

DiversityLeads

**Barriers and Enablers to Advancement
for Equity-Deserving Groups**



Partners



The Diversity Institute conducts and coordinates multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder research to address the needs of diverse Canadians, the changing nature of skills and competencies, and the policies, processes and tools that advance economic inclusion and success. Our action-oriented, evidence-based approach is advancing knowledge of the complex barriers faced by underrepresented groups, leading practices to effect change and producing concrete results. The Diversity Institute is a research lead for the Future Skills Centre.



The Future Skills Centre (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development so that everyone in Canada can be prepared for the future of work. We partner with policy makers, researchers, practitioners, employers and labour, and post-secondary institutions to solve pressing labour market challenges and ensure that everyone can benefit from relevant lifelong learning opportunities. We are founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada, and are funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Organizations with diverse leadership and strong equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policies outperform less diverse peers. They are more likely to benefit from varied perspectives, enabling them to stay competitive, connect with diverse customers and improve employee satisfaction. Such organizations are better positioned to attract top talent, reduce turnover, mitigate legal and reputational risks, drive profitability and increase firm value. Despite this evidence of diversity's wide-ranging benefits, multiple barriers to the advancement of equity-deserving groups still exist.

This summary report aims to synthesize and investigate key findings from comprehensive studies on leadership representation. It presents an analysis of the current state of leadership representation across equity-deserving groups and identifies barriers uncovered by various research approaches. This report is the result of the Future Skills Centre DiversityLeads program of research, undertaken with a group of researchers, industry and community partners, that aims to:

- > Build a network of organizations committed to advancing diversity in senior roles and on boards in the private sector, as well as aggregate resources in support of industry codes of conduct and government initiatives such as the 50 – 30 Challenge
- > Build on previous research to provide an updated perspective on the representation of women, racialized people, Black people, Indigenous Peoples, those with disabilities and those identifying as 2SLGBTQ+ in leadership roles drawing on secondary sources, data collection as well as interviews
- > Identify barriers and enablers to advancement
- > Identify strategies and best practices to advance career pathing and senior leadership skills among women, as well as racialized people, Black people, Indigenous Peoples, those with disabilities and those who identify as 2SLGBTQ+
- > Develop capacity in organizations to better recruit and advance women and diverse leaders through a set of assessments, tools (including the Diversity Assessment Tool) and training

Methods

- > The DiversityLeads research program consisted of several interrelated methods.
- > Review of the literature with a focus on data from the Government of Canada, Stats Canada and the Ontario Securities Commission on representation in leadership as well as best practices.
- > Quantitative analysis of primary data on 18,654 individuals in board and senior leadership roles, in 1,465 organizations across various sectors in 10 cities, with a focus on gender, racialization and Black people, as well as other dimensions of identity based on content analysis. The same approach was applied to analyze diversity data in the corporate sector, specifically the representation of equity-deserving groups in 783 firms on the Toronto Stock Exchange (TSX) from 2015 to 2022.
- > Qualitative interviews conducted with leaders regarding their experiences with barriers and enablers, including 50 women in executive roles, 20 women in communications and technology, 25 Indigenous leaders and 36 leaders identifying as 2SLGBTQ+.
- > Qualitative analysis of practices of corporations based on publicly available information, as well as interviews with 15 people in human resources and management roles regarding corporate practices.

Findings

The research suggests that varying levels of progress are being made to improve the representation of equity-deserving groups—including women, Indigenous Peoples, Black and racialized groups, and members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community—in leadership roles. Under-representation of diverse groups in leadership has ripple effects. For example, it contributes to the wage gap, and it shapes the aspirations of individuals from equity-deserving groups by not providing role models to inspire them. This phenomenon is summarized in the phrase “if you can’t see it, you can’t be it”. However, these are only elements of prior research, which has suggested that barriers to advancing equity-deserving groups in leadership roles are complex and exist across multiple levels: macro (societal), meso (organizational) and micro (individual). While enablers such as access to leadership and professional



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development are vital to advancing equity-deserving groups into senior roles, equal focus must be placed on addressing the underlying systemic barriers that impede access to these opportunities.

The review of data on representation on boards and in executive roles across 10 cities and six sectors provides additional evidence of the under-representation of women, racialized people, Black people, Indigenous Peoples, and other equity-deserving groups. It also shows significant variation across regions, between sectors, and among organizations within sectors, demonstrating that the issue is not the pool but organizational policies and practices.

A supplementary study focused specifically on women in the information and communications technology sector, who stressed challenges of organizational culture rooted in gender exclusionary norms as well as balancing caregiving responsibilities and professional goals. They cited that colleagues who were white men or others who “fit in” were provided with guidance to navigate the corporate environment and careers, while they were not. Respondents indicated that being regarded differently than colleagues by virtue of any characteristic that made them stand out had an overall negative influence on their professional advancement. Interviewees with intersectional identities or hidden characteristics expressed the need to conceal part of their identity or choosing not to disclose their needs to prevent judgemental attitudes and stigma affecting their daily work, professional advancements and opportunities.

Another study summarized here shed light on Indigenous leaders. In a survey of 25 Indigenous leaders, respondents were highly educated and reported that continual learning, on-the-job experience and Indigenous-specific training programs played a role in their career success. Notably, several respondents spoke about promotional opportunities into leadership roles created by employers to Indigenize their organization and workplace. Indigenous study participants indicated that they frequently feel pressured to adapt their leadership styles to fit corporate norms, which can undermine Indigenous ways of knowing and being and contributes to the lack of Indigenous role models in leadership that aspiring Indigenous leaders can derive inspiration from. Among Indigenous leaders, women face compounded challenges due to gendered and racial biases that subject them to increased scrutiny and higher standards compared to male counterparts. The persistent struggle imposed by a dynamic between caregiving and community commitments with their professional responsibilities can limit their pursuits and career advancements in workplace environments that are not structured to acknowledge cultural obligations.

Finally, the interviews with leaders identifying as 2SLGBTQ+ highlighted systemic barriers, including discrimination and biases, that hindered their access to leadership roles. Barriers and challenges were distinct for intersectional 2SLGBTQ+ leaders compared to non-intersectional (i.e., racialized vs. non-racialized individuals identifying as 2SLGBTQ+). Several leaders cited a lack of meaningful inclusion and visibility at

senior levels, contributing to a lack of representation at leadership levels and a barrier to fostering diverse leadership pipelines. Retention was identified as a critical issue, and participants reported that inclusive practices are essential to create supportive workplace environments that foster a sense of belonging where aspiring 2SLGBTQ+ leaders can thrive. Empathy emerged as a significant theme in leadership styles among 2SLGBTQ+ leaders, as their experience of exclusion cultivated deeper compassion to mentor and support other 2SLGBTQ+ community members.

Conclusions and recommendations

Despite some strides in gender diversity, significant systemic barriers continue to hinder equitable representation of equity-deserving groups within Canadian corporate leadership, boards and executive and senior management teams. Progress remains uneven, especially in executive teams and among Black, racialized, Indigenous and 2SLGBTQ+ leaders, with racial equity and gender parity goals largely unmet. Isolated measures are insufficient; sustainable change demands a systems-level approach targeting societal structures, organizational practices, and individual behaviours.

Addressing deeply rooted systemic inequities requires more than aspirational targets or blanket policies; it requires a multi-level, evidence-based, coordinated effort. At the societal level, inclusive policies, legislative reform, compliance mechanisms, infrastructure investments (e.g., accessible child care) and strengthened accountability

mechanisms are essential. At the organizational level, embedding EDI in governance, human resources, culture, value chains and outreach is necessary to enact sustained change. Empowering individual capacity building at the micro level through mentorship, bias training and inclusive leadership practices reinforces these structural reforms by building inclusive attitudes, understanding and behaviours.

Research findings across the selection of reports under the DiversityLeads project indicate that meaningful and transformative change depends on addressing barriers at all levels. While a focus on understanding and providing leadership opportunities and developing leadership skills for women, Indigenous Peoples, racialized people, persons with disabilities and those who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ is critical, so is challenging bias at all levels.

Stereotypes about leadership and barriers to women, Indigenous peoples and equity-deserving groups are embedded at the societal level, in institutions, organizational practices and individual attitudes and behaviours. The findings signal that change also requires a complex systems approach. While providing opportunities and training for aspiring leaders should be part of a comprehensive skills and employment strategy, it is also important to create equitable and inclusive environments where they can thrive, which means training and capacity building around equity, diversity and inclusion are critical at all levels.



Introduction

Over the years, the business case for diversity in governance, senior leadership, and at all levels of organizations and businesses has been strongly established by scholars and practitioners alike.^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5} However, as the data shows, only minimal progress has been made regarding the advancement of women and other equity-seeking groups on boards of directors.⁶ This report explores this data through an analysis and synthesis of relevant reports. From these, we know that the consequences of the chronic lack of diversity and inclusion are felt across all organizational levels and carry considerable implications across society. Numerous studies have indicated that diverse organizations outperform their more homogenous counterparts.^{7, 8} Additionally, there are important correlations between board diversity and a genuine commitment to corporate social responsibility,⁹ which forms a critical aspect of robust equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) strategies. Some research has linked diversity with increased firm value.¹⁰ This is not surprising, as studies show that diverse leadership increases employee satisfaction, which in turn leads to a more motivated and engaged workforce,¹¹ and ultimately better performance. Canada is increasingly diverse, and organizations must reflect their customers, clients and employees to remain relevant.¹²

The work we explore in this report shows that Canada's institutional and legislative frameworks for fostering workplace diversity and inclusion reveal limitations and a record of unequal implementation. This reflects tensions between progressive policy and institutional resistance. For instance, at the national level, the Employment Equity Act (1986)¹³ imposes requirements on a narrow set of employers (federally regulated organizations). Provincial initiatives like Ontario's comply-or-explain model¹⁴ focus narrowly on gender parity in publicly-listed companies, a framework criticized for its enforcement gaps and lack of intersectional scope failing to recognize individuals with overlapping equity-deserving identities.

The 2018 Federal Bill C-25 expands coverage to four equity-deserving groups including women, Indigenous Peoples, racialized individuals and persons living with disabilities.¹⁵ However, the impact is diminished by restricting its application to a select 600 distributing corporations, leaving the majority of the private sector outside of its regulatory ambit. Non-legislative inclusive leadership initiatives like voluntary codes and commitments such as the 50 – 30 Challenge, BlackNorth's The Pledge, and the 30% Club demonstrate company involvement;



*Despite ongoing progress, ethical commitments and the clear advantages their leadership bestows, **equity-deserving groups remain under-represented** in leadership roles in Canadian organizations.*

however, without normalized measures, enforcement processes or intersectional directives, they result in fragmented and unmeasured progress. This regulatory patchwork—defined by voluntary opt-in structures, narrow demographic targets, and limited jurisdictional reach—reveals systemic barriers to equitable representation, especially in senior and leadership roles.

The leadership representation of equity-deserving groups—including women, Indigenous Peoples, racialized and Black people, members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community and persons with disabilities—is advancing unevenly.^{16, 17, 18} Despite ongoing progress, ethical commitments and the clear advantages their leadership bestows, equity-deserving groups remain under-represented in leadership roles in Canadian organizations.^{19, 20}

This report collates and advances evidence that can rectify these gaps in implementation and accountability. It is undertaken through the Future Skills Centre DiversityLeads

program of research, a partnership of researchers, industry and community partners that aims to:

1

Build a network of organizations committed to advancing diversity in senior roles and on boards in the private sector and aggregate resources in support of industry codes of conduct and government initiatives such as the 50 – 30 Challenge

2

Develop previous research to provide an updated perspective on the representation of women, racialized people, Black people, Indigenous Peoples, those with disabilities and those identifying as 2SLGBTQ+ in leadership roles, drawing on secondary sources and data collection as well as interviews

3

Identify barriers and enablers to advancement

4

Spotlight strategies and best practices to advance career pathing and senior leadership skills among women, Black people, Indigenous Peoples, racialized peoples, those with disabilities and those who identify as 2SLGBTQ

5

Develop capacity in organizations to better recruit and advance women and diverse leaders through a set of assessments, tools (including the Diversity Assessment Tool) and training

To accomplish these objectives, the Future Skills Centre and Diversity Institute worked with a range of organizations on a series of research projects. This report provides a synthesis of the findings and draws

out implications for further research and implementation. This aligns with the Future Skills Centre’s strategy priorities, as laid out in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Future Skills Centre priorities.

Strategic Priority	Alignment
Easy-to-access, practical labour market and skills information	Provides women, Indigenous Peoples, racialized people and other diverse people with the information and skills needed to access senior leadership and board positions. Provides corporations with access to talent and tools to effectively utilize it.
Responsive career pathways	Strengthens confidence, knowledge and supports to assist women and diverse Canadians in navigating leadership and board opportunities with tools, training and mentoring.
“What works” replication	Provides access to a tool kit as well as online assessments for individuals and organizations to help reduce friction in the market for leaders and board positions.

Partners in the project included: University of Manitoba Asper School of Business, 30% Club, Canadian Council for Indigenous Business, BlackNorth Initiative, Pride at Work, and Women in Communications and Technology.

Below we summarize the findings in brief for each of the equity-deserving groups identified in the studies we used.

Gender gap

Women’s representation in executive leadership and senior management serves as a critically important indicator of gender equality in labour market outcomes.²¹ It signals the equitable distribution of power and creates opportunities for decision-

making that have traditionally been denied to women.²² Despite significant advancements in education and workforce participation, women’s progress toward leadership roles in the corporate sector remains slow and tenuous. This is evident in their persistent under-representation on corporate boards and C-suite positions.²³

At the societal level, entrenched stereotypes and traditional cultural norms continue to play a significant role in hindering women’s leadership aspirations and pursuits. Assertiveness, decisiveness and competitiveness as leadership characteristics have been stereotypically associated with men, while women are often expected to demonstrate supportive and nurturing traits. This “double-bind” creates

a paradox for women: those who exhibit traditional leadership traits are described as being “difficult”, while those conforming to gendered expectations are considered unsuitable for leadership roles.²⁴

These stereotypes not only discourage women from pursuing leadership roles but also reinforce discriminatory and biased hiring and promotion practices, shaping perceptions of women’s competence, ability and potential. Likewise, the burden of caregiving outside work continues to fall on women. This puts them at a disadvantage in workplaces that value the constant availability of their employees and demand long work hours.²⁵ This creates a “career penalty” for women requiring penalizing accommodations, such as flexible work arrangements or taking career breaks. Child care demands alone render women nearly three times as likely as men to leave the workforce.

Organizational cultures and structures further exacerbate the challenges faced by women pursuing leadership pathways. Due to informal recruitment networks, unspoken workplace norms and performance evaluation biases, women’s contributions are often undervalued or overlooked, particularly in male-dominated industries. However, wage gaps persist across sectors even at senior levels.²⁶ For example, women in board and executive roles in Canada earn, on average, 56% less than their male counterparts.^{27, 28} The “leaky pipeline” phenomenon—whereby the presence of women diminishes at successive career stages—is a glaring indication of systemic failure.²⁹ Hostile work environments,



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characterized by microaggressions, discrimination and sexual harassment, discourage women from aspiring and pursuing leadership roles. Moreover, the “glass ceiling” restricts their access to top-level positions, while the “glass cliff” places women in precarious leadership roles, exposing them to heightened scrutiny and failure risks.³⁰

Individual factors also contribute to women’s under-representation at leadership levels. Women are more likely to experience imposter syndrome and fear of failure because of societal and organizational demands and pressures that dissuade from pursuing leadership opportunities.³¹ The lack of mentorship and sponsorship further compounds the problem. While mentorship provides guidance, sponsorship—promoting and advocating for women in decision-making spaces—is critical for advancing careers. However, women often have limited access to sponsors, curtailing their opportunities for high-profile projects and leadership development.³²

Racialized and Black people

Racialized and Black people constitute over a quarter of Canada's population, yet their representation at the leadership level of organizations and companies continues to be misaligned.³³ Studies indicate that Black leaders are significantly under-represented in comparison to other racialized communities. This imbalance underscores the specific effects of anti-Black racism, compounding the challenges already encountered by racialized groups. Systemic racism, socioeconomic disparities, and pervasive stereotypes collectively restrict access to leadership opportunities, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and inequality.³⁴

A primary driver contributing to the under-representation of racialized and Black people in leadership is the systemic discrimination entrenched in recruitment processes.^{35, 36} Recruitment practices often rely on informal networks,³⁷ favouring candidates from established, predominantly non-racialized circles. This excludes qualified racialized and Black candidates who lack social capital and access to these networks. Moreover, recruitment criteria that prioritize prior leadership experience, such as serving as a CEO, disproportionately disadvantage racialized and Black groups who have been historically excluded from occupying such roles.³⁸ These practices, often cloaked in neutrality, continue to uphold the exclusion of racialized and Black people from leadership and talent pipelines.

Professional networks play a significant role in identifying and cultivating future leaders, providing mentorship, and offering channels to high-profile opportunities.³⁹ However, racialized and Black individuals are often excluded from these networks due to historical patterns of exclusion, unconscious bias, and socioeconomic factors that restrict their participation in elite educational and professional institutions.^{40, 41, 42} Without exposure to these networks, racialized and Black people are limited in terms of garnering social capital and have fewer pathways to leadership at their disposal.

Long-standing stereotypes and unconscious biases also contribute to the under-representation of racialized and Black people in leadership roles. Prejudices often depict these individuals as less competent or unqualified for leadership, reinforcing



microaggressions that undermine their confidence and credibility.⁴³ For Black people, these stereotypes are particularly entrenched, reflecting historical narratives that uphold marginalization and systemic discrimination. Such stereotypes give rise to tokenism, where racialized and Black leaders may be placed in visible roles to alleviate firms' reputational concerns while lacking any meaningful decision-making power, further circumscribing their influence.⁴⁴

Prejudice and xenophobia heighten challenges for racialized and Black people, particularly for those who are (assumed to be) immigrants. Cultural biases and assumptions concerning language proficiency, educational qualifications, and “fit” in organizational cultures frequently hinder their progression.⁴⁵ These attitudes and perceptions not only exclude qualified candidates but also signal to racialized and Black employees that they are unwelcome or undervalued in leadership contexts.

Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Inuit and Métis)

Advancing Indigenous Peoples' representation in leadership roles is imperative for meaningful reconciliation. Systemic marginalization and widespread exclusion of Indigenous Peoples has its roots in colonial practices intended to suppress Indigenous culture and identity, pushing them to the periphery of political and economic systems.^{46, 47}

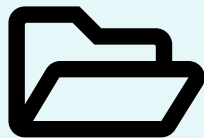
Subsequent governments and widespread anti-Indigenous sentiment exacerbated these harms, reinforcing barriers that limited

access to leadership opportunities for Indigenous Peoples.⁴⁸ Colonialism persists in structural and socioeconomic barriers and obstacles that prevent Indigenous Peoples from ascending to leadership roles. Limited access to basic life necessities, such as clean drinking water, quality education and safe and adequate housing, along with a lack of basic infrastructure such as reliable Internet connectivity, disproportionately affect Indigenous communities in rural and remote areas.⁴⁹ These obstacles not only limit professional development opportunities and prevent prospects for career growth but also increase socioeconomic disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. Educational inequities force many Indigenous individuals to face structural barriers that prevent them from pursuing higher education and advanced degrees,⁵⁰ qualifications often regarded as prerequisites for leadership positions. This creates a catch-22, wherein an absence of role models perpetuates this cycle of exclusion, diminishing the ambitions and confidence of aspiring Indigenous leaders.

In the context of these systemic barriers, Indigenous leaders are significantly under-represented in corporate Canada.⁵¹ A report from Corporations Canada revealed that Indigenous individuals hold only 0.2% of all senior management positions, notably lower than their overall proportion of the population.⁵² Many organizations implement generic or “standard” EDI policies that fail to recognize and address the specific needs and rights of Indigenous Peoples.⁵³ These “one-size-fits-all” solutions fail to respond to the unique challenges faced by Indigenous employees.

Additionally, forms of racial discrimination and implicit prejudices in corporate environments erect barriers to career progression for Indigenous Peoples. Stereotypes and stigma about their capabilities and ambitions often result in exclusion from senior-level opportunities. Indigenous leaders report working harder than non-Indigenous peers to prove their worth, often facing greater scrutiny and undervaluation of their contributions.⁵⁴

When Indigenous leaders are integrated, it is often in the form of tokenization. Indigenous leaders are often assigned and confined to roles addressing diversity-related issues or Indigenous-specific sectors, regardless of their broader qualifications and aspirations.⁵⁵ This stagnates their professional growth and imposes a narrow view of Indigenous contributions in corporate environments. Furthermore, cultural misalignment exacerbates these challenges. Western models of leadership focus on individual achievement and profit-driven objectives, often conflicting with Indigenous leadership



*Indigenous leaders are often assigned and confined to roles addressing diversity-related issues or Indigenous-specific sectors, **regardless of their broader qualifications and aspirations.***

values rooted in community well-being and prosperity, collaboration and environmental stewardship. This disconnect can foster feelings of exclusion and a weakened sense of belonging among Indigenous leaders in non-Indigenous organizations.⁵⁶

2SLGBTQ+ community

Members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, as private, public and non-profit sector employers, face several barriers in their careers which hinder their professional progression and limit their career prospects. 2SLGBTQ+ leaders often report having faced discrimination throughout their careers due to pervasive homophobia and transphobia.⁵⁷ Discrimination appears less common for some leaders as they move up the organizational hierarchy into more senior roles, but for some trans, non-binary, Black and Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ leaders, discrimination is still prevalent at the leadership level. It delays career progression and gives rise to challenges negatively affecting their career planning, leading them to make lateral or reverse career moves to leave unsafe workplaces. They describe feeling unsupported by employers or receiving fewer opportunities for advancement.⁵⁸

The research shows that, in sum, professional pathways to leadership for members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community are inadequate, arduous or absent from work environments. Both subtle and overt forms of homophobia and transphobia permeate corporate and leadership culture, constraining the career choices of 2SLGBTQ+ professionals⁵⁹ and contributing

to wage disparities, labour market insecurity, and reduced job mobility.⁶⁰ At times, this is compounded with racism and ableism,⁶¹ creating additional obstacles for aspiring queer and trans leaders as they struggle to access development opportunities, career resources and upper-level positions. Without adequate representation in leadership ranks, queer and trans professionals are less likely to see themselves as leaders, weakening their professional outcomes.⁶² These workplace environments require assimilating into hegemonic heteronormative workplace and leadership culture.⁶³ Leadership norms in corporate Canada, as in many other societies, are influenced by overarching societal norms that conflate professionalism with the characteristics of white, cisgender, heterosexual men.⁶⁴ This influences perceptions of 2SLGBTQ+ leaders, causing them to be seen as unfit or incompatible for leadership roles, and pushes them to conceal and mask parts of their identity at work. Despite this, 2SLGBTQ+ professionals are just as likely to aspire to leadership positions as their heterosexual and cisgender peers.

Intersectional barriers

Individuals belonging to more than one equity-deserving group often experience compounded and intensified forms of discrimination due to intersecting discriminatory barriers. These composite barriers can affect various aspects of their career progression. For example, racialized women encounter both gender bias and racial prejudice, leading to significant disparities in pay, representation and workplace treatment;⁶⁵ one study revealed



they earned 32% less than their non-racialized peers in board director and senior leadership roles.⁶⁶ Similarly, while access to affordable child care is a critical issue for many Canadians, it poses a unique challenge for Indigenous Peoples, who also grapple with the intergenerational trauma of institutionalized treatment of Indigenous children. These disparities highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions to address overlapping systems of discrimination and promote inclusion on more than one plane.

The following research summary synthesizes and examines key findings from comprehensive studies on leadership representation across equity-deserving groups. We begin with a review of methods, review the detailed findings and collate the conclusions by analyzing the current state of leadership representation across equity-deserving groups and identifying barriers uncovered by various research approaches. Finally, we recommend evidence-based strategies to promote change, formulated by connecting observations and discoveries made across each unique study, generating a consolidated resource that triangulates insights from different research methods.



Methods

This section explains the methods used in the DiversityLeads research program, which were designed to capture the current status of leadership representation for different equity-deserving groups. To capture the complexity in barriers faced by different equity-deserving groups—not only associated with their identities, but also related to the context, such as sectors and geographic areas—we used various methods over the six projects. Using different research and data collection methods allows for a triangulation of findings, enhancing nuanced insights of the barriers to diverse leadership representation and the potential strategies for overcoming them.

The DiversityLeads research program used a mixed method approach, which consisted of several interrelated methods.

- > **Literature review:** We conducted a review of the literature, with a focus on data from the Government of Canada, Statistics Canada and the Ontario Securities Commission on representation in leadership as well as best practices
- > **Quantitative approach:** Quantitative data were used to capture the representation of equity-deserving groups and intersectional groups in leadership roles.

In 2023, we collected primary data on 18,654 individuals in board and senior leadership roles, in 1,465 organizations across various sectors in 10 cities.⁶⁷ Using these data, we conducted an analysis of gender, racialization and Black people, as well as other dimensions of identity, based on content analysis. To focus on the corporate sector, we also looked at the representation of these equity-deserving groups (women, Black individuals and racialized individuals) in 783 firms on the Toronto Stock Exchange (TSX) from 2015 to 2022.⁶⁸

- > **Qualitative approach on lived experiences:** Qualitative data were used to investigate the gaps in diversity in leadership roles. We conducted semi-structured interviews with leaders regarding their experiences with barriers and enablers, including 50 senior executive and C-suite women,⁶⁹ 20 women in communications and technology,⁷⁰ 25 Indigenous leaders⁷¹ and 36 leaders identifying as 2SLGBTQ+.⁷²
- > **Qualitative approach on organizational practices:** We reviewed the practices of corporations based on publicly available information and conducted thematic analysis with these data, as

well as interviews with 15 people in human resources and management roles regarding corporate practices.^{73, 74}

The results of this research were published in several reports.

- > **Diverse Representation in Leadership: A Review of 10 Canadian Cities (2024)** analyzes the representation gaps for women, racialized people and Black people across leadership roles in various sectors in major Canadian cities.
- > **Diversity in Leadership at S&P/ TSX Companies (2023)** assesses the state of diversity in leadership roles in corporate Canada, focusing on representation of women, Black individuals and racialized individuals from 2015 to 2022 in 783 firms on the Toronto Stock Exchange (TSX), including 235 on the S&P/TSX Composite Index.
- > **Bridging the Gender Gap: Skills for the Advancement of Women (2024)** uses in-depth interviews to investigate the experiences of 50 women in senior leadership roles in various industries.
- > **Skills for Inclusive Workplaces and the Advancement of Indigenous Peoples (2024)** explores the unique challenges that Indigenous Peoples face in the workplace and leadership roles and provides strategies for supporting their career progression based on interviews with 25 First Nations, Métis and Inuit leaders from a wide range of industries in Canada.
- > **Advancing Women in the Information and Communications Technology Workplace (2024)** focuses on women's systemic barriers in the ICT sector and suggests strategies to improve their representation and advancement.
- > **Lead with Pride: Best Practices for Advancing 2SLGBTQIA+ Leadership (n.d.)** employs an intersectional approach to investigate the career barriers, supports and opportunities of members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community and identify solutions to improve leadership attainment and conditions enabling their success.





Findings

This section presents the primary key findings generated from the four studies to provide a foundation for the synthesis of this report. We start with the findings on the representation of equity-deserving groups in various sectors across the country. We then provide a deeper examination of the corporate sector. Following the results from the two quantitative projects, we share insights on barriers, enablers and the best practices of organizations to advance diversity in leadership roles with specific equity groups: women, women in the ICT sector, Indigenous Peoples, and members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

In common practice, EDI work largely focuses on awareness training and education campaigns, anti-bias hiring practices, and allyship programs; however, while diversity in entry- and mid-levels is improving with these efforts, representation drops off significantly for multiple equity-deserving groups in upper levels across industries and sectors.

Leadership representation in major cities⁷⁵

The DiversityLeads study (2024) found that despite women comprising about one-half of Canada's overall population (50.7%), their

representation levels on corporate boards across major Canadian cities sits at 41.4% and 39.5% as senior managers across sectors. None of the 10 cities analyzed have achieved gender parity, although Ottawa is closest to closing the gap with 47.2% of women on boards. When looking at senior management teams, women in Halifax have surpassed gender parity, accounting for 55.9% of senior roles. Sectoral variation exists; women have reached gender parity on the boards of directors for schools (55.7%) and as senior managers in the voluntary (58.2%) and hospital sectors (50.6%). Despite this, women continue to face difficulty in the private sector, only accounting for 34.3% of directors on corporate boards and 23.3% on senior management teams. For federally regulated distributing companies that must comply with Bill C-25, women represent 22% of board members in 2023, marking a 3% increase from 2022 and a 5% increase from 2020. The drop-off of women at senior levels is well documented in the literature,⁷⁶ and observed in the collective lived experiences of the women participants across DI studies. Furthermore, a study of women board directors and senior corporate leaders discovered that they earn 56% less than their male counterparts, and racialized women

who are executives earn 32% less than their non-racialized counterparts.⁷⁷ Evidently, inequities and barriers are exacerbated for women leaders belonging to one or more additional equity-deserving groups, such as being Indigenous or racialized, living with a disability or identifying as 2SLGBTQ+.⁷⁸

Racialized and Black people

Racialized individuals and Black people continue to be significantly under-represented in leadership positions across corporate, public, voluntary, health and education sectors relative to their population share in key urban centres.⁷⁹ While racialized people make up one-fifth of Canada's overall population (21.9%), they only account for 10.5% of boards of directors and 8.6% of senior managers across 10 major Canadian cities. Despite comprising nearly one-half of Toronto's population (48.6%), only 15.9% of individuals on boards of directors in the city are racialized and only 15.2% of senior manager roles are occupied by racialized individuals. The highest representation of racialized and Black people is found on the

boards of directors for police (17.9%) and the lowest in provincial agencies, boards and commissions (ABCs) (5.9%). Similarly, the highest representation of racialized people as senior managers was in policing (19.3%) and the lowest was among deputy ministers and assistant deputy ministers (4.2%). Since 2020, only two sectors experienced increased representation of racialized people on boards of directors: school boards (3.7%) and the corporate sector (3.1%).

Black people face starker under-representation across sectors and Black leaders are generally outnumbered compared to other racialized groups. Black people account for 4.2% of the Canadian population, primarily concentrated in urban areas, but only represent 3.8% of boards of directors; this figure drops to 2.6% as senior managers across sectors of 10 major Canadian cities. For example, in Montreal, Black people hold 4.6% of board roles but represent 7.9% of the local population. Cities with smaller Black communities also show disparities. For example, in London, Black people account for 3.5% of the population, but only 1.8% of people on boards of directors. In Hamilton, Black people make up 4.3% of the Black population, yet only 3.6% of board positions. Interestingly, Black people are well represented on boards relative to their population in Vancouver (2.1% vs. 1.6%). Across all cities analyzed for the representation of Black people on boards, the sector with the highest representation was the police (6.3%), and the lowest was provincial ABCs (2%). The representation of Black people on boards in the police sector and at universities and colleges (6.3% and 6.2%, respectively)



*Since 2020, **only two sectors** experienced increased representation of racialized people on boards of directors: **school boards (3.7%)** and the **corporate sector (3.1%)**.*

was higher than the percentage of Black people residing in Canada (4.2%). School boards had the highest representation of Black people (9.5%) in senior management, which was higher than their representation in the Canadian population (4.2%) and the percentage of racialized people in these roles (8.4%).⁸⁰

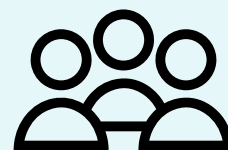
Entrenched systemic inequities in leadership attainment are exacerbated for marginalized individuals with intersecting equity identities. Racialized and Black women face compounded barriers rooted in overlapping systems of racial and gender oppression manifesting in organizational hierarchies. While women collectively occupy 41.4% of board seats and 39.5% of senior management positions in Canada,⁸¹ these numbers mask the profound disparities when disaggregated by race. Non-racialized women dominate leadership spaces, holding 31.9% of corporate board positions compared to Black women (1.9%) and racialized women (4.9%), despite racialized women constituting 11.2% of Canada's overall population.

Leadership roles of Black women are not in keeping with their proportion of the population (2.1%) across most sectors observed. Their representation on boards of directors remains below this benchmark: municipal (1.7%) and provincial ABCs (0.7%), corporate boards (1.5%), school boards (1.3%) and police boards (1.1%). While industries like hospitals (2.3%), voluntary organizations (2.4%) and post-secondary institutions (3.2%) have marginally higher board representation of Black women, the percentages still reflect tokenism rather

than inclusion on an equity basis. In senior management capacities, Black women achieve proportional representation only within delineated industries like school boards (4.9%) and hospitals (2.3%), reflecting institutionalized segregation patterns into job categories based on stereotypic assumptions of caregiving and community service.

Regional variations

There are pronounced regional variations in representation levels among equity-deserving groups. Across the 10 cities studied, women represent about one-half of the population, yet only Ottawa was close to achieving gender parity on boards (47.2% on boards of directors vs. 51.1% of the population). Within senior management, women in Halifax are slightly overrepresented (55.9% of senior managers vs. 51% of the population). Racialized people experience worse attainment, occupying only 15.2% of senior manager roles in Toronto while nearly one-half of



*Across the 10 cities studied, women represent about one-half of the population, yet **only Ottawa was close to achieving gender parity on boards** (47.2% on boards of directors vs. 51.1% of the population).*

the city’s population is racialized (48.6%). Although most Black people live in urban centres, their representation on boards of directors is disproportionately low compared to their proportions of the local city population. For Black people, the gap between overall metropolitan population and representation on boards is 3.3% (7.9% vs. 4.6%, respectively) in Montreal and similar

in Ottawa (7.6% vs. 4.9%, respectively). Vancouver is the only exception, where Black people have a higher representation on boards of directors compared to their overall population share (2.1% vs. 1.6%, respectively). For women with overlapping racial and gender equity-deserving identities, both racialized and Black women had higher representation in Ontario and Quebec.

FIGURE 1
Representation on boards of directors, by equity-deserving group, 2023⁸²

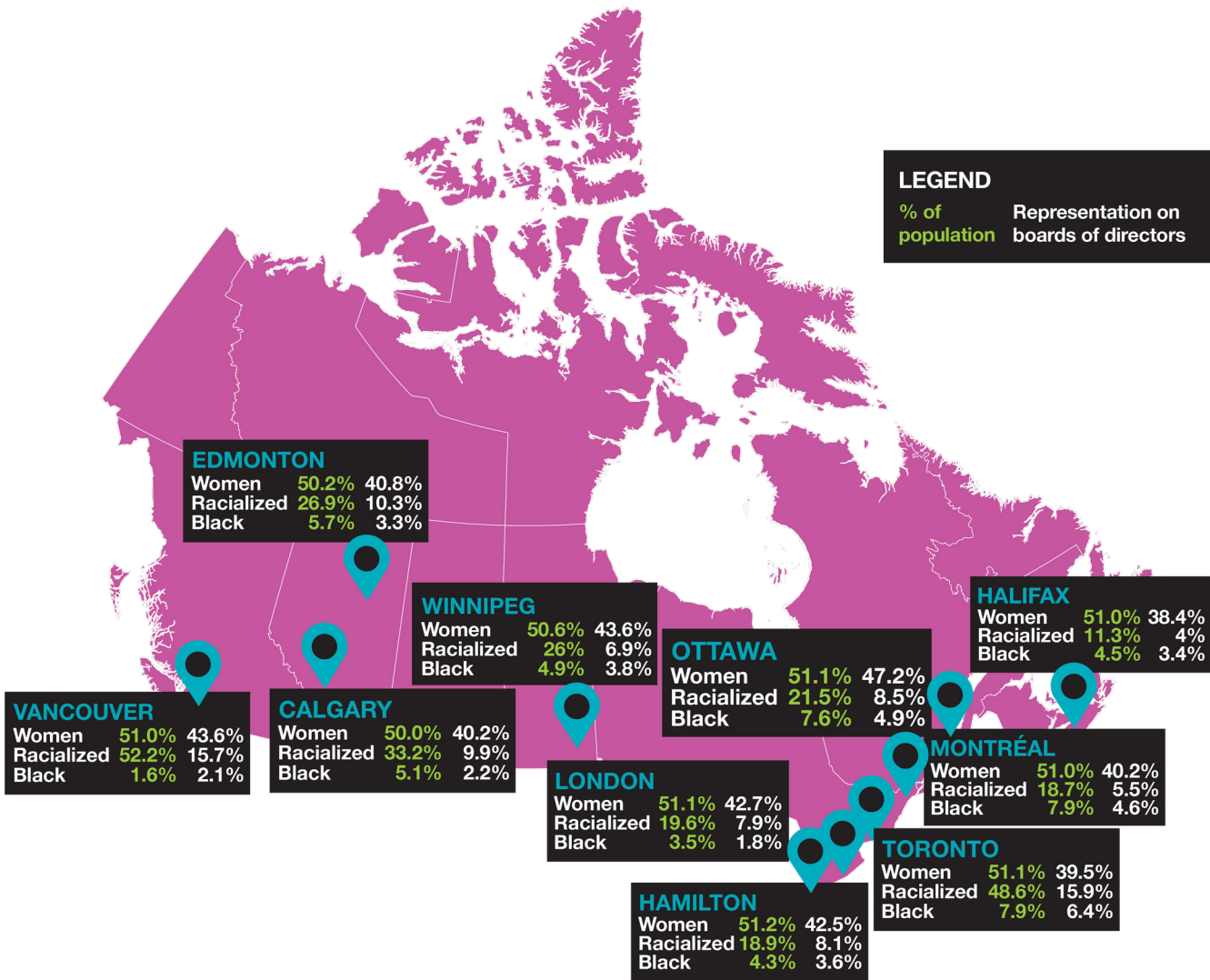
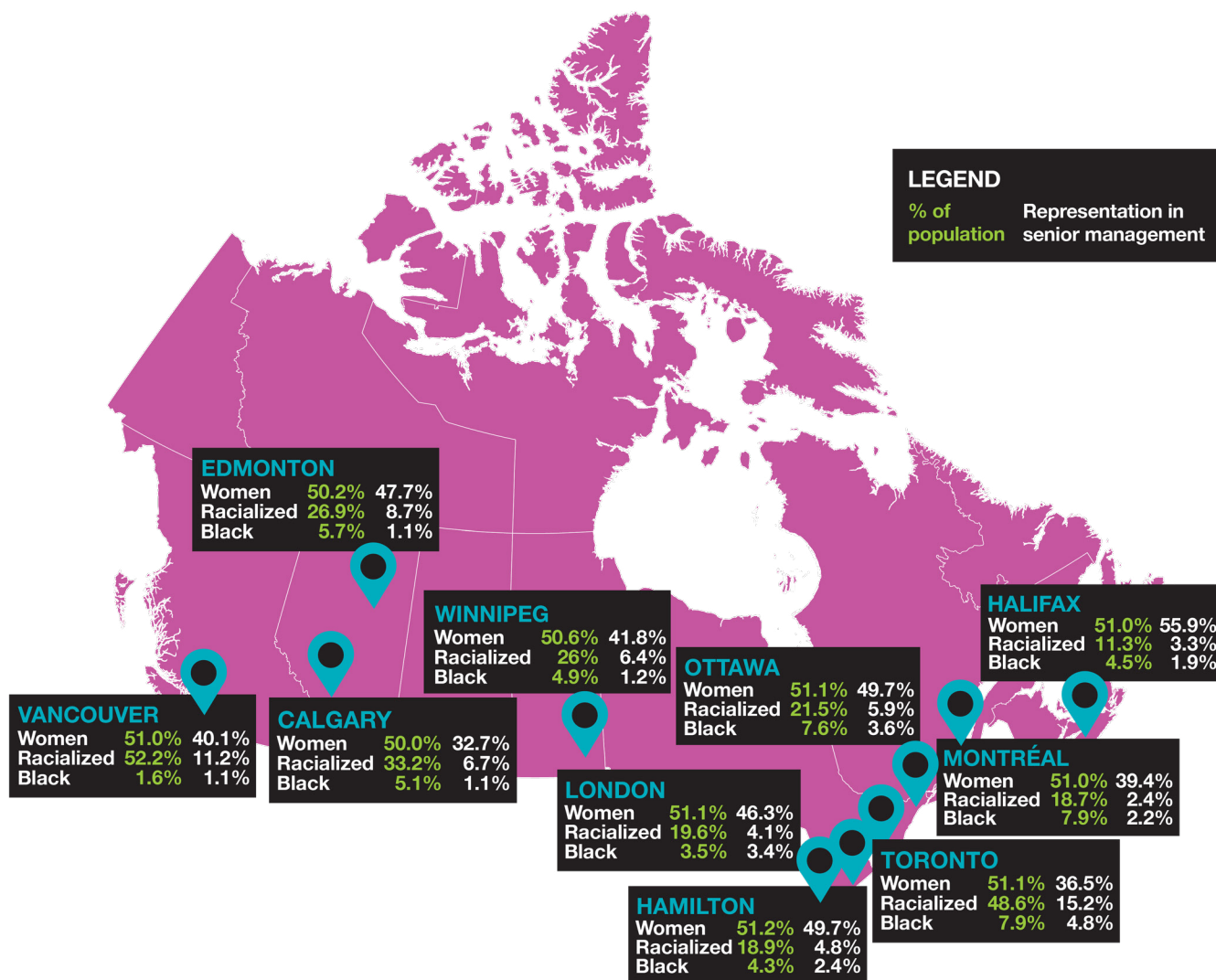


FIGURE 2

Representation in senior management, by equity-deserving group, 2023⁸³



Representation in the corporate sector⁸⁴

Assessing gender and racial diversity on boards and executive teams among 783 TSX-listed companies, including 235 on the S&P/TSX Composite Index, reveals that while Canada has made improvements, representation remains uneven. Between

2015 and 2022, firms listed on the TSX have shown a steady increase in gender diversity. Specifically, the number of women on TSX boards rose from 12% in 2015 to 26.2% in 2022, with the proportion of companies having no women on their boards dropping significantly, from 48% to 12.9%, over the same period (Table 2). Similarly, the share of women in executive roles increased from

13.9% to 21%. For comparison, women now hold 33.7% of board seats on S&P/TSX firms, yet only 23.1% are employed in executive roles. Notably, TSX companies generally lag behind S&P/TSX firms in this

regard, and firms that are signatories of voluntary codes such as the 30%+ Club and BlackNorth Initiative (BNI) demonstrated higher diversity representation levels in leadership capacities.

TABLE 2
Representation of women in leadership: TSX companies (2015 – 2022).^{*85}

TSX-Disclosing	2015	2021	2022
Number of Companies	882	787	783
% of Women on Board	12%	23.8%	26.2%
Number of Women per 100 Boards	91	186	204
% of Companies with No Women on Boards	48%	15.8%	12.9%
% of Women on Executive Teams	13.9%	20.2%	21%

^{*}Refers to all disclosing companies on the TSX.



Racialized and Black people continue to face marked under-representation in corporate leadership. Among S&P/TSX Composite Index firms, the representation of racialized individuals nearly doubled from 2020 to 2022 (4.9% to 9.3%). Representation on executive teams grew as well, increasing by just over 3% (7.5% to 10.8%). TSX companies mirrored these trends, with 9.3% of board members and 11% of executive team members identifying as racialized in 2022 (Table 3). Opposite to the representation levels of women in general, racialized individuals have shown to be better represented on executive teams compared to their representation as board members. Nonetheless, racialized persons’ leadership representation remains below reflective demographic parity, especially in urban regions where racialized populations are highest.

TABLE 3Representation of racialized people in leadership: TSX companies, (2020 – 2022).^{*86}

TSX-Disclosing	2020	2021	2022
Number of Companies	752	787	783
% of Racialized People on Boards	5.9%	7.5%	9.3%
Number of Racialized People per 100 Boards	46	58	72
% of Companies with No Racialized People on Boards	70.7%	88.3%	54.8%
% of Racialized People on Executive Teams	8%	9.7%	11%

*Refers to all disclosing companies on the TSX.

S&P/TSX Composite Index companies have made progress in increasing the number of Black leaders on their executive teams and boards. Between 2020 and 2022, the proportion of Black individuals on boards within these firms rose from 0.9% to 2.1%, while representation on executive teams grew from 1% to 1.5%. Despite these gains,

TSX-listed firms overall continue to lag behind firms on the S&P/TSX Composite Index in terms of board representation. By 2022, Black representation on boards of TSX-listed companies reached 1.7%, still trailing the progress seen among S&P/TSX Composite Index companies (Table 4).

TABLE 4Representation of Black leaders in leadership: TSX companies (2020 – 2022).^{*87}

TSX-Disclosing	2020	2021	2022
Number of Companies	752	787	783
% of Black Leaders on Boards	0.9%	1.3%	1.7%
Number of Black Leaders per 100 Boards	7	10	13
% of Companies with No Black Leaders on Boards	94.7%	97.5%	89%
% of Black Leaders on Executive Teams	1.1%	1.2%	1.5%

*Refers to all disclosing companies on the TSX.

Although there has been incremental progress since the launch of initiatives like BNI in 2020, Black representation remains well below the BNI's 3.5% target. In 2022, Black leaders occupied only 2.1% of board roles and 1.5% of executive positions on S&P/TSX companies. Representation was considerably lower for Black women, who held a mere 1.2% of boards and 0.6% of executive roles in S&P/TSX companies. They remain the most under-represented across all groups analyzed. Racialized women saw better representation but also remain heavily under-represented. On S&P/TSX Composite Index boards, representation of racialized women increased from 1.6% in 2020 to 4.1% in 2022, and from 1.9% to 2.8% on executive teams. TSX companies reported lower figures—3.1% on boards and 2.7% on executive teams.

Lived experiences of women leaders⁸⁸

Women leaders identified several major barriers, challenges and enablers to their careers in interviews, conducted with a sample size of 50. Women identified that being different from the male norm, the prevalence of unspoken rules, a conformist culture and their caregiving responsibilities outside of work as major barriers in advancing senior leadership positions. Women continue to face gender-based differences in compensation, including at the executive levels. These inequities are often difficult to identify and are exacerbated by opaque systems.

Women most often identified that success was rooted in access to effective sponsors and supportive networks, including

supportive men and other women leaders. These sponsors acted as mentors and allies who helped women make vital connections for advancement. They discussed leadership development, advanced emotional and social capabilities and specialized skill development as additionally critical. To break the glass ceiling, women employed a set of strategies ranging from accepting or creating opportunities in the early years of their career, making strategic choices within or outside their companies, and, in some cases, relying on sacrifice, determination and mental strength. Sometimes, women found it necessary to transfer to a different company to achieve their goals, underscoring the losses inherent to a corporate culture that fails to value these leaders. The interviewees also indicated that having more women present in senior leadership was provoking a shift in corporate culture.



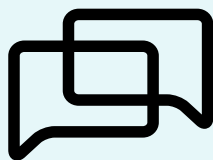
Women leaders in the ICT sector⁸⁹

The under-representation of women in the information and communications technology sector persists despite the sector's tremendous growth and increasing demand for digital-skilled workers. According to DI's research findings, women hold only 28% of management positions in the digital economy and 15% of senior leadership positions. This disparity is even more pronounced in technical positions, where the percentage of women drops to 21%. Surprisingly, the overall percentage of women in the ICT industry has remained static at about 30% for over a decade, indicating a lack of progress in bringing about gender equality in the industry.

This under-representation worsens when taking intersectionality into consideration. Those women who identify with other groups deserving of equity—newcomers, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, those with disabilities, and Indigenous women—are further under-

represented. Those with intersectional identities are more likely to experience exacerbating barriers and obstacles that make it progressively more challenging to enter, remain, and advance in ICT occupations.

Microaggressions are a debilitating obstacle to women's advancement in the information and communication technology sector. Women are more likely to have their judgment questioned, their technical skills undervalued or minimized, and be spoken over in professional life. Furthermore, women whose behaviors are assertive—habits usually encouraged and praised when they are expressed by men—are routinely viewed as “difficult”. These microaggressions not only lower the self-esteem of women but also inhibit career growth and make them more likely to leave science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) careers. The ultimate result of these experiences is a work environment that can be off-putting and discouraging for women, particularly those who are members of multiple under-represented groups.



*Women whose **behaviors are assertive**—habits usually encouraged and praised when they are expressed by men—are routinely viewed as “difficult”.*

Generally, the under-representation of women in ICT is a multifaceted issue with origins in structural, cultural, and interpersonal factors. Overcoming these challenges requires sustained, systemic action at every level, including the implementation of equitable organizational policies, the creation of inclusive workplace cultures and the dismantling of traditional male-dominated workplace culture steeped in gender stereotypes and bias.

Indigenous leaders⁹⁰

Prior to colonization, Indigenous societies had well-defined leadership structures, rooted in shared communal values, profound respect for elders and stewardship of the land. Indigenous women played important roles in leadership capacities, participating in decision-making and governance within their communities and families. Colonization disrupted traditional leadership structures through the imposition of the Band Council system, disenfranchising Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of life, which carried lasting effects on Indigenous representation in leadership positions. Additionally, this system was proactive in reducing the power that Indigenous woman in traditional leadership roles had in matrilineal societies, stripping away agency and limiting possibilities to hone leadership skills.

Today we see that there is a deep disconnect between Indigenous leadership values and prevailing corporate Canada expectations. Mainstream corporate norms emphasize personal achievement, assertive communication style and profit-driven measures. Many Indigenous leadership traits are modeled on the primacy of relationships, community success, storytelling, collaboration and stewardship. In-depth interviews with 25 First Nations, Métis and Inuit leaders revealed that Indigenous women face gendered and racial disadvantages, and struggle to balance professional and community roles. Historically, they held leadership positions within matrilineal societies, but colonization undermined

their roles. Modern workplaces often fail to respect their need to balance professional and personal commitments, further hindering their leadership potential and the enhanced decision-making, market engagement and innovation they could bring.

First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples comprise the fastest-growing demographic group in Canada, particularly among youth, yet existing research indicates a significant under-representation on Canadian corporate boards and in senior management teams. This under-representation extends to the labour market, particularly in mid- to senior-level roles in larger corporations. A 2020 survey of the 230 companies governed by the Canadian Business Corporations Act (CBCA) found that roughly 1% of board positions were held by Indigenous Peoples.⁹¹ Furthermore, a 2021 survey sample of 536 distributing corporations revealed that only 2% had at least one Indigenous person on their board, representing a 0.3% increase from a year prior (1.7% in 2020).⁹² This disparity is not a result of inability or lack of ambition, but of deeply rooted structural obstacles founded on historical and ongoing erasure of Indigenous identities and cultures. These structural obstacles manifest as large gaps in educational attainment, access to employment opportunities, employment training and basic infrastructure like secure high-speed Internet, adequate housing and reliable transportation.

First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples have demonstrated their persistence in the Canadian economy. In 2020, the GDP attributable to Indigenous Peoples in Canada was CA\$48.9 billion.⁹³ There is inherent

value in diversifying leadership strategies by implementing principles that can teach a thriving version of the prosperity frameworks established by Western corporate systems. These findings show that an approach incorporating multiple perspectives within a singular organization can harness the strength of both Indigenous and Western worldviews to the benefit of the corporation.⁹⁴

Qualities of Indigenous leadership are often weighted differently than the leadership qualities sought by corporate Canada. Indigenous leadership is grounded in the values and beliefs of Indigenous cultures that place more weight on community success, storytelling, collaboration and responsible stewardship of resources. Whereas the leadership norms in corporate Canada focus on individual success and assertive communication techniques, and emphasize profit over interpersonal values. Indigenous leaders often feel forced to alter their leadership styles and forgo Indigenous ways of knowing to fit into these corporate values, contributing to fewer Indigenous role models in leadership roles. Integrating these perspectives will open new perspectives and leadership styles for corporate Canada and open the door to more Indigenous leaders.⁹⁵

Leaders from the 2SLGBTQ+ community⁹⁶

Homophobia and transphobia come in various forms and are common in corporate and leadership environments. This reality constrains the career choices of 2SLGBTQ+ professionals in Canada. Canada's leadership norms create perceptions that 2SLGBTQ+



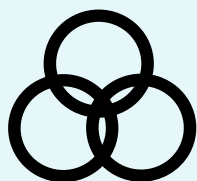
leaders are unfit or less appropriate for leadership roles, and cause leaders to camouflage their identities to avoid discrimination. They speak of being forced to choose between assimilation or career-limiting exclusion. One study by Telus found that 57% of 2SLGBTQ+ employees in Canada did not disclose their identity at work due to concerns of repercussions and negative career impact.⁹⁷ Leaders reported unsafe working conditions due to discrimination, which they say led to emotional hardship and lateral career moves resulting in slowed career progression.⁹⁸

For members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community with intersecting equity-deserving affiliations, it was found that racialized

2SLGBTQ+ employees faced compounded discrimination. 29% of 2SLGBTQ+ employees of colour reported not being hired based on their identities compared to 17% of white 2SLGBTQ+ employees.⁹⁹ Furthermore, queer Black employees are less likely to receive career support and mentorship opportunities in their workplaces. Additionally, trans professionals and those who are racialized, Black or Indigenous were more likely to cover their identities than their cisgender and white peers. This kind of identity management requires a significant amount of mental energy and prevents queer and trans professionals from being their authentic selves at work, a compromise that most cisgender and heterosexual leaders do not have to contemplate.

Leaders from intersectional groups

The barriers equity-deserving groups face in leadership roles are complex and exist across multiple levels: macro (societal),



*The **compounding effects** of belonging to more than one equity-deserving group require us to **address gaps in knowledge** that would **help us dismantle barriers at all levels.***

meso (organizational), and micro (individual). These barriers are demonstrated by the persistent disparities between the representation of non-racialized and Black or racialized women in leadership positions. Non-racialized women make up 31.9% of members of boards of directors compared to only 4.9% for racialized women and 1.9% for Black women.¹⁰⁰ The compounding effects of belonging to more than one equity-deserving group require us to address gaps in knowledge that would help us dismantle barriers at all levels. Better disaggregated data is needed to get a better understanding of these barriers. While enablers such as access to leadership and professional development are vital to advancing equity-deserving groups into senior roles, equal focus must be placed on addressing the underlying discriminatory practices that impede access to opportunities.

Summary

The barriers to leadership and inclusion explored in this section reveal that there are both unique and common experiences across identity groupings. Belonging to more than one group is not just additive but compounds discriminatory experiences. The human potential that is being dismissed, ignored and discarded by these practices robs Canadian corporate culture of a richness of talent, vision, market share and innovation it can scarcely afford to lose out on. The good news is that solutions are within our grasp.



Conclusion and Recommendations

EDI initiatives and policies are critical in transforming Canada's leadership landscape. Diverse leadership fosters innovation, enhances organizational performance, and reflects the multicultural richness of Canadian society. Reviewing the studies synthesized in this report shows us that despite some strides in gender diversity, significant systemic barriers continue to hinder equitable representation of equity-deserving groups within Canadian corporate leadership, boards and executive and senior management teams. Progress is fragmented, especially in executive teams and corporate boards among Black, racialized, Indigenous and 2SLGBTQ+ leaders. Isolated initiatives are too small in scale, lacking the necessary widespread impact real, lasting progress requires. A systems-level approach, targeting societal structures, organizational practices and individual behaviours, is vital to address the root causes and challenges hindering the realization of racial equity and gender parity at every ecosystem level.

Overcoming systemic barriers perpetuating inequities goes beyond setting aspirational quotas or implementing general policies. It demands a strategic, evidence-driven, multifaceted effort that operates on a holistic approach. At the societal level, inclusive

policies, legislative reform, compliance mechanisms, infrastructure investments (i.e., accessible child care) and strengthened accountability mechanisms are essential. At the organizational level, embedding EDI in governance, human resources, culture, value chains and outreach is necessary to enact sustained change. Empowering individual capacity building at the micro level through mentorship, bias training and inclusive leadership practices reinforces these structural reforms by building inclusive attitudes, understanding and behaviours; in short, transforming organizational cultures.

The path forward engages all levels with specific, evidence-based concrete actions, as set out below.

Recommendations

Macro level

- > Expand mandatory reporting: Broaden the scope of mandatory reporting (e.g., Bill C-25) beyond federally regulated companies and to the non-profit sector.

At the societal level, the government is a principal stakeholder in fostering diverse leadership and driving systemic change. Legislation and regulation, such as the

Employment Equity Act, the Human Rights Code and the Pay Equity Act, and corporate regulations, like Bill C-25, are critical in advancing diverse leadership by shaping societal values and driving transparency and accountability for equitable representation. However, the current regime is inadequate in scope. It is imperative to expand equity legislation to include non-federally regulated sectors, non-profits, provincial and municipal boards and SMEs.

- > **Set targets and promote voluntary codes:** Given the evidence that membership in the 30% Club and BlackNorth Initiative are associated with higher levels of representation, other voluntary codes such as the 50 – 30 Challenge and associated standards hold promise.

Voluntary codes and initiatives are crucial in advancing diverse leadership by complementing legislation and regulations while promoting EDI. In Canada and globally, these frameworks, such as the 30%+ Club, BlackNorth Initiative, Responsible Investment Association and the 50 – 30 Challenge, reflect growing investor attention to environmental, social and governance (ESG) priorities. By setting benchmarks and encouraging accountability through varying degrees of reporting and representational metrics, these initiatives drive corporate commitments to improve the representation of equity-deserving groups in leadership. For example, the 50 – 30 Challenge, supported by Canadian businesses, diversity organizations and the Government of Canada, aims to achieve gender parity (50%) and at least 30% representation of other equity-deserving groups in senior leadership roles, with over

2,500 signatories committed to measurable progress. DI strengthens these efforts by providing tailored tools, training and resources, such as the “What Works Toolkit” and extensive workshops, to help organizations implement effective EDI strategies.

- > **Financial incentives:** Governments at all levels can use levers such as procurement, grants and taxation to encourage organizations to develop and implement strategies to hire, promote and retain diverse talent.

Policy makers can introduce financial incentives, such as tax breaks and subsidies, to motivate the hiring, promotion and retention of diverse talent. Funding partnerships across education, industry, employers and community organizations can build inclusive pathways to leadership (i.e., STEM, ICT, public-sector) by closing structural opportunity gaps and spur investments for program design, skills training and mentorship that facilitate successful labour market integration across sectors and foster senior management and leadership pipelines.

- > **Promote inclusive pathways:** Strengthen the ecosystem by harnessing a whole-system approach through investing in partnerships across education, industry, employers, and community organizations to close structural opportunity gaps and spur investments in training, mentorship and sponsorship to advance women, Indigenous peoples and equity-deserving groups.

With 21 % of high-potential individual contributors planning to leave their organizations within the next year—up from 13% in 2020—retaining high potential

employees needs to become a conscious strategy for would-be successful companies. This can take place in the context of a supply chain approach to closing pipeline gaps.

- > Increase infrastructure investments: Disparities in technology (broadband high-speed Internet access for rural Indigenous communities), social support (affordable child care, accessible educational opportunities) and health care (mental health services and wellness) all shape opportunities and advancement, particularly for Indigenous peoples, but also for women and others.

Systemic barriers like limited access to education and Internet infrastructure disproportionately affect equity-deserving groups, particularly in rural and Indigenous communities, restricting their professional development and leadership potential. Government programs like Connecting

Families and the Universal Broadband Fund provide affordable Internet and expand high-speed access to help address these gaps. Governments must prioritize funding for education and workforce development programs that target equity-deserving groups, ensuring they have access to the resources needed for professional advancement. For example, expanding access to Indigenous-specific training programs and digital literacy initiatives can help ensure Indigenous individuals acquire the skills needed to compete for leadership positions.

- > Affordable and culturally relevant child care: Government investment in child care is essential to fostering equitable workforce participation and advancing leadership opportunities for equity-deserving groups, particularly women. Affordable child care directly addresses barriers faced by women, who disproportionately shoulder caregiving responsibilities.



*Systemic barriers like **limited access to education and Internet infrastructure** disproportionately affect equity-deserving groups, particularly in **rural and Indigenous communities**, restricting their professional development and leadership potential.*

The chronic child care shortage in Canada, where only 29% of children in need have access to existing spaces, highlights decades of underinvestment. Efforts like the federal Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Fund aim to create 300,000 spaces and reduce fees to CA\$10/day. However, structural challenges such as low wages and staffing shortages threaten the program's sustainability. Drawing on Quebec's subsidized child care model, experts advocate for increased wages and strategic workforce incentives to ensure these investments deliver long-term impacts and support diverse leadership development.^{101, 102}

For Indigenous communities, culturally appropriate and accessible child care is particularly crucial. The Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework, co-developed by the Government of Canada and Indigenous partners, provides a vision for high-quality, Indigenous-led child care rooted in traditional languages and values. Supported by a CA\$1.7 billion federal investment over ten years, the Framework empowers Indigenous communities through self-determination and aligns with reconciliation efforts.¹⁰³ However, sustained investment, community-driven feedback, and regular assessments are vital to ensure its long-term success, prevent gaps in implementation, and build a child care system that respects Indigenous histories while supporting their future.

- > **Expand access and reach of training:** Much of the focus on skills and capacity development is on entry-level positions or on technological upskilling and reskilling. As there are fewer affordable and accessible opportunities for leadership development targeting women, Indigenous peoples and others, particularly in non-profit organizations and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), more such opportunities should be created and maintained.
- > **Challenge stereotypes and promote role models:** Leadership is highly gendered and cultural. To counteract this, it is critical to celebrate the success of leaders who are women, Indigenous peoples and from other equity-deserving groups, and to challenge assumptions and bias.

Bias is often mistaken to result in a passive form of exclusion. However, evidence is mounting that harassment and hate targeting high-profile women and racialized leaders are being deliberately orchestrated to drive them away from public and leadership roles, including women in political life. This culture includes a widespread experience of being hired into leadership at times of great crisis, then pushed off the glass cliff as a scapegoat for previous leadership decisions, or biased bullying for being who they are.

- > **Track disaggregated and intersectional data across sectors:** There is limited data outside of the little available through federally regulated companies, with no data on non-profits or charitable organizations, despite their accounting for a notable proportion of employment in Canada. A lack of data collection and disaggregation prevents the examination of intersectional identities necessary to adequately monitor the progress of representation of diverse population groups.

Collecting disaggregated data enables organizations to identify and address disparities among equity-deserving groups. This granular approach uncovers unique challenges different communities face, informing targeted interventions and resource allocation. Statistics Canada's Disaggregated Data Action Plan (DDAP) exemplifies this approach. Launched in 2021 with CA\$172 million in funding over five years, DDAP aims to enhance statistics on diverse populations and support more representative data collection methods. By producing detailed disaggregated data, DDAP will facilitate the development of policies and programs that

reflect Canada's diversity, fostering inclusive leadership across various sectors.

Organizational (Meso) Level

- > EDI strategies: Develop comprehensive EDI strategies aligned to organizations' strategies to embed a diversity and inclusion lens across all business functions or organizational processes, with an emphasis on improving diversity and inclusion in leadership.

Strong leadership and robust governance structures prioritizing EDI are crucial for fostering an inclusive leadership pipeline. Successful organizations embed EDI principles into their core governance and leadership strategies, ensuring accountability at the highest levels. Companies like Bell Canada, Telus and Rogers exemplify this by setting representation targets and integrating EDI considerations into corporate strategies, board policies and selection processes.^{104, 105, 106, 107} Similarly, Microsoft and IBM link executive compensation to board and leadership-level diversity targets, holding

leaders accountable for achieving measurable outcomes. Participation in voluntary initiatives like the 50 – 30 Challenge demonstrates a commitment to achieving gender parity and broader diversity in senior leadership.

Embedding EDI in leadership competencies, such as IBM's linking executive compensation to performance on diversity and inclusion and on building culture, reinforces the focus on attracting and retaining diverse talent by disclosing performance and measuring the representation of equity-deserving groups in executive positions.^{108, 109}

- > Inclusive governance: Set measurable diversity goals for boards and executive teams, consider competency frameworks, include EDI knowledge and experience in skills matrices, broaden the pool of candidates and deploy inclusive recruitment and selection processes to ensure merit-based leadership.

To strengthen governance, organizations can use skills matrices that include diversity characteristics, adopt inclusive guidelines and provide accessibility accommodations. Succession planning should focus on removing barriers and identifying candidates from equity-deserving groups for senior roles. Additionally, mandatory EDI training for boards and leaders is vital to fostering culturally responsive leadership. Increased representation of diverse backgrounds, such as Indigenous leaders, contributes to inclusive corporate cultures and supports reconciliation action plans, demonstrating a tangible commitment to positive outcomes for equity-deserving groups.



- > **Improve human resource practices:** Integrate EDI into HR processes to reduce bias in job descriptions, recruitment, selection, onboarding, development and mentoring, promotions, and retention of leaders.
- > **Recruitment, selection and promotion:** Inclusive recruitment, selection and promotion practices are vital to fostering diverse leadership by addressing systemic barriers that hinder the advancement of equity-deserving groups.

Traditional methods, such as rigid credential requirements and reliance on internal referrals, often exclude equity-deserving groups, limiting access to leadership opportunities. Innovative companies like Shopify address this issue by prioritizing competencies over formal credentials in hiring, opening pathways for candidates from marginalized backgrounds, including Indigenous Peoples, to compete for leadership roles.¹¹⁰ Capgemini and Wealthsimple further exemplify inclusive hiring by sourcing diverse candidates beyond traditional networks and focusing on varied skill sets, ensuring equitable access to leadership pipelines.

Competency-based, transparent leadership selection can reform promotion practices and play a critical role in advancing diverse leadership. Rogers has implemented several initiatives to broaden the talent pipeline and increase leadership diversity. The company requires a 50/50 diverse shortlist for all open roles and requires all hiring managers and recruiters to complete “Inclusive Recruitment” training. Leadership development programs, such

as Bell Canada’s Judy Project and Rogers’ Accelerated Development Program for women, offer tailored mentorship, skill-building and sponsorship to prepare equity-deserving groups for senior roles.^{111, 112}

- > **Build inclusive workplace cultures:** Ensure leaders understand the role of privilege and bias in the process of identifying, developing and mentoring leaders. Require anti-bias and cultural competency training, promote allyship, mentorship, sponsorship and coaching.

Mentorship and networking are essential enablers of career progression. Indigenous leaders, for example, have highlighted the importance of career and community mentors in guiding professional development and fostering confidence. Many equity-deserving groups lack access to learn from role models and through mentorship from those who have faced similar challenges



Leadership development programs, such as Bell Canada’s Judy Project and Rogers’ Accelerated Development Program for women, offer tailored mentorship, skill-building and sponsorship to prepare equity-deserving groups for senior roles.

and barriers due to a lack of representation at leadership levels. Leaders identifying as 2SLGBTQ+ emphasized the importance of empathy and engaging with aspiring leaders from the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

Organizations that create supportive environments and mentorship opportunities ensure diverse candidates can thrive, contributing to innovation and equity in leadership. An inclusive organizational culture is essential for enabling diverse leadership by creating an environment where equity-deserving groups feel valued, supported and empowered to thrive. Organizations that address tokenism, unconscious bias and workplace microaggressions establish a foundation for diverse talent to stay, grow and advance into leadership roles. Inclusive cultures mitigate systemic barriers and support a leadership pipeline reflective of diverse perspectives. Strategically developing tailored policies specific to the unique needs of equity-deserving groups facilitates organizational cultural shifts that are necessary. CivicAction, a non-profit organization, launched BoardShift in 2022, a program which trains and connects future racialized leaders with non-profit, charitable and public board opportunities while supporting boards by equipping them with the tools and resources necessary to implement inclusive governance practices.¹¹³

Flexible work arrangements and family-friendly policies, such as those implemented by Telus,¹¹⁴ help equity-deserving groups, particularly women, balance caregiving responsibilities and help them pursue professional growth. Robust mental health initiatives further address the unique

challenges faced by equity-deserving groups, fostering a supportive environment for career advancement. For Indigenous leaders, workplaces that respect Indigenous values—such as community-oriented leadership—and provide culturally specific support allow them to excel without compromising their identity. This approach highlights the importance of developing Indigenous-specific EDI policies to respect the unique rights of Indigenous Peoples.

> Establish targets, track and report: What gets measured gets done, and organizations need to set targets and track progress transparently. Tracking and measuring EDI efforts are crucial for enabling diverse leadership, ensuring organizations remain accountable for their diversity goals. Metrics allow companies to monitor the representation of equity-deserving groups at all levels, evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives and refine strategies to address gaps. Tools like diversity dashboards and employee surveys help organizations such as Rogers identify under-representation across the organization and implement targeted interventions.^{115, 116}

By setting explicit diversity goals, regularly tracking progress and transparently evaluating EDI policies, organizations create an inclusive culture where diverse talent can thrive, ensuring leadership reflects the richness of their workforce and communities.

Cultural awareness training, anti-bias programs, and initiatives like Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are vital to promoting inclusivity. Practices such as anti-

racism training enhance understanding and collaboration among diverse employees. By embedding these principles, organizations empower equity-deserving groups to reach their full potential, ensuring a diverse and dynamic leadership pipeline.

- > **Build partnerships:** Organizations often rely on informal networks to identify and develop potential leaders, and those networks may be exclusionary. Building relationships with organizations committed to developing women, Indigenous and diverse leaders can help organizations implement appropriate structures, policies and practices and identify qualified candidates for leadership roles.¹¹⁷

Integrating EDI across the value chain fosters diverse leadership by creating inclusive systems that support equity-deserving groups. Supplier diversity programs, accessible product design and inclusive marketing enable equity-deserving groups to contribute meaningfully and access opportunities. By embedding EDI into core processes, organizations cultivate a culture that nurtures diverse talent, ensuring leaders from varied backgrounds can thrive and drive innovation.

Supplier diversity programs, such as those at IBM, Rogers and Telus, demonstrate commitment by allocating budgets to engage businesses owned by equity-deserving groups.¹¹⁸ Inclusive product design ensures accessibility and usability, exemplified by Microsoft's accessible tools and inclusive AI standards. Telus enhances accessibility with programs like Internet for Good, addressing

diverse customer needs. Organizations like BMO reflect diversity through targeted banking programs and gender parity in media roles.

Marketing initiatives, such as Rogers' CA\$10 million ALL IN campaign, dispel stereotypes and promote inclusion. Canadian Tire and Laurentian Bank also align marketing with EDI values, ensuring authentic representation. Despite progress, EDI integration across the value chain remains limited, hindered by resource constraints and organizational resistance. Shifting EDI from HR to a core business strategy is key to driving widespread adoption and sustainable change.

- > **Outreach and expanding the pool:** These initiatives involve organizations proactively engaging equity-deserving groups through partnerships and initiatives to build inclusive talent pipelines.

For example, Bell's CA\$5 million Let's Talk Diversity Fund supports culturally informed mental health services,¹¹⁹ while Cogeco partners with Computers for Excellence Canada to provide computers to young Canadians.¹²⁰ Companies like Rogers collaborate with Toronto Metropolitan University's Cybersecure Catalyst, where 54% of graduates are women and 85% are racialized.¹²¹ IBM's STEM 4 Girls program introduces young girls to STEM careers through hands-on experience,¹²² while mentorship programs like TRIEC connect newcomer professionals with industry mentors to enhance cross-cultural understanding and employment opportunities. Institutions should create

formal sponsorship programs and offer leadership development opportunities

Hackathons such as SheHacks+ and ElleHacks provide women participants with networking and skill-building opportunities,^{123, 124} while initiatives like Google's scholarships for equity-deserving groups invest in future talent.¹²⁵ These programs provide equity-deserving groups with access to education, mentorship and career pathways, strengthening inclusion and workforce diversity.

Individual (Micro) Level

- > Self awareness, assessments and feedback: Aspiring leaders often need help in understanding their potential and to identify their leadership strengths and weaknesses.

Individual efforts by leaders and mentors to address biases and stereotypes are critical in enabling diverse leadership by fostering an inclusive culture that promotes

equity-deserving groups. Leaders who actively challenge their unconscious biases and stereotypes set an example for others, influencing organizational culture and decision-making processes. By raising awareness of microaggressions, stereotypes and systemic barriers, leaders and mentors help to dismantle the subtle and overt forms of discrimination that hinder diverse talent from advancing. Tools like the Harvard Implicit Association Test¹²⁶ and resources such as the Micropedia of Microaggressions¹²⁷ can equip individuals with the knowledge to identify and address harmful behaviours.

- > Professional development: In today's environment, leadership roles are demanding and there are a range of skill building programs that are available, including honing interpersonal skills, financial skills, technological skills and risk management skills through formal and informal learning.

Access to leadership and professional development programs empowers equity-deserving groups with the knowledge and tools needed to succeed in leadership roles. Programs focusing on industry trends, digital transformation and inclusivity build competence and confidence. Educational opportunities tailored to the unique challenges faced by equity-deserving groups ensure practical learning experiences that translate into measurable results. Tailored workshops, certifications and on-the-job experience allow aspiring leaders to bridge skill gaps and remain competitive.



*Leaders who **actively challenge their unconscious biases and stereotypes** set an example for others, influencing organizational culture and decision-making processes.*

- > Leverage supportive networks: Leaders need to build networks of advisors, mentors, role models and supporters that can provide vital guidance and direction that are propitious for career development and promotion.

Affinity groups and professional networks create safe spaces for equity-deserving groups to connect with peers with similar lived experiences. These networks provide emotional support, mentorship opportunities and a platform to share challenges and successes. By fostering community, support networks help individuals develop confidence and resilience. Networks often facilitate workshops, advocacy campaigns and leadership summits, enabling members to hone skills and build connections that enhance career mobility. Inclusive support ecosystems also allow individuals to exchange strategies for navigating systemic barriers, strengthening their capacity to contribute meaningfully to their organizations. Developing self-advocacy skills enables equity-deserving groups to navigate workplace challenges such as microaggressions, biases and systemic barriers. It also helps individuals assert their value, negotiate for equitable opportunities and assert their rights confidently. Encouraging self-reflection, growth mindsets, and perseverance fosters personal and professional development. Leadership training empowers individuals to pursue senior roles despite institutional hurdles. Initiatives celebrating diverse success stories provide role models, inspiring individuals to persist in breaking glass ceilings and forging pathways for future leaders.

- > Coaching, mentorship and sponsorship: Leaders should coach, mentor and sponsor diverse talent, creating pathways to leadership for others.

Board members and senior leaders can actively participate in the development and formation of the next wave of leaders in their workplace by engaging with aspiring talent from various equity-deserving groups through knowledge-transfer, guidance based on experience, and skilled advisory. Supporting junior employees prepares them for future senior-level roles, helps them navigate nuanced aspects of workplace development depending on the unique obstacles they may face, and is a key enabler to individual and organizational success by creating a valuable, rich and inclusive board pipeline.

- > Allyship: Allies can help amplify marginalized voices, challenge exclusionary behaviours, support inclusive initiatives and advocate for inclusive practices in decision-making, hiring and strategic planning within their spheres of influence.

Reactive allyship, where a peer or senior colleague intervenes and counteracts an exclusionary interaction or bias, can reaffirm the equity-deserving employee's belongingness while addressing unacceptable behaviour to influence positive behavioural changes among employees and promote inclusive culture. Proactive allyship builds equitable participation and increases recognition of the contributions of equity-deserving employees by empowering their voices across workplace functions and organizational processes. For example, Catalyst's MARC (Mutual Accountability,

Real Change) program is an initiative that leverages the unique opportunity men have and inspires them to be more responsible by advocating for equity.¹²⁸

Conclusion

This report began with a comprehensive depiction of the current status of leadership representation for different equity-deserving groups across various sectors in the country. Addressing the barriers identified in this report requires coordinated efforts from governments, organizations and individuals. Legislative measures, public awareness campaigns and culturally appropriate investments in education and child care are vital societal enablers. In organizations, embedding EDI in governance, recruitment and succession planning, fostering

inclusive cultures, and tracking measurable progress is essential. At the individual level, self-reflection, access to mentorship, professional development and supportive networks empower equity-deserving groups to overcome challenges and build leadership capabilities. Confronting and shifting bias is critical.

Meaningful and transformative change requires addressing barriers at all levels, engaging a complex systems approach. By embracing these strategies, Canadian organizations can overcome leadership retention challenges, creating an ecosystem that reflects the diversity of Canada and delivers a strong and resilient business sector, as well as meaningful and equitable opportunities for all.





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