

LEAN IN

# The State of Black Women in Corporate America



## About the report

*[The State of Black Women in Corporate America](#)* draws heavily on Lean In and McKinsey & Company's annual Women in the Workplace study. Since 2015, more than 590 companies employing more than 22 million people, along with a quarter of a million individual employees, have participated in Women in the Workplace. To our knowledge, this makes it the largest study on the state of women in corporate America, and the largest study on the experiences of women of color at work. Additional sources for this report include [Lean In's 50 Ways to Fight Bias](#) program, a collaboration with Stanford's VMware Women's Leadership Innovation Lab and Paradigm, and research conducted by Lean In in partnership with SurveyMonkey.

Unless otherwise noted, the images in this report are from the Lean In Collection on Getty Images, a library of more than 6,000 photographs of empowered women and girls.

## INTRODUCTION

# The workplace is worse for Black women

In all of Lean In's research on the state of women at work, we see the same general pattern: Women are having a worse experience than men. Women of color are having a worse experience than white women. And Black women in particular are having the worst experience of all.

This report offers a detailed look at the barriers holding Black women back at work. It also outlines specific steps companies should take to make sure Black women are treated fairly and given equal opportunities to learn, grow, and lead.

**PART 1**

# **What Black women are up against**

## SECTION 1

**Black women are significantly underrepresented in leadership roles**

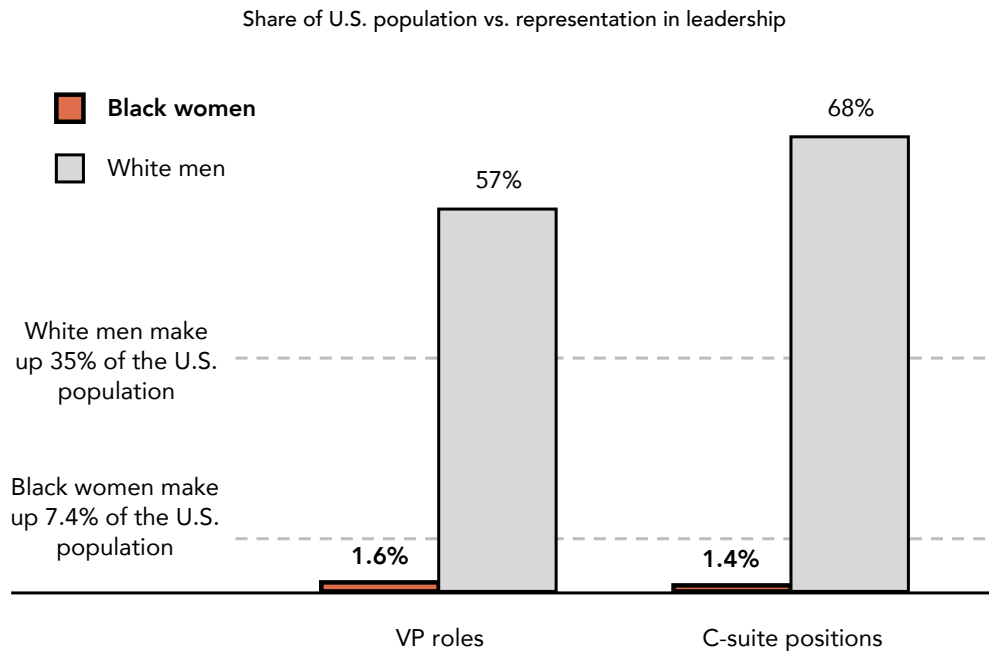
# Black women are much less likely to be promoted to manager—and their representation dwindles from there

Black women are underrepresented in the workplace for many reasons. One big factor is a “broken rung” at the first critical step up to manager. For every 100 men promoted to manager, only 58 Black women are promoted, despite the fact that Black women ask for promotions at the same rate as men.<sup>1</sup> And for every 100 men hired into manager roles, only 64 Black women are hired.<sup>2</sup> That means there are fewer Black women to promote at every subsequent level, and the representation gap keeps getting wider.

## DID YOU KNOW?

49% of Black women feel that their race or ethnicity will make it harder for them to get a raise, promotion, or chance to get ahead, compared to just 3% of white women and 11% of women overall.<sup>4</sup>

### Black women are severely underrepresented in senior leadership<sup>3</sup>



FROM 50 WAYS TO FIGHT BIAS

## Black women's successes are often discounted

When a Black woman succeeds, people often attribute her accomplishments to factors outside her control—such as affirmative action, help from others, or random chance. For example, colleagues might say things like “She only got the promotion because she’s Black” or “She was lucky to close that sale.”<sup>6</sup> This reinforces a damaging stereotype that portrays Black women as less talented and competent than their peers. When these comments go unchallenged, they can prevent Black women from receiving the credit they deserve for their hard work and achievements.<sup>7</sup>



**“I don't feel I have the same opportunities to advance as others. If you look like the people making the decisions, it's easier to advance. And I don't look like any of the people making decisions here.”<sup>5</sup>**

VICE PRESIDENT

## SECTION 2

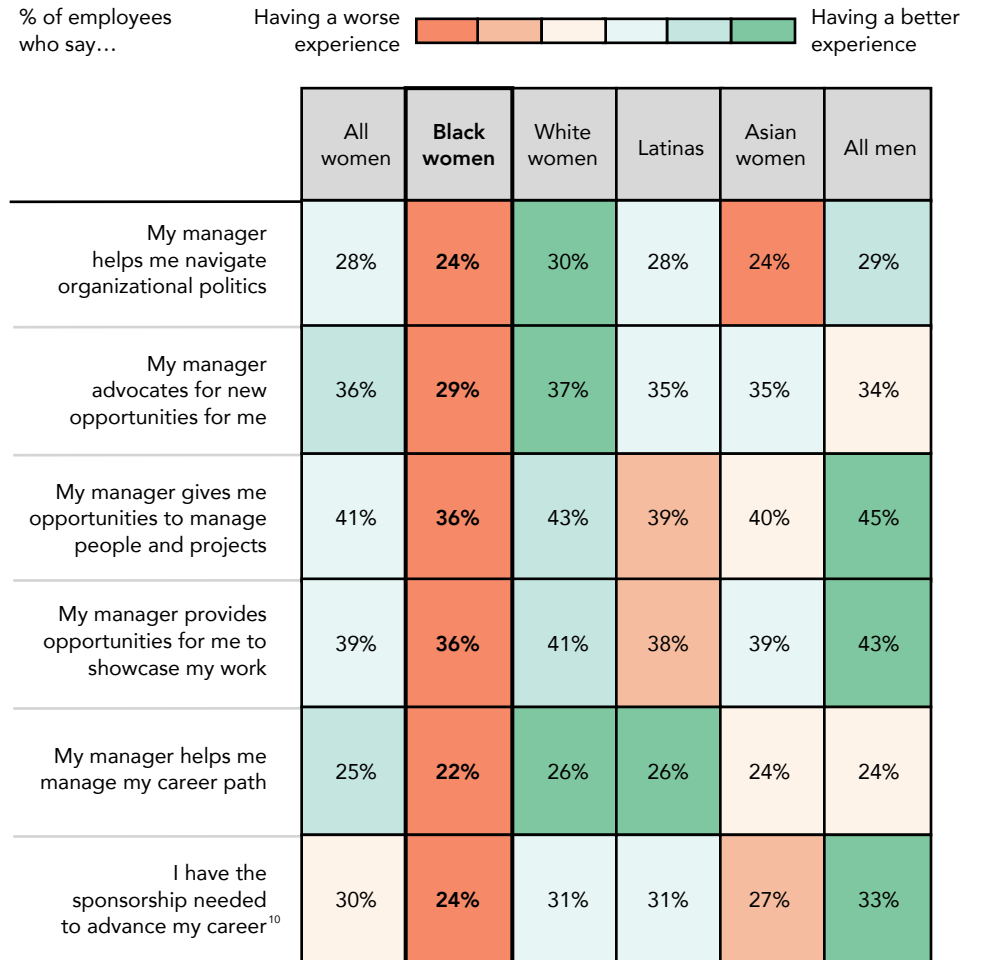
**Black women are less likely to  
get the support and access they  
need to advance**



# Black women receive less support from their managers

Women of color, and Black women in particular, tend to receive less support and encouragement from their managers. Compared to white women, Black women are less likely to have managers showcase their work, advocate for new opportunities for them, or give them opportunities to manage people and projects. Black women are also less likely to report that their manager helps them navigate organizational politics or balance work and personal life.<sup>8</sup> This matters—employees who have consistent manager support are more likely to be promoted, and they’re also more likely to believe that they have an equal opportunity to advance.<sup>8</sup>

## Managers are less likely to advocate for Black women<sup>9</sup>



**“I would like a manager who respects and values my opinions, especially in my realm of expertise. I’d love to be asked, ‘What are your thoughts?’ Or, ‘We’re having this meeting. Can I pull you in on this?’ But that doesn’t happen.”<sup>11</sup>**

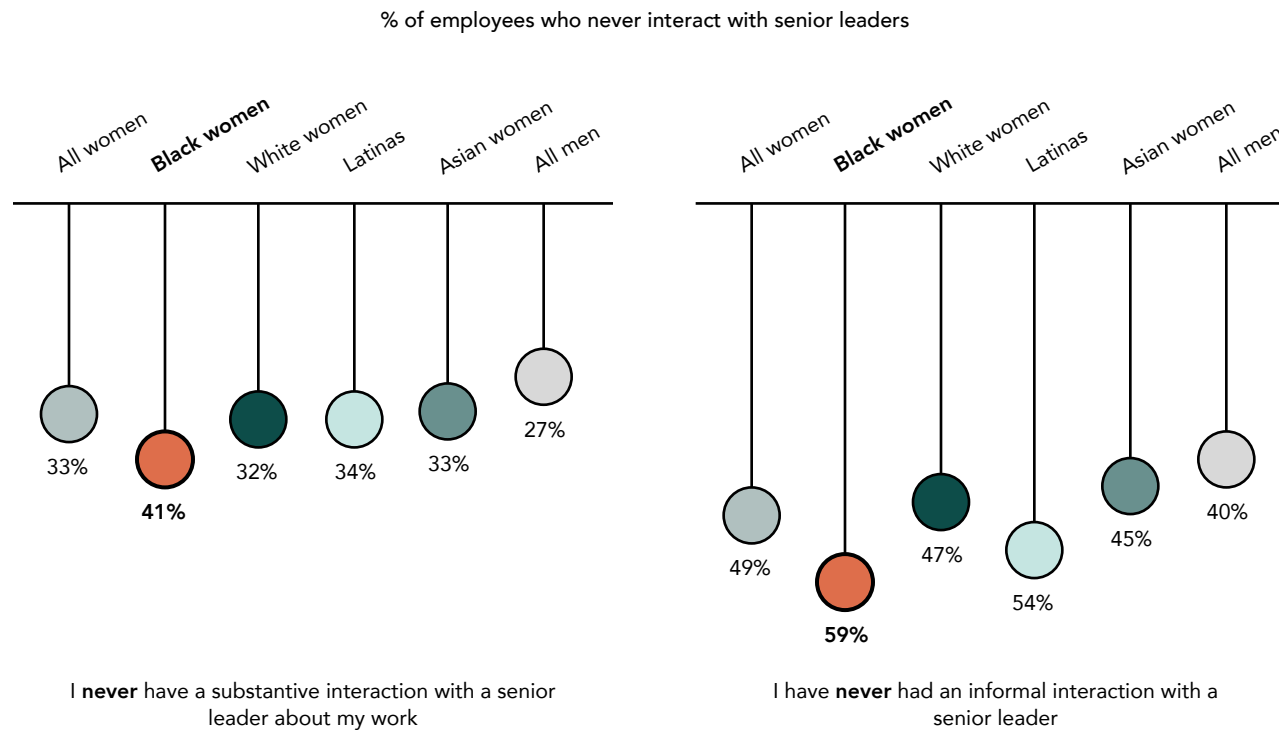
**ANALYST, 2 YEARS AT COMPANY**



# Black women are less likely to interact with senior leaders

Black women are much less likely than their non-Black colleagues to interact with senior leaders at work.<sup>12</sup> This lack of access is mirrored in a lack of sponsorship: less than a quarter of Black women feel they have the sponsorship they need to advance their career.<sup>13</sup> It also means Black women are less likely to be included in important conversations about company priorities and strategy, and they have fewer opportunities to get noticed by people in leadership.

## Many Black women have never had an interaction with a senior leader<sup>16</sup>



**DID YOU KNOW?**

In a survey of U.S. law firm employees, 62% of women of color with some level of mentorship said the lack of an influential mentor was a barrier to their advancement; only 30% of white men said the same.<sup>14</sup>



**“At a meeting with the COO, a young woman asked him, ‘How do you get to where you’re at?’ He replied, ‘It’s all who you know.’ Hearing that, I felt defeated. If that’s true, how am I going to get there? I want to be there. I think I deserve to be there. But I don’t have those connections.”<sup>15</sup>**

**ENTRY LEVEL EMPLOYEE, 5 YEARS AT COMPANY**

## SECTION 3


# **Black women face more day-to-day discrimination at work**

# Black women experience a wider range of microaggressions

Microaggressions—comments and actions that subtly demean or dismiss someone based on their gender, race, or other aspects of their identity—are a common experience for women at work. And since Black women face both racism and sexism, they experience a wider range of microaggressions than women overall. They are more likely to have their judgment questioned in their area of expertise and to be asked to provide additional evidence of their competence. They are also nearly two and a half times more likely than white women—and more than three times more likely than men—to hear someone in their workplace express surprise about their language skills or other abilities.<sup>17</sup>

Microaggressions may seem insignificant when viewed as isolated incidents. But when they occur day after day—as they often do—their impact builds up and takes a toll. Whether intentional or unintentional, these insults and invalidations signal disrespect. It’s hard for any employee to bring their best self to work when they’re often underestimated and slighted. Women who experience microaggressions are three times more likely to regularly think about leaving their job than those who don’t.<sup>18</sup>

## A closer look at how microaggressions affect Black women<sup>21</sup>

% of employees who say... Having a worse experience  Having a better experience

|  | All women | <b>Black women</b> | White women | Latinas | Asian women | All men |
|--|-----------|--------------------|-------------|---------|-------------|---------|
|--|-----------|--------------------|-------------|---------|-------------|---------|

### Having competence questioned

|   |     |            |     |     |     |     |
|---|-----|------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Needing to provide more evidence of your competence       | 30% | <b>40%</b> | 28% | 28% | 30% | 14% |
| Having your judgment questioned in your area of expertise | 38% | <b>41%</b> | 39% | 31% | 30% | 29% |

### Being disrespected

|  |     |            |     |     |     |     |
|--|-----|------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Being mistaken for someone at a much lower level                     | 18% | <b>20%</b> | 17% | 16% | 18% | 9%  |
| Hearing demeaning remarks about you or people like you               | 16% | <b>18%</b> | 15% | 16% | 12% | 11% |
| Hearing others’ surprise at your language skills or other abilities  | 14% | <b>26%</b> | 11% | 18% | 16% | 8%  |
| Feeling like you can’t talk about yourself or your life outside work | 10% | <b>12%</b> | 10% | 9%  | 8%  | 7%  |





#### DID YOU KNOW?

More than 1 in 4 Black women have heard someone in their workplace express surprise at their language skills or other abilities; just 1 in 10 white women have had this experience.

FROM 50 WAYS TO FIGHT BIAS

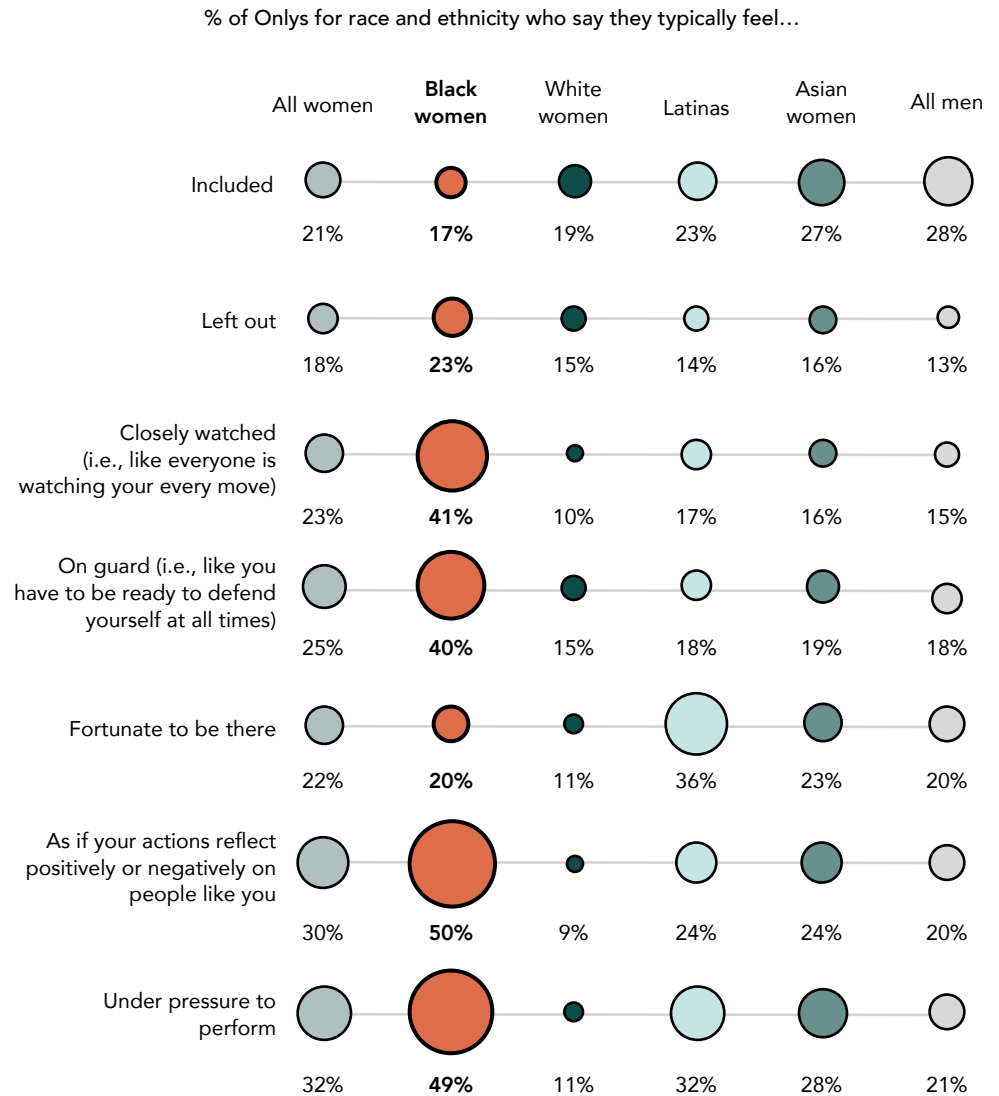
### Debunking the myth of the “angry Black woman”

Black women are no more likely to express anger than any other group of Americans,<sup>19</sup> but despite this reality, they are often on the receiving end of racist comments that they are “angry.” Fixating on a Black woman’s tone is a form of bias that’s rooted in sexism and racism, and it can cause real harm—in one study, Black women who were perceived as angry tended to receive lower performance evaluations and lower recommended raises.<sup>20</sup>

# The “Only” experience is far too common for Black women

Fifty-four percent of Black women say they are often “Onlys,” in that they are the only Black person or one of the only Black people in the room at work.<sup>22</sup> Black women who are Onlys are having an especially difficult experience. They are very aware of the fact that they may be seen as representatives of their race, and they are more likely than Onlys of other racial and ethnic groups to feel as though their individual successes and failures will reflect on people like them. This leads to a sense that they are constantly under scrutiny: Black women who are Onlys often report feeling closely watched, on guard, and under increased pressure to perform.<sup>23</sup>

## Black women who are Onlys feel heavily scrutinized<sup>24</sup>





**“I feel like I have to represent the entire race. I need to come across as more than proficient, more than competent, more than capable. I have to be ‘on’ all the time. Because in the back of someone’s mind, they could be judging the entire race based on me.”<sup>25</sup>**

**MID-LEVEL ADMINISTRATOR,  
4 YEARS AT COMPANY**



**“I feel like expectations for me as a Black woman are much higher than those of my white counterparts. It feels like I am expected to go above and beyond while my colleagues at the same level just do what is described in our job descriptions.”**

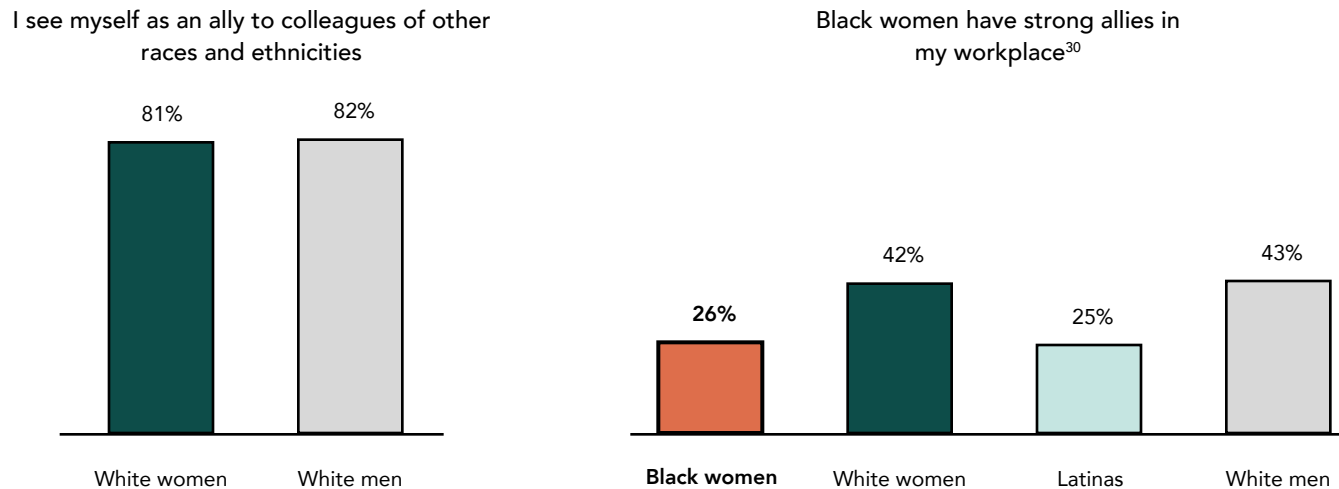
**SUPPORT STAFF, 12 YEARS AT COMPANY**  
Shared via the Women of Color in the Workplace Study<sup>26</sup>

# Many white employees aren't stepping up as allies to Black women

More than 80 percent of white women and men say they see themselves as allies to people of color at work. But less than half of Black women feel that they personally have strong allies at work—and barely a quarter think it's mostly accurate that Black women have strong allies in their workplace.<sup>27</sup>

White employees hold most of the power in corporate America. One of the most fundamental ways they can use that power is as allies, advocating for people of color. Challenging racism is a basic act of allyship—but even though most white employees believe they are allies, only 40 percent have ever spoken out against racism at work.<sup>28</sup>

## White employees see themselves as allies—but Black women disagree<sup>29</sup>



## SECTION 4

**Black women remain highly ambitious  
in spite of the obstacles they face**

# Black women want to lead—and they are motivated to improve their workplaces

Black women are substantially more likely than white women—and just as likely as white men—to say that they are interested in becoming top executives.<sup>31</sup> And among employees who want to be top executives, Black women are most likely to be motivated by a desire to positively influence company culture or to be role models for others like them.<sup>32</sup> They know how hard it can be for women of color to advance at work, and they want to help change that.

## DID YOU KNOW?

Among employees who want to be top executives, Black women are 50% more likely than men to say they are motivated by a desire to be role models for others like them.<sup>33</sup>

## Black women want to make a difference as leaders<sup>36</sup>

Among employees who want to be top executives, percent who say they are motivated by...



FROM 50 WAYS TO FIGHT BIAS

## Black women are unfairly penalized for being ambitious

Because we expect women to be kind and communal, women are often criticized as “overly ambitious” or “out for themselves” when they express a desire to lead.<sup>34</sup> For Black women, this ambition penalty can be compounded in some contexts by stereotypes that unfairly portray Black women as aggressive and angry.<sup>35</sup>



**PART 2**

# **What companies need to do**

## SECTION 5

# **Commit to making Black women's advancement a business priority**



## To support Black women, companies need to focus on the unique barriers they face

Many corporate diversity efforts focus on either gender or race. But very few focus on gender and race combined. That means Black women and other women of color, who face a uniquely challenging combination of sexism and racism, are often overlooked.

Companies need to commit to addressing the specific barriers that are holding Black women back. That starts with letting everyone know that the company will be prioritizing Black women's advancement, and explaining why: Not only is it the right and just thing to do, but it's also good for business—research shows diverse companies are more innovative and profitable.<sup>37</sup>

Companies should also set representation targets for Black women, track and share progress toward these goals, and reward success. Experts agree that clear goals, consistent measurement, and accountability are the building blocks for any organizational change.<sup>38</sup>





**When diversity initiatives treat gender and race as separate issues, women of color can get left out.<sup>40</sup>**



**“A lot of Black women think that many gender initiatives are really tailored toward white women. Are they targeting women of color too? It often doesn’t feel like it.”<sup>39</sup>**

SENIOR MANAGER

## Four concrete ways to prioritize Black women's advancement:

### ① Take both gender and race into account when setting representation targets.

Only 7 percent of companies set representation targets for gender and race combined, which means too many companies aren't setting specific goals around advancing Black women.<sup>41</sup> In addition to setting targets, companies should track hiring and promotion outcomes for women of color to make sure they're getting equal opportunities to advance. This is especially important at the first step up to manager—the "broken rung"—where many Black women are left behind.

### ② Look at metrics beyond just representation.

Mentorship, sponsorship, and professional development opportunities also have a big impact on Black women's advancement and experiences at work. If Black women aren't getting access to those things, figure out why, and take steps to make these programs more inclusive.

### ③ Share metrics.

Giving employees visibility into how the company is performing against diversity goals can help everyone understand why proactive efforts to advance Black women are so important. Sharing key metrics on a regular basis can also foster a valuable sense of organization-wide accountability. But right now, fewer than half of companies share at least some diversity metrics with their employees.

### ④ Reward progress.

Currently, fewer than 1 in 5 companies offer financial incentives for senior leaders who meet diversity targets. This is a signal that many companies aren't as committed as they could be; what gets rewarded is typically what gets done. Companies need to hold leaders and managers accountable for meeting diversity goals, which means incorporating those goals into management expectations and performance reviews.

FROM 50 WAYS TO FIGHT BIAS

## What is “intersectionality”?

Law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989 to describe how overlapping and intersecting identities evoke distinct forms of discrimination.<sup>42</sup> For example, Black women are discriminated against both because they are women and because they are Black. The combined effects of this double discrimination can be greater than the sum of its parts—imagine the compounded effect of being Black, Muslim, an immigrant, and a woman.<sup>43</sup>



## SECTION 6

# Address bias in hiring and promotions



## Reducing bias takes commitment

Hiring and promotions are the biggest levers for improving Black women's representation, which means companies need to do everything they can to remove bias from those decisions. That includes assembling diverse candidate slates, providing bias training for evaluators, and establishing clear and specific review criteria so reviewers are less likely to rely on their subjective feelings. It also includes taking active steps to ensure that Black women are in the promotion pipeline—for example, providing them with better access to leadership training, mentorship and sponsorship, and high-profile assignments.



# Five concrete ways to reduce bias in hiring and promotions:

## ① Require a diverse slate of final candidates for every position.

A diverse slate includes two or more candidates from any underrepresented group. Research shows that when only one woman or one Black person is included in a slate of finalists, there is statistically zero chance they will be hired—but when two such candidates are included, the chance that one of them will be hired rises dramatically.<sup>44</sup> This suggests that if you want to give a Black woman a fair chance of being hired, you need to include two or more Black women among your finalists for the role.

## ② Put evaluators through unconscious bias training.

Only 19 percent of companies require bias training for employees involved in hiring, and a mere 4 percent require training for employees involved in performance reviews.<sup>45</sup> To be effective, bias training needs to teach employees to counteract both gender and racial bias in specific scenarios. If this type of training only teaches employees that bias exists, without giving them the tools to take action, it is likely to be ineffective or even counterproductive.<sup>46</sup>

## ③ Use clear, consistent review criteria.

Evaluation tools should be designed to gather objective input, and they need to be put in place before the hiring or review process begins to make sure they're applied consistently to all candidates. Using a quantitative rating system—such as a five-point scale—has been shown to reduce bias, as compared to relying on open-ended questions. Evaluators should also be prompted to support their ratings with explanations and specific examples.<sup>47</sup>

## ④ Anonymize résumés and assignments.

Companies should anonymize résumés and skills assignments as much as possible, especially in the early stages of the hiring process. Research shows that anonymous evaluations reduce bias in decision-making and improve outcomes for women and people of color.<sup>48</sup>

### DID YOU KNOW?

In one study, replacing a stereotypically Black-sounding name with a stereotypically white-sounding name on a candidate's résumé resulted in 50 percent more callbacks—the equivalent of adding eight years of work experience.<sup>49</sup>

## ⑤ Appoint a criteria monitor.

Have an HR team member or an employee from a different department sit in on hiring and promotion conversations to make sure evaluators remain focused on the criteria for the role. Research shows that when a specific person monitors for this, evaluators are less likely to base their recommendations on subjective factors, such as a candidate's "culture fit" or personality.<sup>50</sup>

## SECTION 7

# Create an inclusive workplace

## **Employers need to show Black women that they are welcome, respected, and valued**

An inclusive workplace is one in which Black women, and all other employees with marginalized identities, feel a true sense of belonging. This starts with ensuring that every employee feels safe. Companies need to make it clear that disrespectful behavior won't be tolerated, and employees need to feel empowered to speak up when they witness sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination. But simply policing bad behavior isn't enough. It's also critical that companies take proactive steps to make Black women feel welcome and valued.





## Four concrete ways to create a more inclusive workplace:

### ① **Develop clear and specific conduct guidelines.**

Develop guidelines to explain exactly what an inclusive culture looks like and what constitutes unacceptable behavior. To be treated seriously, these guidelines must be supported by a clear reporting process and swift consequences. Companies should also hold periodic refreshers to drive the guidelines home and make sure all employees understand them.<sup>51</sup>

### ② **Provide comprehensive allyship and antiracism training.**

In addition to teaching employees to recognize sexism and racism, this training should address the importance of understanding one's own privilege and taking proactive steps to eliminate bias and be antiracist. It should also emphasize tangible ways that employees can practice allyship, such as speaking out against discrimination and advocating for opportunities for Black women colleagues.

### ③ **Make the “Only” experience less common for Black women.**

Consider hiring and promoting Black women in cohorts or clustering Black women together on project teams.<sup>52</sup> Creating employee resource groups specifically for Black women can also help them feel more supported and less alone.

### ④ **Take a closer look at company and team norms.**

Step back and consider how day-to-day customs might disadvantage Black women. For example—are work events held in spaces that are welcoming and inclusive? Are Black women getting invited to spontaneous informal gatherings? Ensure that Black women have a voice in shaping company norms, and make it as easy as possible for them to speak up if it's difficult or uncomfortable for them to participate.

FROM 50 WAYS TO FIGHT BIAS

## Supporting Black women and men when violence against Black people is in the news

For a workplace to feel inclusive, it's critical that all employees demonstrate awareness of events—such as police brutality—that disproportionately impact the Black community. Here are some ways companies can support Black employees when these events are in the news:

- Make sure Black employees have space to process their understandable rage and grief. Remind non-Black colleagues that everyone responds to acts of violence differently—their Black colleagues may be grieving, upset, or distracted, and they may or may not want to talk about what happened. All of those reactions need to be respected.<sup>53</sup>
- Managers should ask Black team members what they need to feel supported. Some Black employees may appreciate the option to reschedule meetings, move deadlines, or take time off—but others may prefer to stay occupied with work. Make sure Black employees have the agency to choose what feels best to them.
- Senior leaders should consider sending a company-wide email that links to unbiased information about what happened, reminds Black employees of support resources available to them, and suggests actions—such as donating to antiracist organizations—that colleagues can take to show support.<sup>54</sup>

**“Recently, a lot of Black men have been shot by the police. This is a huge thing in the Black community. Black lives matter. But when I come into work, who do I talk to about that? I don't think I've heard anybody talk about it at work. Nothing. To some degree, you feel like you have to put yourself to one side. And that is clearly not inclusion. Inclusion is when your work environment is so safe that you feel like you can bring 100 percent of yourself to work every day.”<sup>55</sup>**

**MID-LEVEL ADMINISTRATOR,  
4 YEARS AT COMPANY**



# Conclusion

For years, Lean In has urged employers to make their workplaces equal for women. The only way to do this is to center on the women who are most marginalized. If employers want to do better by women, they must do better by Black women.

# Endnotes

1. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2019* (October 2019), <https://womenintheworkplace.com/>.
2. Ibid.
3. Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (2018), <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/>; LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2019*, unpublished data. Percentage of Black women in U.S. population includes women of more than one race.
4. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2019*, unpublished data.
5. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2019*.
6. LeanIn.Org, "Situation 11," 50 Ways to Fight Bias, <https://leanin.org/gender-bias-cards/grid/card/set-4/14>; Miriam G. Resendez, "The Stigmatizing Effects of Affirmative Action: An Examination of Moderating Variables," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 32, no. 1 (2002): 185–206.
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8. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2019*; LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2018* (October 2018), <https://womenintheworkplace.com/2018>.
9. Data source: LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2019*. Unless otherwise specified, employees indicated that managers perform each manager support and sponsorship action "a great deal." The full scale was: A great deal, Somewhat, Not at all.
10. Full question: At this company, I have the sponsorship I need to advance my career (Agree/Disagree).
11. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2018*.
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15. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2018*.
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17. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2019*.
18. Ibid.
19. Tsedale M. Melaku, *You Don't Look Like a Lawyer: Black Women and Systemic Gendered Racism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019), Kindle edition; J. Celeste Walley-Jean, "Debunking the Myth of the 'Angry Black Woman': An Exploration of Anger in Young African American Women," *Black Women, Gender + Families* 3, no. 2 (2009): 68–86, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/blacwomegendfami.3.2.0068#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/blacwomegendfami.3.2.0068#metadata_info_tab_contents).
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21. Data source: LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2019*.
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23. Ibid., unpublished data.
24. Data source: Ibid., unpublished data. These findings are among survey respondents who answered "Often" or "Almost always" to the question "How often are you the only, or one of the only people in the room of your race/ethnicity?"
25. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2018*.
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29. Data source: Ibid.
30. Defined as respondents who said that it is mostly or extremely accurate that Black women have strong allies in their workplace.
31. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2019*, unpublished data.
32. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2018*.
33. Ibid.

34. Madeline E. Heilman and Tyler G. Okimoto, "Why Are Women Penalized for Success at Male Tasks? The Implied Communitarian Deficit," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 92, no. 1 (2007): 81–92; Madeline E. Heilman et al., "Penalties for Success: Reactions to Women Who Succeed at Male Gender-Typed Tasks," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 89, no. 3 (2004): 416–27.
35. Tsedale M. Melaku, *You Don't Look Like a Lawyer*; Robert Livingston, Ashleigh Rosette, and Ella Washington, "Can an Agentic Black Woman Get Ahead? The Impact of Race and Interpersonal Dominance on Perceptions of Female Leaders," *Psychological Science*, Mar 14, 2012, doi: 10.1177/0959; Ashleigh Rosette and Robert Livingston, "Failure Is Not an Option for Black Women: Effects of Organizational Performance on Leaders with Single Versus Dual-Subordinate Identities," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48, no. 5 (2012): 1162–67.
36. Data source: LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2018*, unpublished data.
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38. Alexandra Kalev, Erin Kelly, and Frank Dobbin, "Best Practices or Best Guesses? Assessing the Efficacy of Corporate Affirmative Action and Diversity Policies," *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 4 (August 2006): 589–617; Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, "Why Firms Need Diversity Managers and Task Forces," in M. Pilati, H. Sheikh, C. Tilly, and F. Sperotti, eds., *How Global Migration Changes the Workforce Diversity Equation* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 170–98.
39. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2019*.
40. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2017* (October 2017), <https://womenintheworkplace.com/2017>. Artwork by Kim Warp.
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