had to decide if they would “dutifully climb the corporate ladder” or take the risk of leaving to advance professionally (Subj_3-5). Some respondents began their careers in smaller businesses where there was no room to grow and no C-suite positions to move into. In these circumstances, moving to another field or company was found to be the best move for career advancement.

For participants working at larger organizations, a perceived and real risk was reported when they considered leaving. We have observed that the standard meritocracy and traditional corporate ladder is designed for white men with the requisite social connections, shared interests and a wife at home. In most cases this does not provide space for career breaks, family responsibilities and anything that would take you off the prescribed corporate track. As a result, jumping ship risks seniority, merit increases, salary, social currency and one’s spot in line to enter the C-suite. Yet, this was the path left to many of the women interviewed.

The risks associated with leaving may be worthwhile when coupled with the promise of respect. For example, one woman leader was passed over for a promotion until she was offered another position, but she still left. These interviewees were strategic. They did not advise burning bridges (although at least three referenced legal suits were filed because of discriminatory job deferrals). Instead, the study observed the corporate world burned bridges by not respecting

women in leadership and losing talent in their organizations. One of the participants made it to the C-suite at her company but still moved on to another business that treated her better. Another executive experienced repeated deferrals of promotion until she finally resigned (a common experience). Still another interviewee waited after being denied a promised promotion until she could strategically leave for a higher-level position.

“There was really no answer as to why I wasn’t getting promoted. The year before, when I didn’t get promoted again, I said, ‘If I do all these things, will I get promoted next year?’ I had not only met but exceeded all my metrics. Why am I not being promoted? And he looked at me and he said, ‘I’m not going to BS you. It’s not fair ... it’s political, and I don’t know.’ I didn’t leave right away, because what I didn’t want to do is leave out of anger and end up somewhere that would set me back. The corporate world isn’t fair, and I was not going to make a decision out of emotion. My patience was rewarded because I didn’t want to just leave to take a lateral job. No, I waited, and it took me almost ... over a year before I made my move. Do you know how long a year is when you’re pissed off?” (Subj_2-9)

A side effect of the glass ceiling phenomenon is the mental load it places on women. Respondents named doubt, dissatisfaction, feeling stuck, frustration and feeling behind in their careers. This lack of control is seen in their references to toxicity, sacrifice and ill effects on mental and physical health. Even when given the opportunity to lead, a participant reported being blocked by having her project taken



One of the participants made it to the C-suite at her company but still moved on to another business that treated her better.

over by a colleague who was a man once it showed signs of success. Those who didn’t report feeling this strongly observed barriers to career progression for other women attempting to advance in their organizations. The inequity and discrimination experienced by repeatedly being denied promotions that were earned and sometimes promised speaks to a man-centric power that is particularly potent at the C-suite level. All of this contributes to the establishment of a “pink-collar ghetto”⁵ (Subj_2-4), builds doubt around qualifications and worthiness, and increases the risk of women opting out of leadership.

Given these findings, a question for further exploration is whether there are gatekeepers that keep women and equity-deserving groups from advancement if they are

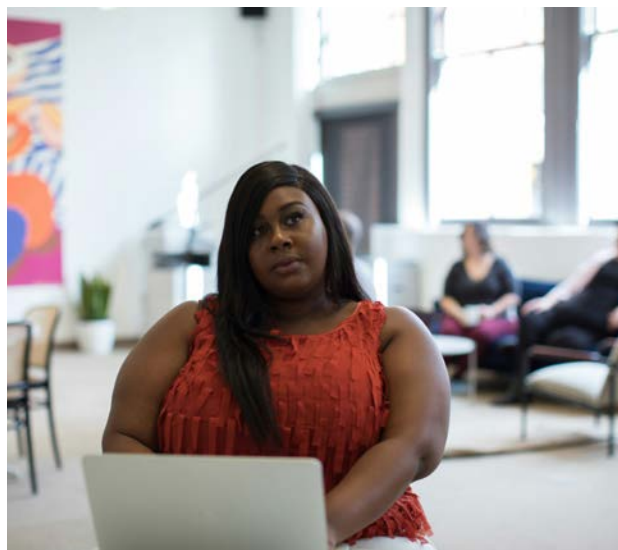
5 Pink-collar jobs (in contrast to white-collar or blue-collar) are roles that have been considered to be “women’s work” and are occupied significantly by women in the labour force. Pink-collar jobs are typically service-oriented roles that require interpersonal skills and involve caring for others, such as administrative roles, human resources, equity work and similar roles.

not liked or socially connected. Future research may consider other risks and lost opportunities that may occur if the C-suite continues to treat invitations to the executive table as a golden ticket only available to the privileged.

“I don’t know why we can’t get this right. I mean, we have so much amazing talent; we’re cutting off our own nose to spite our face. And all the statistics and the data are there. I mean, you could pick anything, there’s all this data about how companies with more females on the boards are more productive, more diverse companies do better at business—it’s all there. So, this stuff is so deep, this bias and prejudice is so deep, that even in the face of facts people are unwilling to change, and I get very frustrated and discouraged.” (Subj_1-8b)

The barriers to women’s advancement discussed above include the messages in the workplace about women’s roles and how best to succeed. The barriers affected women’s sense of identity, perception as executive leaders and ability to advance. They influenced their career decisions (for example, prompting them to switch companies) and the ability to ascend past senior leadership into the C-suite or executive tables.

An interplay of multiple barriers can result in women leaving the workforce, but women in our study reported navigating around such barriers. Such strategies included adapting to the barriers by conforming to gender roles as necessary, bucking expected roles when possible, ignoring micro-aggressions and systemic barriers, setting boundaries around family life and negotiating for fair pay. The study noted patterns of behaviour that contributed to women overcoming the glass ceiling. All strategies were unique to each individual. The context for corporate experiences is not homogenous, either, so challenges looked different for each woman, especially for racialized women.





Conclusions and Implications

This study examined the gender gap in corporate executive advancement by detailing the personal and professional journeys of more than 50 executive women in Canada who have successfully navigated into senior leadership or C-suite positions.

The report found persistent barriers and pay gaps, some institutionalized into the daily operations and practices of many organizations. Study participants, however, were able to succeed and overcome these obstacles. They attributed their advancement to skills, credentials and the actions of individuals who opened doors of opportunity for them. We summarized approaches these leaders took to advance at different stages in their careers. All participants offered critiques of practices for the equitable advancement of women and recommendations to inform change.

This study provides a snapshot of the experiences of a diverse set of women in senior leadership positions in Canada. To build on the intersectional perspectives shared in this report, it should be complemented with further reading. Reports from the Diversity Institute (such as the DiversityLeads analysis of representation of women and other diverse individuals in Canadian leadership and boards),⁵⁴ as well as the experiences of Indigenous Peoples on boards and women in sectors such as STEM, are important to consider. Other reports on leading practices and the best practices database of the Diversity Institute offer practical examples of how corporations are advancing their EDI strategies for real results. Further research can build on the results of this report.

The study also underscores the need for a systems-level response and to engage with actors at societal, organizational and individual levels of the ecosystem. Below are recommendations at each level.

Recommendations for societies

Societal shifts, in coordination with actions on the individual and organizational levels, can enable gender parity. For this study, participants cited the societal level as supplementary commentary on the roots of inequity in the workplace. The following recommendations are derived from this general commentary.



Improve child-care access, options and costs. A lack of affordable child care options was named as a significant, continuing and critical barrier to the advancement of women. The level of availability of child care in its current form relies on a societal expectation of a more traditional family unit. Single parents and families without extended, supplemental child-care support struggle even more.



Increase equity and intersectionality literacy in practice and policy within Canadian society.



Advance policies and programs to improve reporting and transparency in the advancement of women, and encourage the development and implementation of policies and programs.



Leverage government funding (such as tax relief, grants, research and development funds and procurement) to encourage corporations to see EDI as a competitive advantage.



Ensure policies and regulations have supports for implementation.



Challenge stereotypes and celebrate successful women leaders.

Recommendations for organizations

Participants offered many recommendations for employers based on positive and negative experiences. The following actions are recommended for organizations to better advance women and gender parity at the executive level. They are organized according to the dimensions of the Diversity Assessment Tool (DAT).⁵⁵

Governance, leadership and strategy

This dimension evaluates how the organization demonstrates the importance of top-down implementation of diversity practices and policies, with the following recommendations.

- > Develop and publicize hiring policies for board appointments and senior leadership hiring that state the organization will identify and nominate women and/or non-binary individuals and equity-deserving candidates including Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities (including invisible and episodic disabilities), racialized, Black, and 2SLGBTQ+ and/or gender and sexually diverse individuals.
- > Encourage and support development of progressive and relational leadership practices that employ social-emotional skill competencies for all leaders. Support and internally report on progress toward equity mandates and targets, individual workplace satisfaction measures and improved organizational health. Encourage senior leaders to model work-life balance and family prioritization by leaving at the end of the workday, attending their family events, and similar.
- > Develop an organization-specific diversity plan that includes targets, activities, responsibilities and timelines. Make it part of performance reviews of all senior leaders.
- > Use a skills matrix to assess the qualifications of board members and senior leaders. This should detail diversity characteristics and attributes to help the board oversee the organization's purpose and strategy.
- > Develop guidelines and/or a code of conduct for board members and senior leadership that promotes inclusive decision-making and meeting practices that encourage all individuals to speak openly and share their perspectives. Train all senior leaders and board members in these capacities. This should include accommodations and considerations related to accessibility to ensure all board members and senior leaders can engage in meetings and other decision-making processes.
- > Prioritize succession planning as fundamental to helping current employees enter and grow into the leadership pipeline. Establish a formal succession planning program that considers all leaders and assesses them against a consistent set of criteria and expectations. Succession planning strategies should mitigate barriers and identify qualified women and/or non-binary individuals,

Indigenous Peoples and individuals from other equity-deserving groups as candidates for senior management positions.

- > Employ specialized mandatory training for board members and senior leaders on EDI.

Human resources processes

This dimension assesses how the organization recruits, develops, manages and engages with its employees, with the following recommendations.

- > Prioritize gender parity and diversity beyond gender in leadership positions. Create a diversity lead or committee responsible for overseeing hiring and retention policies and targets. It should report to the board on a regular basis. Hold lead HR functions and senior leadership jointly accountable for embedding EDI in talent processes and leadership recruitment.
- > Develop and implement a strategy for recruiting, onboarding, mentoring and retaining diverse women leaders.
- > When engaging in social or networking activities among senior leaders, it is important that activities be inclusive and consider the preferences of all leaders.
- > Create employee resource groups to support women and/or non-binary individuals and equity-deserving groups.
- > Improve retention through a focus on inclusion rather than diversity.
- > Pursue internal investigations of unhealthy work dynamics and address the issues uncovered. Be accountable for creating a safe workplace for all.
- > Engage in recruitment practices to identify women and/or non-binary individuals and equity-deserving groups as candidates for senior management positions through succession planning and recruitment. For example, mandate diverse slates of candidates and diverse hiring panels, and extend hiring timelines.
- > Engage in selection processes that reduce bias. Have mandatory training on bias-free selection processes for those involved in hiring and supervision.
- > Develop job descriptions and hiring criteria that screen in more diverse applicants. For example, ensure position postings reflect diverse competencies (including a mix of technical and job-specific skills, social-emotional skills and credentials) and value transferable skills and experiences. Make sure they are free of gendered or biased language and are made widely available.
- > Do not invite diverse applicants to apply without actively recruiting and seeking diverse applicants. Diverse candidates will not apply because of a disclaimer on the position description that they are “welcome.” Hiring practices need to include a shift in methods of recruitment, and the language and criteria within the job advertisement.
- > Ensure all leaders have access to mentorship opportunities to grow within the organization. This promotes retention

and contributes to business success. Mentorship can take various forms, depending on the size and nature of the organization. This includes formalized programs that cultivate a community of belonging, alongside small team socials with leaders that are inclusive and gender-inclusive networking opportunities.

- > Facilitate and cultivate an experienced, diverse pool of sponsors and executive coaches for high-performing women. Develop and implement supports for women leaders' skills.
- > Provide time and resources for leaders and employees to participate in resource groups to support women and/or non-binary individuals and equity-deserving groups.
- > Ensure opportunities for skills building, training and education for women leaders. Build in time and flexibility to allow diverse women leaders to engage in learning, recognizing the need to consider additional responsibilities they may have.
- > Build in incentivization for increasing representation, such as penalties, board term limits and bonuses.
- > Reduce the gender pay gap at senior levels by:
 - Prioritizing equitable salaries and creating a plan to provide the appropriate tools to HR when pay grievances are brought to light
 - Creating transparent performance appraisal and reward systems

- Assessing and updating classification bands, as appropriate
- Providing mentorship to women and supports, such as skills for negotiation
- Conducting an equity pay review for salary calibration
- Taking leaves of absence into account in merit-based salary increases
- Not paying women executives less than their counterparts who are men.

Organizational culture and value

This dimension analyzes whether the organization fosters an inclusive and positive culture and considers quality of life that is sensitive to the needs of a diverse workforce, with the following recommendations.

- > Where there are informal policies and processes (e.g., parental leave), consider how to accommodate employees' needs and maximize flexibility in the workplace. Allow space for innovation and flexibility in policy implementation, as introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., some remote work or a four-day work week).
- > Foster allyship through internal education and programming. Implement mandatory EDI training as part of orientation and professional development for all employees.
- > Encourage all employees, especially senior leaders, to understand their role in mitigating unconscious bias and identifying the respective power and privilege they may have within race, class, gender, religion and ability.

- > Standardize proactive, regular discussions with high-potential women about navigating the challenges of executive advancement.
- > Promote and celebrate women and non-binary individuals and equity-deserving groups as role models.
- > Report on organization's efforts to implement the key indicators that support EDI and accessibility throughout the organization.
- > Collect disaggregated data on women stalling at senior leadership positions or exiting the company at that level. Include exit interviews.

Equity, diversity and inclusion measurement and tracking

This dimension considers how the organization measures and tracks the results of its EDI efforts to ensure commitment and accountability, with the following recommendations.

- > Sign up for the 50 – 30 Challenge, and track and report progress on meeting its goals: gender parity (50% women and/or non-binary people) on Canadian boards and/or in senior management and significant representation (30%) on Canadian boards and/or senior management of members of other equity-deserving groups.
- > Adopt targets for achieving gender parity (50%) and significant representation (30%) for the board of directors and for senior management. The target should be expressed as a percentage and should indicate the date for accomplishment.
- > Recognize intersectionality and that an individual on the board and/or senior management team may hold more than one identity, attribute or characteristic related to the goals of gender parity and significant representation when reporting on compliance.

- > Actively listen and learn from equity-deserving employees and create channels for leaders and the executive level to receive direct feedback to ensure that the organization's EDI commitments lead to maximum impact and minimal harm.

Diversity across the value chain

This dimension evaluates whether the organization clearly and actively communicates its commitment to diversity internally as well as externally, with the following recommendations.

- > Recognize that equitable solutions are not one-size-fits-all. Tailored measures that address the diverse, intersectional needs of diverse women leaders are needed in the development of internal programs, services, supports and processes.
- > Do not make bold statements about commitment without follow-through.
- > Use a gender and diversity lens to shape the language and images included in internal and external corporate communications.
- > Do not just meet the minimum regulatory requirements. Indicators of an authentic EDI journey are setting the bar higher,

continuous improvement and pursuing further benefits.

Outreach and expanding the pool

This dimension measures the organization's efforts to develop its resources and outreach programs to develop EDI partners and pipelines, with the following recommendations.

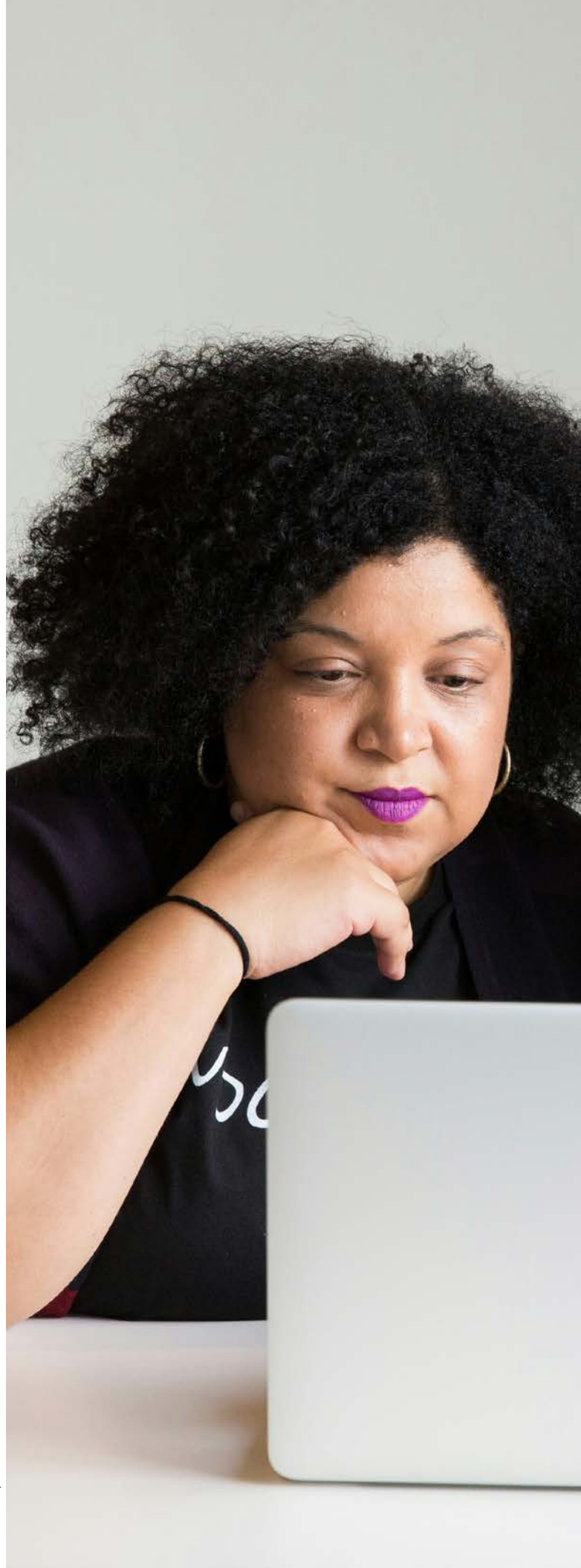
- > Build relationships with wider networks for more diverse candidates. Develop partnerships with organizations in the ecosystem to develop the pipeline of the next generation of diverse leaders.
- > Build partnerships to support alternative pathways for women and/or non-binary individuals and equity-deserving groups.
- > Participate in industry efforts to diversify the talent pipeline earlier in the process.

Recommendations for individuals

Participants made suggestions regarding individual competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics) that are needed to succeed. While this set of recommendations is for individual women, all leaders in the organization should be responsible for their own accountability, action, education and commitment.

- > Be confident in your experience and judgment and use emotional intelligence to assess approaches to professional situations and difficult interactions.
- > Be selective and strategic with boards on which you participate outside of your position. Following passion provides significant benefits. Depending on circumstances, access to senior leaders in these roles and contexts can be useful for networking.
- > Listen to others. Building a custom team allows one to surround themselves with smart people, subject matter experts and diversity.
- > Be clear about your personal goals and self-promote. Prioritize career steps and make senior leaders aware of this. (For example, you could communicate a business case for a partnership.)
- > Build skills and individual value for the organization. Learn the economics of the organization, take on a P&L role early in a career and build up breadth that will allow a better understanding of the business.
- > Practice and do the work. Always deliver and excel in the roles you fill. Participants offered examples of how they would go above and beyond to be the best.
- > Learn when to say yes and when to say no. Putting oneself out there and taking on additional projects is advised but should be done strategically. If the task is not going to create a benefit for advancement, it might be a no.
- > Create space for others to say yes. Participants encouraged offering the names of other women and equity-deserving individuals to foster representation.

- > Live on the edge of discomfort to foster learning and experience challenging work. Seek out peers who can push and challenge you. Build your knowledge and skills, and embrace continual learning.
- > Set boundaries between professional and personal time. Identifying non-negotiables (such as putting kids to bed) is useful for work clarity and mental health.
- > Be creative instead of opting out of professional situations. For example, if networking includes alcohol and one doesn't drink, participate anyway and have a soft drink.
- > Be strategic with parental leave or other personal leave. Depending on one's situation, staying in touch periodically while on leave can make a difference for maintaining visibility, maintaining relationships and understanding significant project developments.
- > Build your networks of advisors, mentors and supporters.
- > Consider your own privilege and bias.
- > Know when to "call in" and "call out."
- > Ensure focus is also on shifting knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of others to create a more inclusive environment for women. Lead diversity and be an inclusive leader.



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