Gender, Diversity and Discrimination in the Workplace

TED ROGERS SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

DiVERSITY INSTITUTE

Future Skills Centre Centre des Compétences futures

Environics Institute For Survey Research

The Diversity Institute undertakes research on diversity in the workplace to improve practices in organizations. We work with organizations to develop customized strategies, programming and resources to promote new, interdisciplinary knowledge and practice about diversity with respect to gender, race/ethnicity, Indigenous Peoples, abilities and sexual orientation. Using an ecological model of change, our action-oriented, evidence-based approach drives social innovation across sectors.

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

Environics Institute for Survey Research conducts relevant and original public opinion and social research related to issues of public policy and social change. It is through such research that organizations and individuals can better understand Canada today, how it has been changing, and where it may be heading.

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About the Survey on Employment & Skills

The Survey on Employment and Skills is conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the Future Skills Centre and the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University. In early 2020, the Survey on Employment and Skills began as a project designed to explore Canadians' experiences with the changing nature of work, including technology-driven disruptions, increasing insecurity and shifting skills requirements. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey was expanded to investigate the impact of the crisis on Canadians' employment, earnings and work environments. A second wave of the survey was conducted in December 2020, a third wave in June 2021, a fourth wave in March–April 2022, a fifth wave in March 2023 and a sixth wave in October–November 2023.

Each wave of the study consists of a survey of over 5,000 Canadians aged 18 years and over, conducted in all provinces and territories. A total of 34,740 Canadians were surveyed across the six waves. The survey includes oversamples of Canadians living in smaller provinces and territories, those under the age of 34 years, racialized Canadians and Canadians who identify as Indigenous, in order to provide a better portrait of the range of experiences across the country. Unless otherwise indicated, the survey results in this report are weighted by age, gender, region, education, racial identity and Indigenous identity to ensure that they are representative of the Canadian population as a whole.

Survey reports can be found online at:

> https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/listing/-in-tags/type/survey-on-employment-and-skills

> fsc-ccf.ca/research/2020-survey-on-employment-and-skills

> https://www.torontomu.ca/diversity/research/future-skills/survey-on-employment-and-skills/

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Workplace discrimination in Canada is a significant issue that affects a wide range of employees and has an impact on broader workplace culture. Discrimination in the workplace is experienced by many people from equity-deserving groups, including Indigenous Peoples, women, racialized people, persons living with disabilities and 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. Intersectionality also plays a key role in how discriminatory practices affect people with multiple identities.

Research design

This study explores the experiences of people with discrimination in the workplace in Canada drawing on data from the Survey of Employment and Skills conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the Future Skills Centre and the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University. The survey was administered in six waves between 2020 and 2023 to a total of 34,740 participants. Overall, the survey asked about seven grounds for discrimination: age, gender, race or ethnicity, Indigenous identity (asked only to Indigenous respondents), disability, sexual orientation and religion.

Findings

Overall, the findings from this analysis are consistent with other research confirming that many women, racialized people, Indigenous peoples, those who identify as lesbian or gay, those with disabilities that always or often limit their daily activities and those who are 18 to 34 years of age, report experiencing discrimination

in the workplace The results show intersectionality is important as many groups face multiple layers of discrimination; for example, Black women, and younger women (18 to 34 years) are more likely than women overall to report experiences of workplace discrimination. Similarly, we see that Indigenous men, and younger Indigenous men specifically, are more likely than average to report experiencing workplace discrimination because they are Indigenous.

The results also show that, for some groups, those who report experiencing workplace discrimination tend also to report poorer mental health compared to their counterparts who do not report experiencing discrimination. This is seen for some racialized groups who reported experiences of racial discrimination (Black and South Asian), women who report experiences of gender-based discrimination, young women who report experiences of age-based discrimination, and gay and lesbian individuals who report experiences of sexual orientation-based discrimination.

As well, the results suggest that reports of workplace discrimination are more prevalent in the public sector than the private sector. These findings will be discussed further.

Conclusions and implications

There are no simple solutions to complex problems and addressing discrimination in the workplace requires a multilayered strategy. Organizations do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by broader societal forces. We must name the problem and collect disaggregated data to understand the impact of systemic discrimination on individuals from equity-deserving groups across sectors: education, employment, health, the justice system and more. Strong legislation is the foundation and must be supported with strong implementation and enforcement. Some legislation, for example the Canadian Human Rights Act, the Employment Equity Act, the Canada Labour Code and the Accessible Canada Act, applies only to federally regulated corporations and the application is uneven. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms enumerates rights and freedoms, and a range of provincial acts and statutes set out the rights and duties of employers, but enforcement is uneven and complaint processes are often long and expensive for complainants. Stronger measures are needed to ensure transparency and impact. We also need to continue to combat discrimination in all its forms in the media, online and in the public sphere as this has a profound impact on prejudice and stereotypes. There are also a plethora of government policies and programs which can advance or impede opportunities for members of equity-deserving groups.

Employers need to have clear and formal commitments to preventing discrimination in all its forms and to ensure they have strong and effective equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) strategies that are well

understood and implemented. Tone from the top is critical to signal that discrimination will not be tolerated. Human resources policies and practices need to be reviewed with an eye to eliminating bias. Building an inclusive culture is complex but requires ensuring there are clear and well understood anti-discrimination and harassment policies coupled with appropriate mechanisms for tracking and responding effectively to complaints as well as proactive efforts to develop a workplace where all are valued and included.

Benchmarking is critical—what gets measured gets done—and organizations need to track not only the composition of their workforce and leadership, but also the application, selections and promotion processes. Employee engagement surveys are a good way to track perceptions of discrimination and inclusion to help drive strategies. And tracking complaints and separations from the company also offer important signs regarding what is working and what is not. Organizations also have a profound impact on the broader environment and commitment to considering EDI in product and service design, marketing and support can influence the experiences of discrimination more broadly as can investment in communities.

At the end of the day, organizations consist of individuals and while education alone has limited impact on shaping behaviour, ensuring all employees and decisions makers have mandatory training on EDI, bias and privilege and their rights and responsibilities as well as Canada's history of discrimination and the ways it impacts systems, organizations and individuals is key.

Introduction

Discrimination, the unfair treatment because of an aspect of one's identity, is a daily reality for many Canadians. The Canadian Human Rights Code and provincial codes, define the prohibited grounds of discrimination including gender or sex race, Indigeneity, disability, age, religion, education, rank, personality, income, experience, gender expression, sexual preference, children, marital status and domestic caregiving activities.

Workplace discrimination, or unfair treatment because of one's identity within the workplace environment, remains a critical issue that affects a broad spectrum of employees in Canada. There is strong evidence that explains that the unemployment and underemployment of equity-deserving groups is due to the barriers produced by systemic discrimination.[1, 2, 3] Despite progressive policies and a growing emphasis on inclusivity, many equity-deserving groups still face significant barriers and biases that negatively affect their workplace experience and hinder their professional advancement.

Discrimination can take many forms. Overt discrimination, or explicit exclusion from access to education, accommodation, work or other opportunities is the most obvious form of discrimination. It is framed by the conscious and unconscious negative race-based values, assumptions and beliefs of individuals. Overt discrimination often manifests as "individual discrimination" which can be expressed both directly and indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, in words, attitudes, ideas, behaviours and actions.

Systemic discrimination is also known as structural, second-generation, or institutional discrimination. In the workplace environment, it has been defined by the Supreme Court of Canada as discrimination that is the result of traditional recruitment, hiring, and promotion procedures that are not inherently designed to produce discrimination.[4] These processes and structures can be both current and historic, can influence each other, and can shape and be shaped by the racist beliefs of individuals or groups of individuals. Because this type of discrimination is embedded in policies and practices that produce, condone and perpetuate widespread, unfair treatment and oppression, it is often harder to discern.

Research clearly documents that subtle forms of discrimination are as harmful as overt discrimination.[5] For example, microaggressions are statements, actions, or other incidents that involve unintentional, indirect, or subtle discrimination against members of equity-deserving groups. Research has shown that experiencing microaggressions can have negative psychological (e.g., high stress, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation) and physiological (e.g., increased cortisol levels, poor general health, insomnia, hypertension, headaches, etc.).[6] Often, microaggressions cause more harm than overt instances of discrimination because they lead individuals to second guess their own perceptions.

In the workplace, overt discrimination is more clearly noticed and can be challenged legally. However, subtle forms of discrimination, like microaggressions, that target workers from equity-deserving groups can easily go unnoticed. This may include mockery,

disempowerment, disrespect and incivility disguised in everyday interactions like jokes.[7, 8] The daily slights and insults, intentional or unintentional that are hurtful and insulting and often debilitating.

Research indicates that race-based discrimination imposes significant financial and personal costs on individual employees.[9, 10, 11, 12] Lower employment rates lead to reduced chances to advance and fewer leaders from marginalized groups to mentor and coach younger generations along their own pathways to employment and professional development. Additionally, experiences of discrimination and harassment are linked to numerous poor health outcomes, including emotional distress, anxiety, depression and physical ailments, highlighting how racism should be a concern of public health as well.[13] There is also evidence that fear of retaliation and stress often discourage the reporting of gender-based harassment.[14, 15]

Research also indicates that discrimination affects broader workplace culture. For example, across race, ethnicity and gender, those reporting higher levels of being "on guard" against bias in the workplace are significantly more inclined (61%) to consider leaving their jobs compared to those with lower levels (31%).[16] A culture of bias can lead to lower employee engagement, ultimately reducing productivity and job satisfaction. In organizations like this, where management is aware of the discrimination that occurs and the underlying culture but does nothing to combat the issue, this sends the message that management condones this type of behaviour which further reinforces it while marginalizing the victims. This may occur not only when management explicitly ignores these situations, but even when they do not take the concerns seriously or do not conduct thorough investigations.[17] Research shows that organizations prioritizing diversity and supporting equity-deserving groups generally attract and retain more racialized workers, particularly within the public sector.[18]

For example, Indigenous communities have long faced historical discrimination that has shaped their access to opportunities and hindered economic growth. Indigenous Peoples have endured colonization, marginalization and the suppression of their cultural identities. The lasting effects of these actions can be seen in Indigenous Peoples' poor access to education and employment opportunities, and general lack of representation in leadership positions.[19] Recent data are encouraging showing that Indigenous Peoples with university educations have comparable employment outcomes to non-Indigenous people,[20] highlighting the importance of investing upstream to address barriers to education.

While work on ensuring equal opportunities for women have been a priority for decades, women still experience occupational segregation, employment gaps, wage gaps, underrepresentation in leadership roles. When an intersectional lens is applied, the experiences of Indigenous, racialized and Black women or those with disabilities show barriers are amplified.[21] Experiences of harassment are pervasive. Statistics Canada data indicates that nearly one-half (47%) of women experience some form of harassment or sexual assault in the workplace compared to nearly one-third (31%) of men. This persists across diverse groups, including women with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, racialized groups and immigrants.[22]

Among racialized peoples there is longstanding and consistent evidence of bias in the workplace - for example they have an unemployment rate of 9.9% compared to 7.3% for non-racialized people. Despite comprising more than 50% of the population of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), they represented only 4.3% of S&P/TSX

Composite Index board members in Toronto in 2022. Among racialized groups, there are significant differences with those who identify as Black facing the most barriers. While the Black population in Canada has bridged the education gap with virtually no difference in the proportion of individuals with university education, the massive gap in employment and earning shows evidence of pervasive anti-Black racism.[23] Additionally, research has shown that Black individuals face more obstacles to employment and promotion compared to other racialized groups, and are more likely to report experiencing racism on a regular basis compared to non-Black populations, with 18% frequently and 49% occasionally encountering unfair treatment based on their race.[24]

An intersectional lens shows barriers are compounded based on race, religion, disability and other dimensions. For example, immigrants have an unemployment rate of 5.8% compared to a rate of 5.1% for Canadian-born individuals.[25] Immigrants, who also are often racialized face additional barriers and research shows even when born and educated in Canada, job applicants with "foreign sounding" last names are less likely to get called back for interviews.[26]

Evidence shows that persons living with one or more disabilities are underemployed and that they experience discrimination and significant gaps in earnings. Despite the Government of Canada's efforts to develop a strategy to promote equity and to improve the employment opportunities of persons living with disabilities, 76% of persons living with a mild disability are employed compared to 67% of those living with a moderate disability, 49% of persons living with a severe disability and 31% of those living with a very severe disability.[27] Persons living with invisible disabilities often face the issue of stigma and biases.[28]

Although there are clear signs of increased acceptance of 2SLGBTQ+ individuals in society, employment outcomes are uneven particularly for those who identify as transgendered.[29] One study showed 7% of employers and 11% of co-workers were found to discriminate against their 2SLGBTQ+ colleagues.[30] Many of those who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ are younger Canadians,[31] and international studies indicate that younger 2SLGBTQ+ workers have a more challenging time entering high-paying industries and retaining good jobs, and they face a greater risk of unemployment compared to their non-2SLGBTQ+ counterparts.[32] 2SLGBTQ+ Canadians are also twice as likely to experience sexual harassment in the workplace than others.

This report offers important insights in the way discrimination has an impact on workers. It focuses on the intersectional experiences of individuals who identify with multiple equity-deserving groups. The data gathered builds understanding around the frequency with which discrimination is amplified for certain groups. This essential knowledge-base will inform policy and practice to improve workplace culture, accommodation strategies and support infrastructure for equity-deserving communities.

Research Design

This study explores the experiences of people who face discrimination in the workplace in Canada. The purpose of this investigation is to better understand what demographic groups are more likely to report different types of discrimination in this context.

This analysis focuses on the survey question: "Have you ever experienced discrimination or been unfairly treated in the workplace?" or "In the past 12 months, have you experienced discrimination or unfair treatment in the workplace?" (Waves 5, 6). Seven grounds for discrimination were explored: age, gender, race or ethnicity, Indigenous identity (asked only to Indigenous respondents), disability, sexual orientation and religion. Table 1 shows how the questions on the different types of discrimination varied across the survey waves.

TABLE 1.
Questions for types of discrimination by survey wave

Survey	Race or Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Indigenous Identity	Disability	Religion	Sexual Orientation
Wave 1 (Mar 2020)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Wave 2 (Dec 2020)	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	X	X
Wave 3 (June 2020)	✓	X	X	✓	✓	X	X
Wave 4 (Mar–Apr 2022)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Wave 5 (Mar 2023)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
Wave 6 (Oct–Nov 2023)	✓	X	X	✓	✓	X	✓

It is important to note that all respondents were asked the survey question, regardless of their current labour force status. Consequently, some respondents may answer "no" because they have never been in the labour force, such as students. Moreover, retired respondents may have less proximity in time to experiences of discrimination and may not be inclined to recall them. Reported experiences with discrimination tend to be higher among younger age cohorts, so excluding retired persons from the sample might increase the incidence of these experiences.

For this reason, the incidence of reported discrimination is slightly higher if the responses are limited to those currently in the labour force. However, these differences are modest and do not materially affect the overall patterns reported in this study.

The questions were drawn from the Survey on Employment and Skills which was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the Future Skills Centre and the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University, and was administered in six waves with a minimum of 5000 respondents in each wave. A breakdown of survey respondent demographics can be found in Table 2.

TABLE 2.
Demographic breakdown of survey respondents compared to population demograpthics

		All Waves (%)	Stats Can [33, 34, 35] (%)
Gender			
	Men	48	49
	Women	52	51
Age (years)			
	18–24	17	6 [1]
	25–34	20	13
	35–44	21	13
	45–54	20	13
	55–64	11	14
	65–74	8	11
	75+	3	8
Sexual orientation (only W6)			
	Heterosexual	89	96
	Lesbian or gay	4	2
	Bisexual	6	2
Disability status (only W2–W6)			
	Yes	37	27
	No	63	73
Racial identity and Indigenous			
	Indigenous	13	5
	Racialized (combined)	24	27
	White	61	74

[1] Note. Due to census age groupings, this percentage represents only those from 20 to 24.

Findings

Overall

The findings are consistent with other research suggesting that, discrimination in the workplace experienced by equity-deserving groups is common. The data shows that many women, racialized people, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, those who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ and young people report discrimination in the workplace.

Intersectionality plays a significant role, as several types of discrimination are more prevalent among non-white Canadians. Racialized Canadians and Indigenous Peoples are more likely than those who identify as white to report discrimination based on gender, age and disability. The pattern with respect to gender is mixed: women are more likely than men to experience discrimination based on gender or age, while men are more likely than women to experience discrimination based on racial or Indigenous identity and sexual orientation.

Younger adults are more likely than middle-aged or older adults to mention experiencing age-based discrimination as well as each of the other six types of discrimination covered in the survey. It is unclear whether this is because younger adults encounter more discrimination or because youth are more inclined to call it out and less likely to accept it.

The data gathered in this survey aligns with the extensive research that has documented the linking discrimination and adverse mental and physical health outcomes.[36] We found that many groups who report experiencing workplace discrimination report poorer mental health compared to their counterparts who do not report experiencing discrimination. This is particularly true for South Asian and Black Canadians reporting racial discrimination, women reporting experiencing gender-based discrimination, young women reporting age-based discrimination and 2SLGBTQ+ individuals reporting discrimination based on sexual orientation.
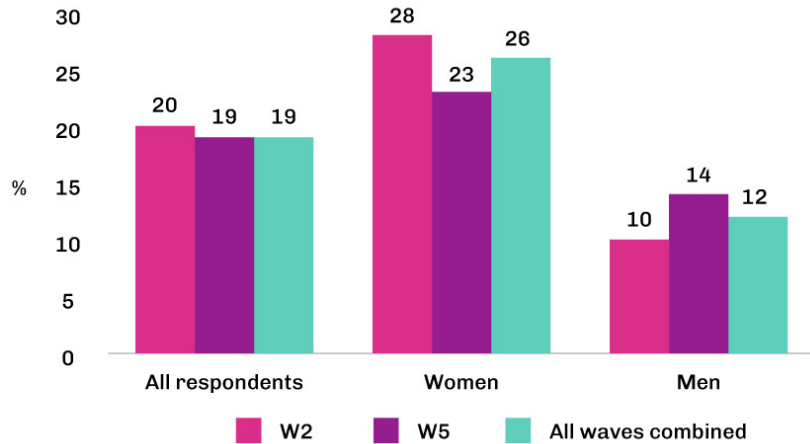
Gender

Survey respondents were asked about gender-based discrimination in waves 2 and 5. The results show that gender-based discrimination is reported by one in four women in the workplace (26%) and about one-half as many men (12%) (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1.
## Gender-based discrimination by gender, waves 2 and 5

This bar graph shows women report experiencing gender-based discrimination in the workplace twice as much as men in waves 2 and 5 for all survey respondents.

Higher proportions of gender-based discrimination are seen among younger women aged 18 to 34 years (36% versus 25% for those aged 35-54 and 15% for those 55 and older). The proportion is slightly more pronounced for women who identify as Black (38%) or Indigenous (38%). Additionally, 30% of Black men report experiencing gender-based discrimination at work (see Figure 2). The survey results further show that the proportion is highest for women with a university education (34% for undergraduate and 36% for graduate) and lowest (19%) for women with high school diplomas or less. In terms of occupations, a greater proportion of women in professional (31%) and executive (32%) positions report discrimination compared to those in office or administrative jobs (25%), trades, transportation and labour (27%), as well as sales and services (28%).

FIGURE 2.
Gender-based discrimination by demographic group and gender,
waves 2 and 5 combined

This bar graph shows differences in how often different demographic groups report experiencing workplace discrimination in waves 2 and 5 combined. The differences are shown for all respondents, men, and women. Higher proportions of reports of gender-based discrimination are seen among younger women aged 18-34 than their older counterparts. The graph also shows reports of workplace discrimination are more frequent for women who identify as Black or Indigenous.
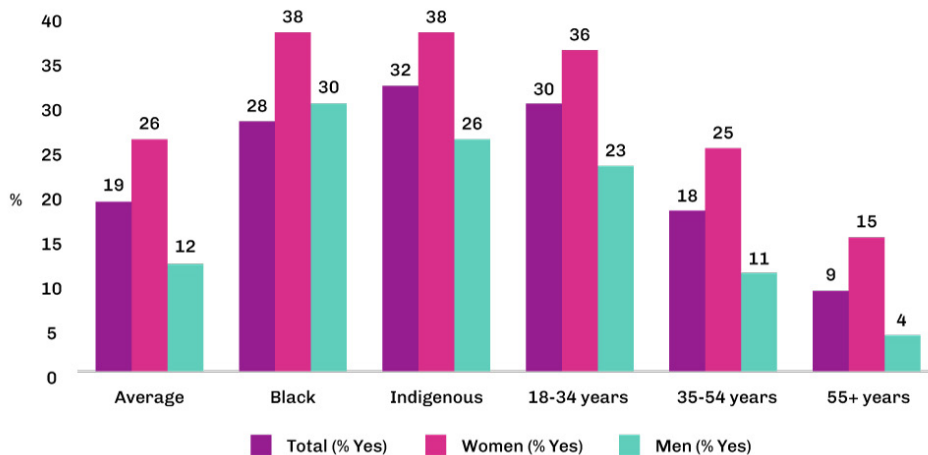
Race and ethnicity

Respondents were asked about race or ethnicity-based discrimination in waves 2, 3, 5 and 6. Forty percent of all racialized respondents compared to only 9% of white respondents report race-based discrimination in the workplace. The proportion rises to nearly 50% for those identifying as Black (47%) or South Asian (48%). Among individuals aged 18 to 34 who identify as Black or South Asian this figure surpasses 50%.

FIGURE 3.

Race or ethnicity-based discrimination by racial or ethnic group and Indigenous Peoples, waves 2, 3, 5 and 6 combined

This bar graph shows that race or ethnicity-based discrimination is more commonly reported among respondents who identify as South Asian or Black, while those who identify as white report experiencing race or ethnicity-based discrimination the least for waves 2, 3, 5 and 6 combined.
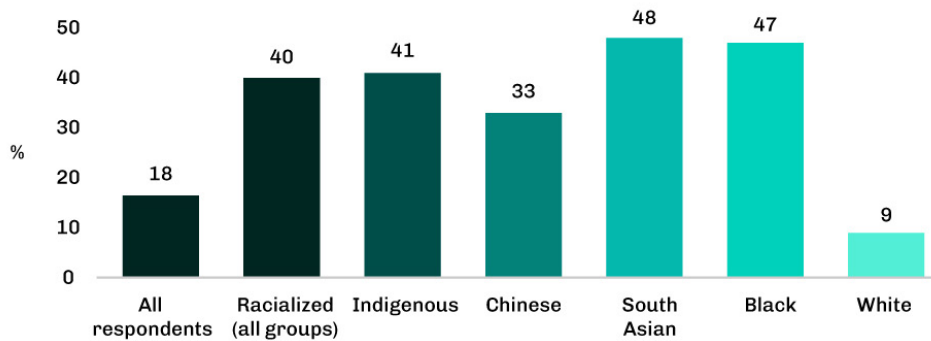
Indigenous identity

Indigenous respondents were asked if they had experienced discrimination because of their Indigenous identity in waves 2, 3, 5 and 6. Thirty-eight percent of Indigenous Peoples report facing discrimination at work because of their Indigenous identity, with higher proportion (46%) of those identifying as First Nations (see Figure 4). Indigenous men report higher proportions (43%) of such discrimination compared to Indigenous women (33%), with the highest proportions (45%) observed among the youngest age group (ages 18 to 34 years) for both Indigenous men and women (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 4.

Discrimination based on Indigenous identity, waves 2, 3, 5 and 6

This bar graph shows that those identifying as First Nations report facing discrimination at work because of their Indigenous identity more often than Métis and Inuit Peoples across waves 2, 3, 5 and 6.

Legend: All Indigenous respondents | First Nations | Métis | Inuit

	W2	W3	W5	W6	All waves combined
All Indigenous respondents	38	39	33	43	38
First Nations	44	42	50	47	46
Métis	32	28	40	42	35
Inuit	39	42	37	43	40
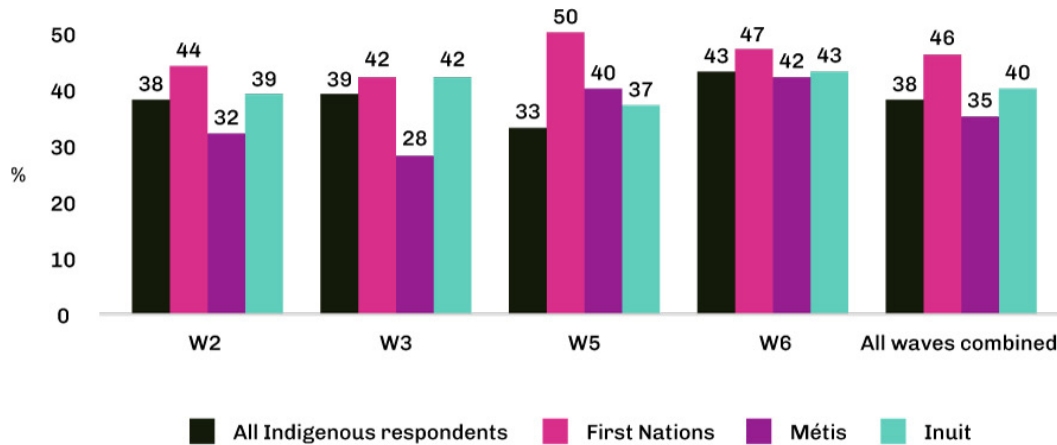
FIGURE 5.

Discrimination based on Indigenous identity, broken down by demographic group, waves 2, 3, 5 and 6 combined

This bar graph shows differences in reporting experiencing discrimination based on Indigenous identity for different demographic groups in waves 2, 3, 5 and 6. Indigenous men are more likely to report experiencing Indigenous-based discrimination than Indigenous women. Younger Indigenous Peoples, aged 18-34 are the most likely to report Indigenous-based discrimination in the workplace compared to older counterparts.


Average	Men	Women	18-34 years	35-54 years	55+ years
38	43	33	45	40	25
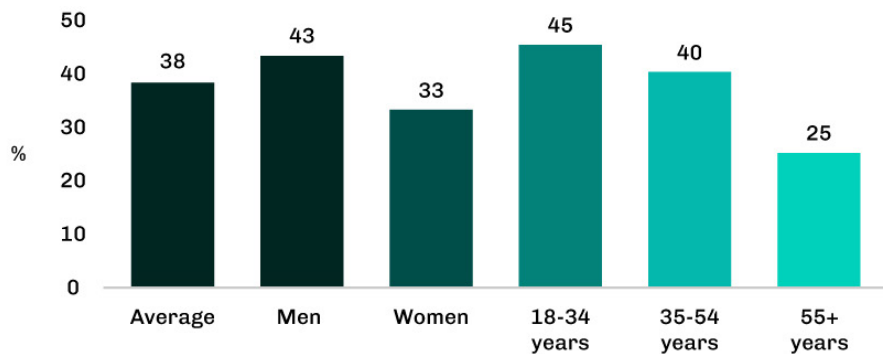
Sexual orientation

A question asking about discrimination based on sexual orientation was added in wave 6. Forty-eight percent of respondents who identified as gay or lesbian, and 34% who are bisexual, report workplace discrimination due to their sexual orientation (see Figure 6). These proportions are higher among younger gay, lesbian or bisexual Canadians (47%), and among men (46%) compared to women (33%) with these sexual orientations (see Figure 7).

FIGURE 6.

Sexual orientation-based discrimination by sexual orientation, wave 6

This bar graph shows that sexual orientation-based workplace discrimination is most commonly reported by those identifying as lesbian or gay, followed by those who are identifying as bisexual in wave 6.
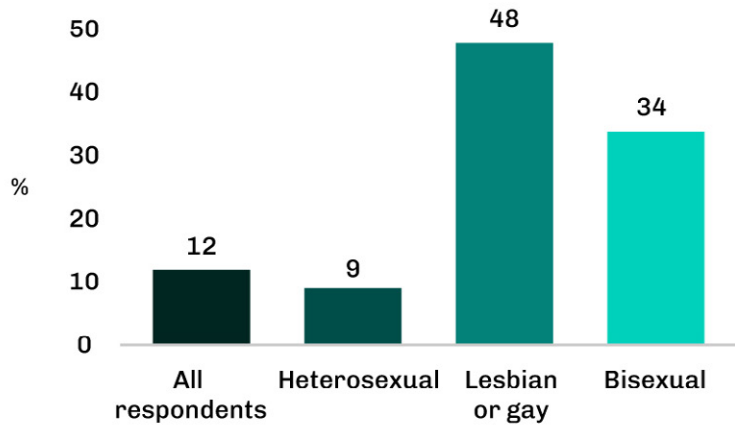
FIGURE 7.

Discrimination based on lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity, broken down by demographic group, wave 6

This bar graph displays differences in reports of workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation, with the highest proportions observed among younger lesbian, gay, or bisexual Canadians from age 18 to 34, and among men compared to women with these sexual orientations in wave 6.
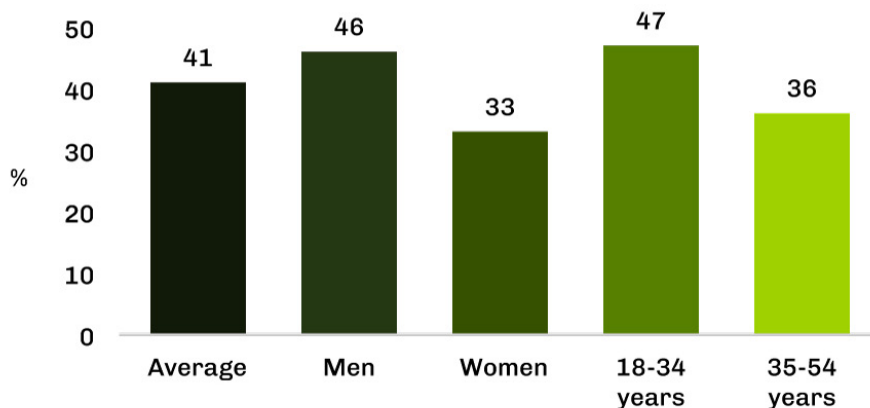

Note. 55+ age group subsample too small.

Persons with disabilities

Respondents were asked about discrimination based on disability status in waves 3, 5 and 6. While in wave 3, respondents were just asked about how often their disability limits their activity, respondents were also asked about the type of disability they had (physical, mental, or cognitive) in waves 5 and 6 (see Figure 8). The results indicate that 33% of Canadians with a disability that always or often limits their activity report workplace discrimination due to their disability. The proportion is higher (36%) for younger persons with a disability and is highest (58%) for those with a cognitive difference (see Figure 9).

FIGURE 8.

Disability-based discrimination by disability status, waves 3, 5 and 6 combined

This bar graph shows the highest proportion of survey respondents who report disability-based discrimination is for those with a cognitive difference. This is almost two times as often compared to those who have a physical or mental disability.
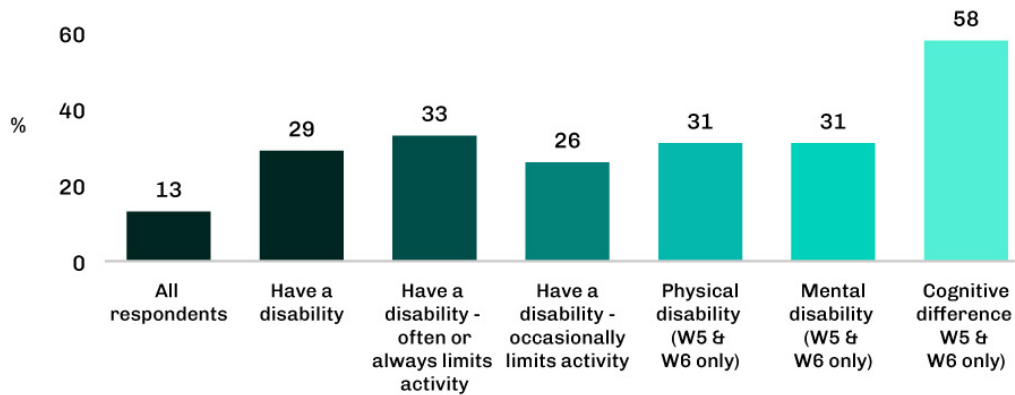
FIGURE 9.

Disability-based discrimination by demographic group, all waves combined, waves 5 and 6 combined

This bar graph shows younger persons from age 18 to 34 report experiencing disability-based discrimination more often than their older counterparts. Men with a mental disability report disability-based discrimination more often than women with a mental disability, but women with a physical disability report disability-based discrimination more often than men with a physical disability.
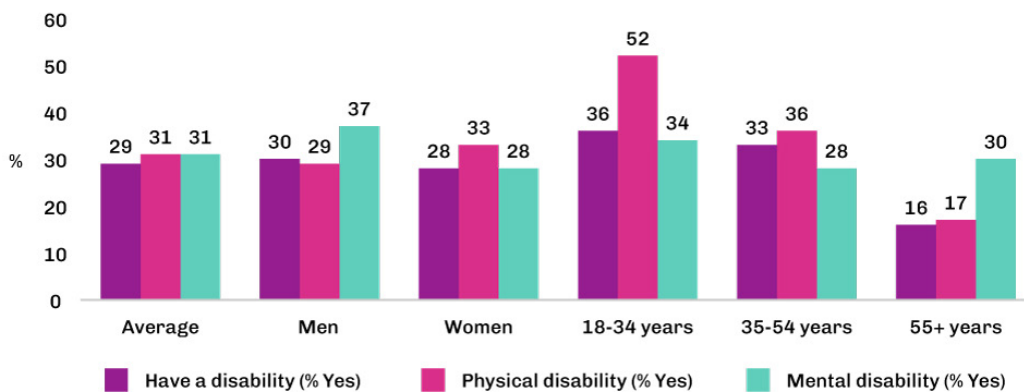

Note. "Have a disability" total includes all waves combined, "Physical disability" and "Mental disability" total includes only waves 5 and 6 combined.

Religion

Respondents were asked about religion-based discrimination in wave 5 only (see Figure 10). About one in 10 (11%) respondents report experiencing workplace discrimination because of their religion. This proportion is higher (13%) among immigrants and recent immigrants (18%), as well as among racialized respondents (21%), especially those identifying as South Asian (30%). Younger respondents (20%), and, in particular, younger racialized respondents (29%), report experiencing higher proportions of religious discrimination (see Figure 11).

FIGURE 10.

Religion-based discrimination by demographic group, wave 5

This bar graph shows differences in reporting religion-based discrimination, with those identifying as South Asian most likely to report workplace discrimination among all racialized Canadians. Religion-based discrimination is also more often reported among immigrants, particularly recent immigrants in wave 5.
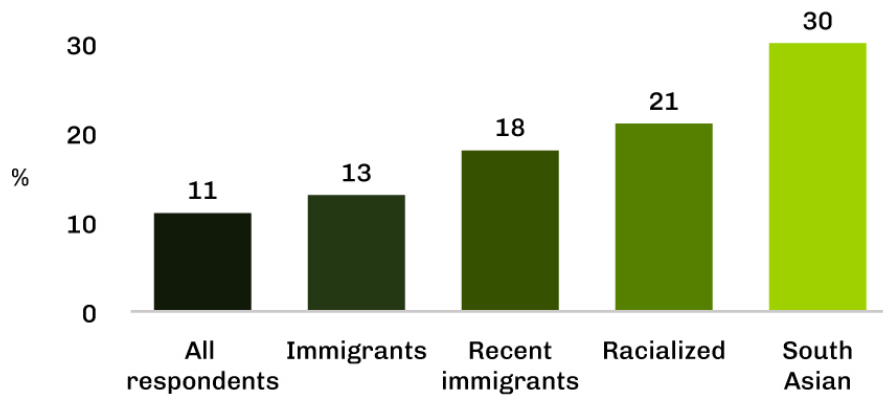
FIGURE 11.

Religion-based discrimination by demographic group, wave 5

This bar graph shows differences in reports of religion-based discrimination in the workplace for different demographic groups. Younger Canadians (ages 18-34) are more likely to report religion-based workplace discrimination than their older counterparts. Racialized Canadians are more likely to report religion-based discrimination than immigrants in all demographic groups (men, women, and all age groups).
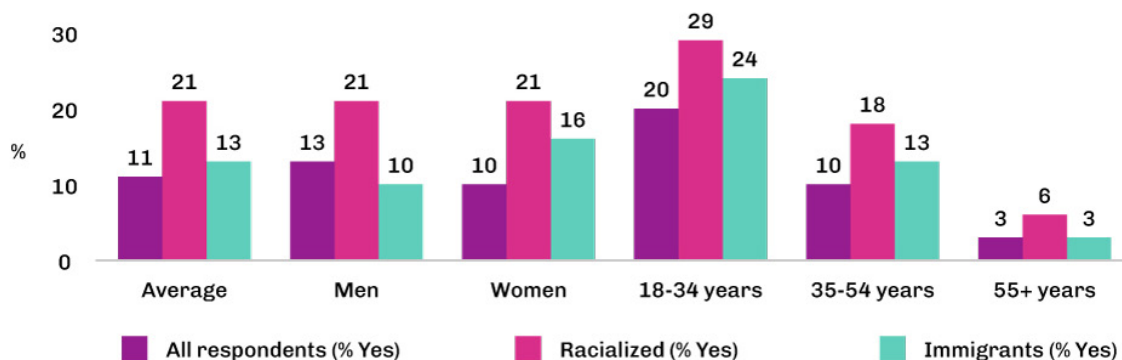
Age

Survey respondents were asked about age-based discrimination in waves 2 and 5. In waves 2 and 5 combined (n=11,255) just under a quarter (23%) of Canadians reported experiencing age-based discrimination. One in three (34%) of young adults report experiencing age-based discrimination in the workplace, which is more than their older counterparts (only 18% of those aged 35 to 54, and 17% of those 55 or older) (see Figure 12). Across all age groups, women report slightly higher proportions (26%) of discrimination than men (21%) (see Figure 13).

FIGURE 12.

Age-based discrimination by age group, waves 2 and 5

This bar graph shows how often different age groups report experiencing workplace discrimination. Reports of experiencing discrimination in the workplace are most common for survey respondents aged 18-34 in waves 2 and 5. Respondents in this age group are nearly twice as likely to report experiencing workplace discrimination compared to their older counterparts.
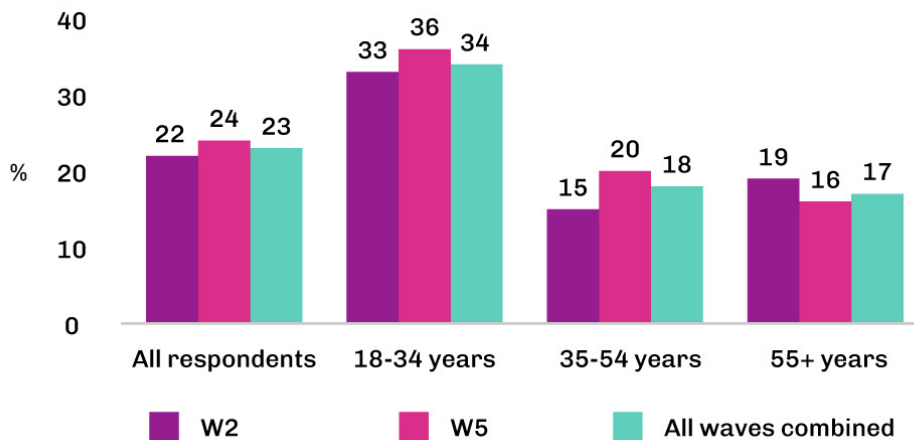
FIGURE 13.

Age-based discrimination by gender and age group, waves 2 and 5 combined

This bar graph shows the differences in reporting experiencing discrimination in the workplace for men and women across different age groups. The data shows the prevalence waves 2 and 5 combined. Women report experiencing discrimination slightly more often than men in every age group.
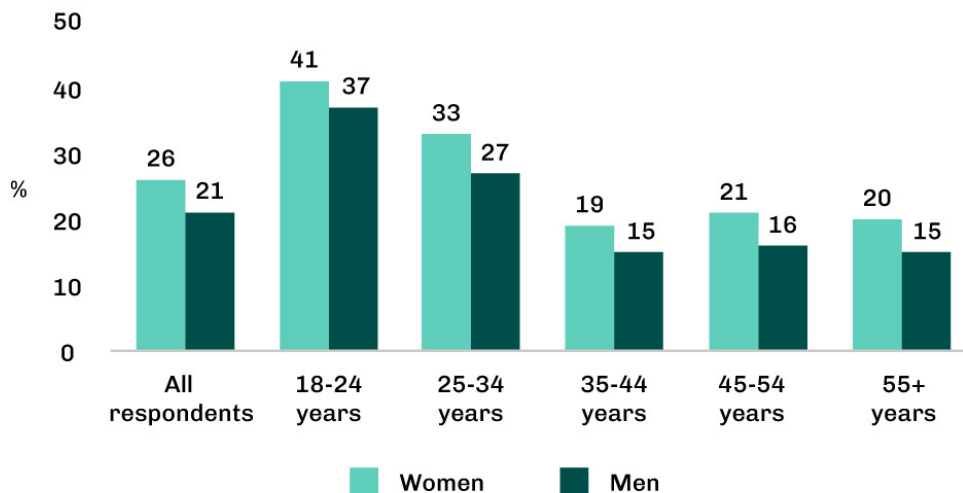
Sectoral perspective

Workplace discrimination occurs in public, nonprofit and private sectors, though, the data suggests workplace discrimination is more commonly reported in the public sector and nonprofit sector than in the private sector for all types of discrimination. The sample size for the nonprofit sector was too small for some discrimination types, preventing a direct comparison; but in many cases, it had the highest levels of discrimination reported. Looking across all discrimination types within the specified population (see Table 3), the public sector consistently shows higher proportions of individuals reporting discrimination compared to the private sector. Notably, a significant proportion of Indigenous Peoples surveyed in the public sector (57%) report experiencing discrimination due to their Indigenous identity, the highest among all groups. This is followed by race-based discrimination reported by racialized groups, with 52% in the public sector.

TABLE 3.
Percentage of participants reporting discrimination in the workplace, by type of discrimination, demographic group and employment sector

Type of Discrimination	Group (Across Waves)	Private Sector (%)	Public Sector n=7,913 (%)	Non-profit Sector n=1,161 (%)
Racial	Racialized n=8,565	37	52	53
Gender	Women	29	34	39
Age	18 to 34 years n=12,967	33	43	36
Indigenous	Indigenous n=4,667	33	57	(sample too small)
Disability	Disability n=10,680	30	39	44
Sexual orientation	Not heterosexual n=646	37	42	(sample too small)

The private sector is subject to considerable regulation and reporting regarding EDI and many companies have formalized EDI strategies, policies and practices. In business, the case for EDI has been linked to corporate strategy for example in terms of broadening the talent pool and address skills gaps,[37] addressing the needs of more diverse markets,[38] enhance innovation [39, 40, 41, 42] mitigate reputational and legal risks and improve employee satisfaction and reduce turnover [43, 44] ultimately leading to overall improvements in business performance.[45, 46] While federal government agencies, boards and commissions are subject to legislative requirements, other levels of government and public institutions have uneven requirements. The nonprofit sector, while assumed to embrace EDI, is subject to limited regulation, although there are proposals for extending legislation to cover charities.
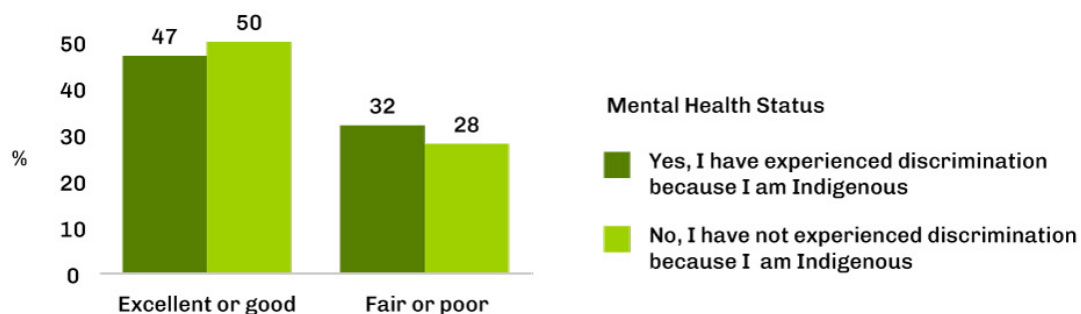
Mental health

The Survey of Employment and Skills also asks respondents about their current mental health. To investigate the potential relationship between mental health status and experiences of workplace discrimination, we cross-referenced the frequency of reports of workplace discrimination for different demographic groups with mental health status. This analysis includes only a subsample of survey respondents who are currently in the labour market.

For some groups and some types of discrimination, reports of experiencing workplace discrimination are not linked to mental health outcomes. For example, we don't see a strong relationship between experiences of discrimination and mental health for persons with disabilities or Indigenous Peoples; persons with disabilities and Indigenous Peoples who report who report experiencing discrimination in the workplace are not significantly more likely to say their mental health is fair or poor (persons with disabilities: 42%, Indigenous: 32%) than those who do not report having this experience (persons with disabilities: 46%, Indigenous: 28%) (see Figures 14 and 15). Additionally, there is only a slight relationship between experiences of workplace discrimination and mental health for younger age groups (aged 18-34). Survey respondents in this age group who report experiencing workplace discrimination are only slightly more likely to say their mental health is fair or poor (41%), than those who do not report experiencing this (36%).

FIGURE 14.

Proportion of Indigenous respondents with good or poor mental health status by experiences of workplace discrimination based on Indigenous identity

This bar graph shows that the proportion of Indigenous Peoples who report experiencing discrimination and fair or poor mental health is only slightly higher than the proportion of Indigenous Peoples who do not report experiencing workplace discrimination and have fair or poor mental health.

FIGURE 15.

Proportion of respondents with disabilities with good or poor mental health status by experiences of workplace discrimination based on disability status

This bar graph shows that the proportion of persons with disabilities (PwD) who report experiencing discrimination in the workplace and fair or poor mental health is slightly lower than the proportion of those who have not experienced workplace discrimination and report fair or poor mental health.
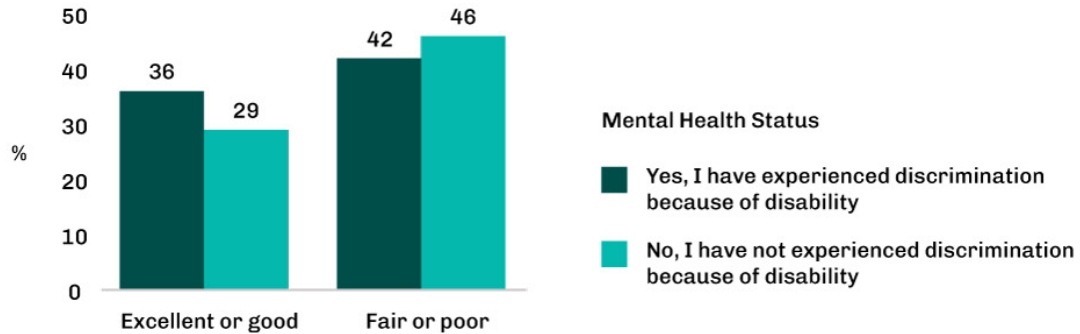

When we compare mental health status between those who have and have not experienced workplace discrimination, we see a clear trend for some groups. For women (and younger women especially) and individuals who identify as South Asian or Black, those who report experiences with workplace discrimination are more likely to report fair or poor mental health than those who have not. For example, 45% of women who say they have experienced workplace discrimination also report fair or poor mental health compared to only 34% who say they have not had this experience (see Figure 16). For racial discrimination in the workplace, 38% of South Asian individuals and 31% of Black individuals who report experiencing workplace discrimination also report fair or poor mental health. This is compared to only 23% and 24% of South Asian and Black individuals do not report experiences with workplace discrimination and have fair or poor mental health (see Figures 17 and 18). On the other hand, for these groups there is only a slight difference in the prevalence of excellent or good mental health for those who report and do not report experiencing workplace; women, South Asian and Black individuals who do not report experiencing workplace discrimination are slightly more likely to report excellent or good mental health compared to those who have experienced workplace discrimination. For women, only a quarter (25%) of those who have experienced gender-based workplace discrimination report excellent or good mental health, while a third (33%) have not had this experience (see Figure 16). Similarly, 39% of South Asian individuals and 44% of Black individuals who have experienced race-based workplace discrimination report excellent or good mental health, while only slightly more (44% and 47%) who report not having the same experiences report having excellent or food mental health (see Figures 17 and 18).

FIGURE 16.

Proportion of women with good or poor mental health status by experiences of workplace discrimination based on their gender identity
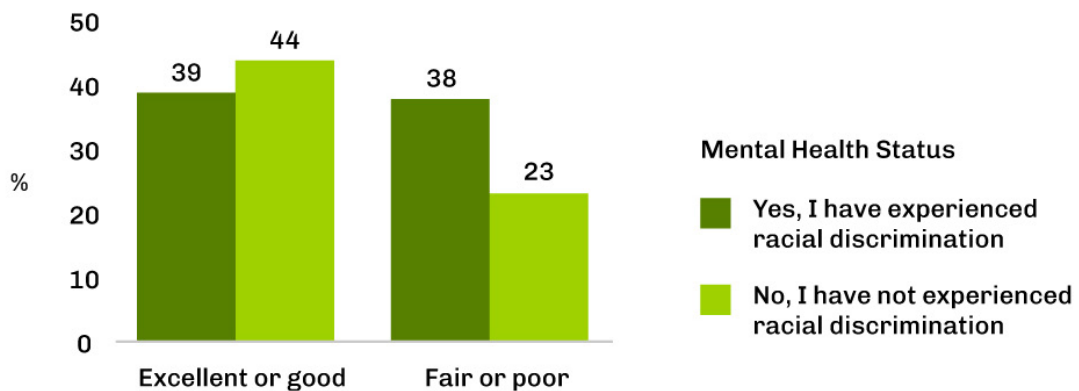
This bar graph shows that women who report experiences with workplace discrimination are more likely to report fair or poor mental health than those who have not.
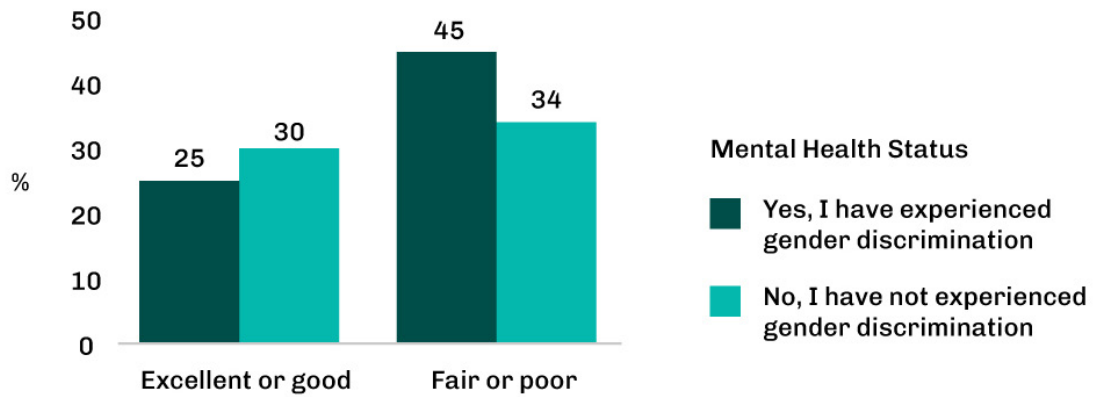
FIGURE 17.

Proportion of South Asian respondents with good or poor mental health status by experiences of workplace discrimination based on their racial/ethnic identity

This bar graph shows that the proportion of South Asian individuals who report experiencing workplace discrimination and report fair or poor mental health is higher than South Asian individuals who do not report experiences with workplace discrimination and have fair or poor mental health.

FIGURE 18.

Proportion of Black respondents with good or poor mental health by experiences of workplace discrimination based on their racial/ethnic identity

This bar graph shows that the proportion of Black individuals who report experiencing workplace discrimination and report fair or poor mental health is higher than Black individuals who do not report experiences with workplace discrimination and have fair or poor mental health.
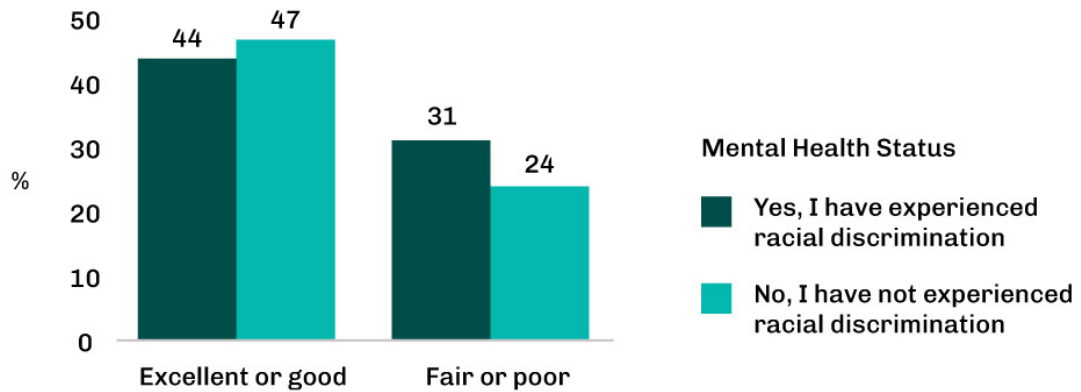

Further, we see this trend with those who identify as gay or lesbian as well, where those who have experienced workplace discrimination are more likely to report fair or poor mental health (43%) than those who have not had experiences with workplace discrimination (32%) (see Figure 19).

FIGURE 19.

Proportion of lesbian or gay respondents with good or poor mental health by experiences of workplace discrimination based on their sexual orientation

This bar graph shows that gay or lesbian who have experienced workplace discrimination are more likely to report fair or poor mental health than those who have not had experiences with workplace discrimination.
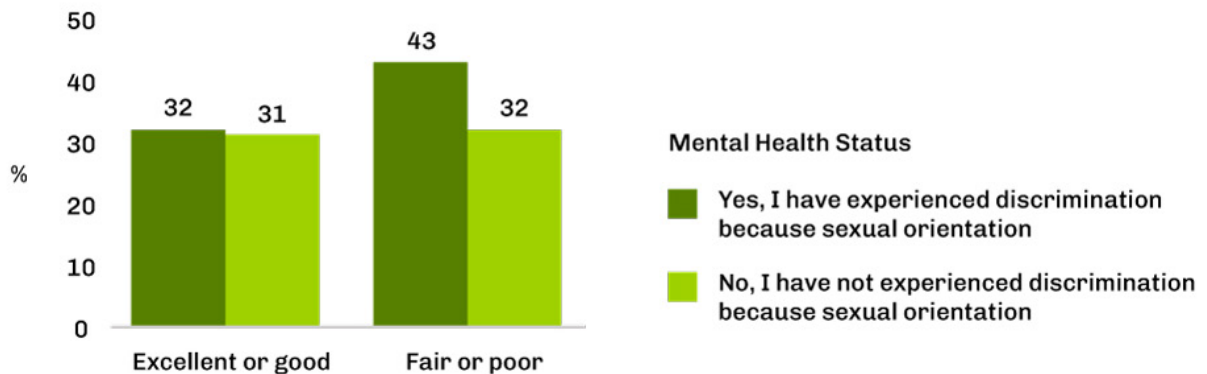
Conclusions and Implications

The results of this analysis show that workplace discrimination is more prevalent for different groups, and for different types of discrimination. We also show the importance of intersectionality, with results often showing that intersecting identities compound on one another when it comes to experiences of workplace discrimination. Further, our results suggest a link between poor mental health and experiences of workplace discrimination for some groups, which highlights the importance of addressing this issue. Our study underscores the importance of taking a multi-level approach to discrimination. There are no simple solutions to the complex and pervasive issue of discrimination in the workplace. It requires a comprehensive, multilayered strategy that acknowledges its intricate nature and the need for a thorough approach.

Societal level

Strong legislation is the foundation for preventing workplace discrimination and must be supported with strong implementation and enforcement. In Canada, various pieces of legislation are in place to do this. The Canadian Human Rights Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, family status, disability and conviction for which a pardon has been granted.[47] Publicly regulated companies are required to provide a work environment free from harassment and discrimination and to take proactive steps to prevent such behaviours. This is enforced by the Canadian Human Rights Commission, which investigates complaints of discrimination and harassment and works to resolve issues through mediation or legal action, if necessary.[48] Other important tools include the Employment Equity Act[49] and the Canada Labour Code.[50] Additionally, the Accessible Canada Act (ACA) is a federal law enacted to create a barrier-free Canada by identifying, removing and preventing barriers to accessibility. The ACA came into force in 2019, and aims to make Canada fully accessible by 2040.[51] The Act is significant in its scope and objectives, as it targets a wide range of barriers that individuals with disabilities may face in their daily lives.

However, some legislation - for example the Canadian Human Rights Act, the Employment Equity Act, the Canada Labour Code and the Accessible Canada Act apply only to federally regulated corporations and the application is uneven. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms and a range of provincial acts and statutes set out the rights and duties of employers but enforcement is uneven and complaint processes are often long and expensive for complainants. Stronger measures are needed to ensure transparency and impact.

National strategies to improve EDI overall in the country can also indirectly have an impact on experiences of workplace discrimination. For example, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action.[52] Strategies like this set the tone for all institutions within society. There are also a plethora of government policies and programs that can advance or impede opportunities for members of equity-deserving groups. Their application by employers is uneven. More robust measures are needed to ensure transparency and impact. Systems and structures are to be examined critically for their impact on disadvantaged groups. We also need to continue to combat discrimination in all its forms.

Another key aspect of preventing workplace discrimination is bringing awareness to it. This is where the media can play an important role. Larger cases of workplace discrimination and research on it have made it into the news in recent years. We must name the problem and collect disaggregated data to understand the impact of systemic discrimination on individuals from equity-deserving groups across sectors—education, employment, health, the justice system and more. These stories may also help to empower those who have had similar experiences to come forward. In addition, we are more often seeing discrimination manifesting itself through the media, and as such, we also need to combat discrimination in all its forms, including in the media, online and in the public sphere. These types of discrimination can have a profound impact on prejudice and stereotypes. We must also recognize that in the current environment, social media and the online propagation of hate messages can amplify discrimination.

Organizational level

Organizations are not isolated entities but are deeply influenced by broader societal forces and are shaped by broader technological, socio economic and political forces, by legislation and policy and by deeply rooted bias and stereotypes that shape our assumptions about Indigenous Peoples, racialized people, persons with disabilities, women and those who identify as 2SLGBTQ+. These biases are often invisible but become embedded in organizational policies, practices and culture. Treating everyone "the same" may "frequently produce serious inequality." Employers need to have clear and formal commitments to preventing discrimination in all its forms and to ensure they have strong and effective equity, diversity and inclusion strategies that are well understood and implemented.

To achieve successful workplace inclusion, a top-down approach with strong leadership commitment is essential.[53] The "tone from the top" significantly influences the sense of belonging within an organization and signals that discrimination will not be tolerated. Leaders set the cultural tone, and well-defined organizational values, including mission statements, can be used to broadly influence organizational practices. Building an inclusive culture is complex but requires ensuring there are clear and well understood anti-discrimination and harassment policies coupled with appropriate mechanisms for tracking and responding effectively to complaints as well as proactive efforts to develop a workplace where all are valued and included. This can be achieved through a dedicated EDI lead, such as a chief diversity officer, or a well-resourced committee with direct access to decision-makers.

Human resources policies and practices need to be reviewed with an eye to eliminating bias. Ensuring jobs are not designed with mandatory qualifications, for example a university degree in a particular discipline that are not aligned to competencies required to do the job for example will often exclude members of groups unlikely to have those qualifications. Examining recruitment strategies, selection processes, who participates in the selection, training for those involved are among the measures needed to reduce bias in hiring practices. Open and transparent processes for promotion coupled with supports, mentoring and sponsorship as well as professional development are also key. Even termination and separation processes also need to incorporate an EDI lens. Conducting interviews with departing employees can offer valuable insights into discriminatory practices and help employers identify areas for improvement.[54, 55]

Building an inclusive strategy and norms of anti-discrimination is often challenging. Ensuring that policies are in place, implemented and enforcement is key. Workers should have an easy and straightforward process for reporting workplace harassment and discrimination. Additionally, maintaining confidentiality throughout the reporting and investigation process is essential. Ensuring that reports are handled discreetly, and information is shared only on a need-to-know basis fosters trust and encourages more employees to come forward. Organizational culture is shaped and reflected by its policies. It is important for employers to have codes of conduct, workplace harassment policies and accessibility guidelines in place to standardize expectations and provide behavioural guidance that help organizations go beyond the minimum legislated requirements. Fostering an inclusive culture involves supporting work-life balance through benefits such as strong parental leave policies, that are inclusive of 2SLGBTQ+ parents, and flexible working arrangements. Clear policies formalize these benefits and guarantee their availability and consistent application.[56] Mental health support and benefits reinforce the organization's commitment to inclusion, non-discrimination and a healthy work culture. National policies with clear guidelines and enforcement mechanisms can act as a springboard for even more progressive workplace practices.[57] Employee resource groups (ERGs) may provide support for individuals from equity-deserving groups but the research on their impact is uneven depending on resources, access to decision-makers and their ability to drive change in organizational policies and processes.[58, 59, 60] To maximize their effectiveness, ERGs must be integrated into a larger strategy.

Benchmarking, which involves comparing your organization's performance against industry standards or best practices, is critical, and organizations need to track the composition of their workforce and leadership, as well as application, selection and promotion processes to ensure they are equitable and inclusive. In other words, "what gets measured gets done." Moreover, data can give an indication of the existence of discrimination. Collecting anonymous self-identification data helps understand representation across equity-deserving groups. Tracking representation at all organizational levels—from executive to entry-level—identifies gaps where diversity drops off and can provide valuable insights into where barriers and discrimination are most prevalent. Incorporating diversity and inclusion into key performance indicators (KPIs) and assigning clear managerial responsibilities for EDI goals enhances accountability and fosters closer collaboration between managers and employees. Employee engagement surveys, which include EDI data, help employers understand employee experiences and collect recommendations for change.[61, 62] Further, tracking complaints and separations from the company also offer important signs regarding what is working and what is not. Equal pay auditing assessments and gender wage reporting promote pay transparency, identify where wage gaps are most prevalent, and provide guidance for pay equity action plans.

Organizations do not exist in a vacuum and while the focus here is on discrimination in the workplace it is important to flag that organization can have a profound impact on society more broadly through the design, development, marketing and support for their products and services. Meeting the needs of diverse customers with targeted products and services and ensuring inclusive design principles are embedded is key. In addition, decisions they make about procurement, partnerships, philanthropy and corporate social responsibility can shape the behaviour of other organizations.

Individual level

The foundation of combatting discrimination is shaping individuals' knowledge, attitudes and behaviour but this is often easier said than done as employers are only part of the solution. Many organizations implement EDI training for employees, managers and hiring teams, but its effectiveness varies.[63] Research on unconscious bias training shows it raises awareness but often fails to result in long-term behavioural change.[64] Conversely, a meta-analysis of over 40 years of diversity training research indicates that longer-term training can lead to more positive outcomes.[65] Equity, diversity and inclusion training can be effective if properly implemented, meaning it should be ongoing, integrated into the organizational culture and supported by continuous reinforcement and accountability measures. It also needs to be reinforced more broadly across institutions and society at large. All employees need to understand their rights and their responsibilities and this is particularly true of leaders and decision makers. At the end of the day, organizations consist of individuals and while education alone has limited impact on shaping behaviour, ensuring all employees and decision makers have mandatory training on EDI, bias and privilege as well as Canada's history of discrimination and the ways it impacts systems, organizations and individuals is key.

Final thoughts

Overall, the results of this analysis are consistent with other research and show that many women, racialized people, Indigenous Peoples, those who identity as gay or lesbian, those with disabilities that often or always limit their daily functioning, and those between the ages of 18 and 34 report experiencing discrimination in the workplace based. Intersectionality is also important, as we see that those with multiple identities are especially likely to experience discrimination in the workplace; often, individuals with intersecting identities have layered experiences with workplace discrimination. Mental health is also important to consider. We found that there is a relationship between mental health and experiences of workplace discrimination for some groups. Though the results here cannot speak to a causal relationship (i.e., if experiencing discrimination in the workplace influences mental health status), they do signal an important potential implication and a need for future research. Finally, to prevent and eliminate workplace discrimination, multilayered solutions that address the issue at the societal, organization and individual levels are needed.

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