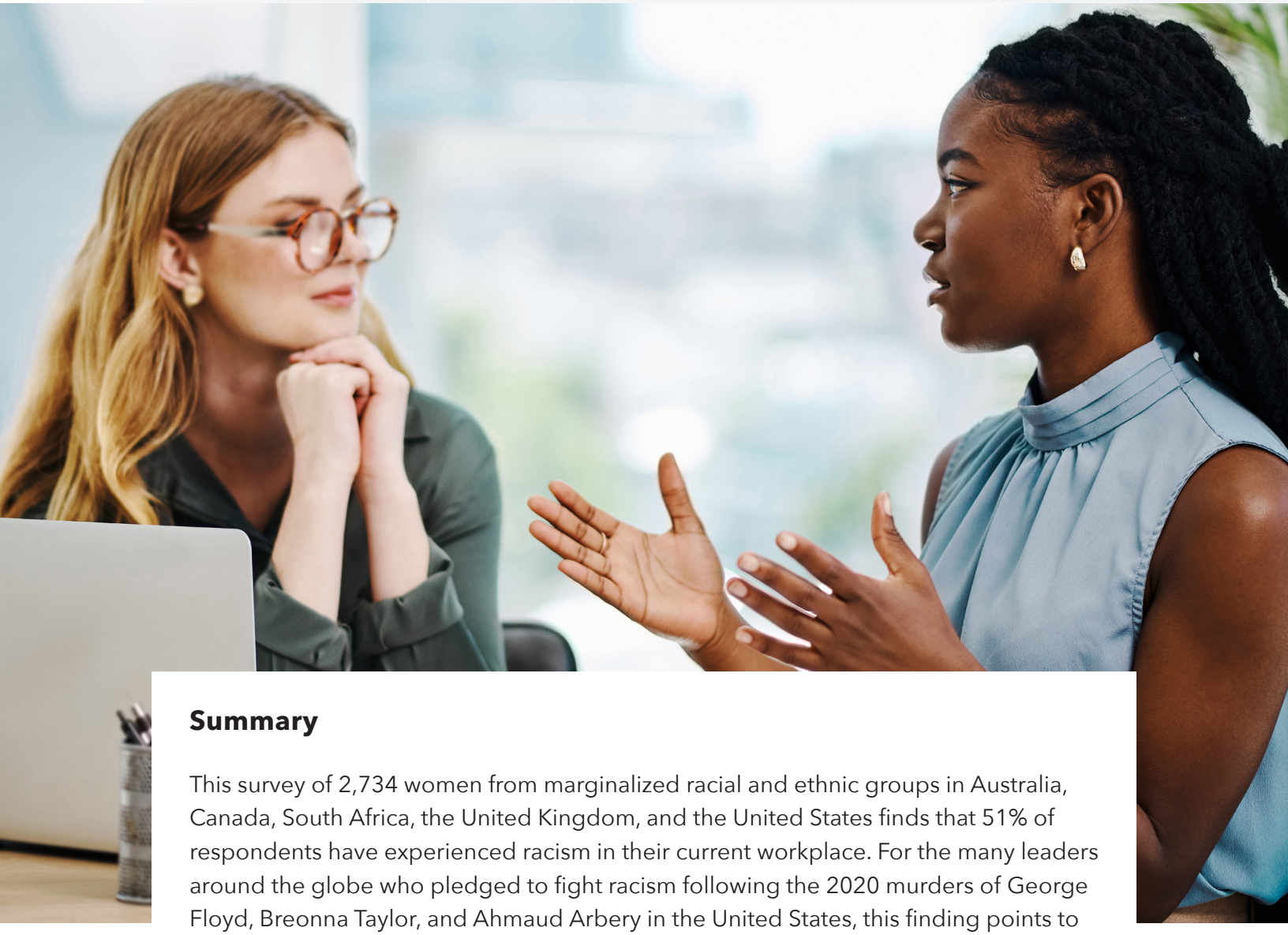
Exposé of Women's Workplace Experiences Challenges Antiracist Leaders to Step Up

Samantha E. Erskine, PhD, Sheila Brassel, PhD, Kathrina Robotham, PhD

CATALYST
WORKPLACES THAT WORK FOR WOMEN



Summary

This survey of 2,734 women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in Australia, Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States finds that 51% of respondents have experienced racism in their current workplace. For the many leaders around the globe who pledged to fight racism following the 2020 murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery in the United States, this finding points to a large disconnect in what leaders say they *want to* do and the reality that racism is still pervasive in workplaces internationally. What's worse, the links between the multiple oppressions that women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups experience at work are often ignored and go unaddressed. Authors Samantha E. Erskine, PhD, Sheila Brassel, PhD, and Kathrina Robotham, PhD, center women's experiences and highlight that leaders' actions and inactions can perpetuate intersectional forms of racial harm. The authors show that senior leaders who demonstrate allyship and curiosity can combat racism, in part by decreasing the climate of silence in their organization and increasing its diversity climate.

If you are a senior leader committed to fighting racism at work, you need to absorb these findings and adopt an intersectional approach to antiracist leadership. By taking action to interrupt intersectional forms of racial trauma, you can help advance equity in your workplace.

Becoming an Antiracist Leader

In this report, we center the voices of women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups because their experiences are often unnoticed or ignored in DEI interventions. When gender initiatives don't seek out the experiences of women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups, chances are that White women will be the main beneficiaries. Similarly, when antiracism initiatives fail to incorporate women's voices, it is likely that mainly men will benefit.[1]

This report elevates the stories of women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups so corporate leaders can clearly see that they continue to experience intersectional racial harm reflecting discrimination based on racial and ethnic identity, skin tone, hair texture, and/or LGBTQ+ identity.

We find that 51% of women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in Australia, Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States have experienced racism in their current workplace, with many sharing disturbing incidents of both overt and covert racism. The numbers are even higher for women with darker skin tones, queer women, and transgender women.

Our data also show that senior leaders can interrupt intersectional forms of racism and become antiracist change agents when they exhibit allyship and curiosity. Previous Catalyst research highlighted the importance of allyship and curiosity in creating a more inclusive, welcoming workplace,[2] and this report extends this work by underscoring how critical it is for these two behaviors to be at the heart of a senior leader's mindset. Moreover, this study highlights how senior leader allyship and curiosity improve companies' organizational climate. When that happens, experiences of racism are less likely to occur. However, leaders have work to do: Only half of survey respondents—51%—said their leader shows allyship at work, and 57% said that their leader shows curiosity.

Leaders: Racism does not occur just in interpersonal interactions; it also manifests in the various systems of power embedded in the institutions that govern societies. **And it is occurring in your workplace**. You can help repair intersectional racial harm and become the inclusive and antiracist leader you want to be by engaging in allyship and curiosity. These day-to-day actions are key to creating a work environment where people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups of all genders feel comfortable speaking up and where diversity is valued.[3]

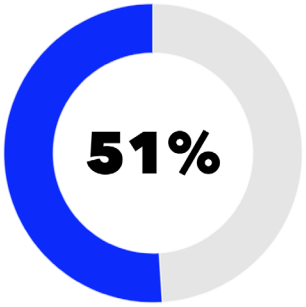
Key Findings

- Half (51%) of women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups experience racism at work.
- Women with darker skin tones are more likely than women with lighter skin tones to experience racism at work.
- Trans women (67%) and queer women (63%) are more likely than cisgender heterosexual women (49%) to experience racism at work.
- When senior leaders display allyship and curiosity, they can decrease the climate of silence and boost the diversity climate in their organizations, which in turn decreases the likelihood that women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups will experience racism at work.
- Senior leaders need to step up: 49% of survey respondents say their senior leaders do not engage in allyship, and 43% say they do not engage in curiosity.

Women From Marginalized Racial and Ethnic Groups Share Stories of Racism at Work

Because of their gender and their race and ethnicity, women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups are different from the majority of corporate leaders—White men—in the five White-dominant countries where we conducted this research. As such, these women may inadvertently be overlooked in initiatives meant to advance either people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups or women.[4] In this report, we shine a light on stories and experiences of women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups so that leaders at all stages can better understand how these women experience racism and what they as leaders can do to combat it.

We found that half of women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups experience racism in their current workplace (51%).[5]



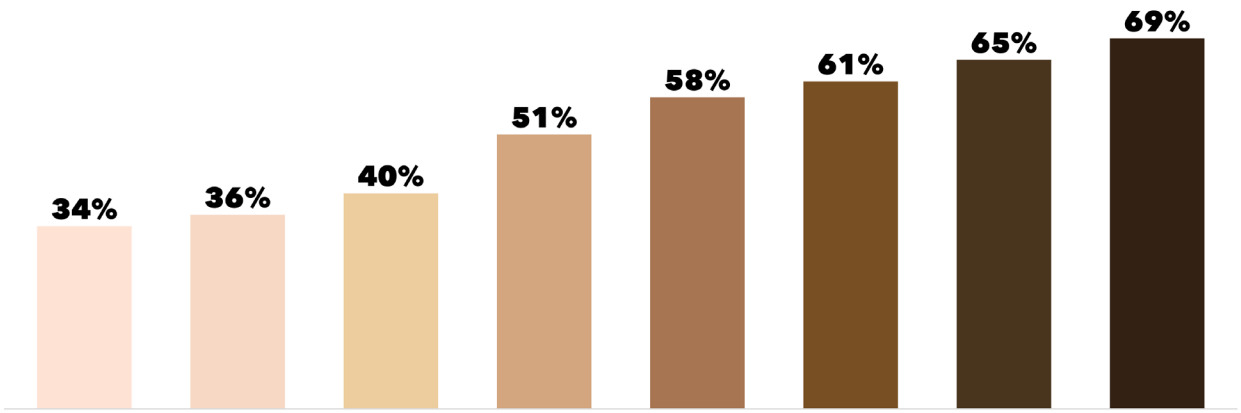
of **women** from marginalized racial and ethnic groups experience **racism** in their current workplace.

But the story isn't that simple. Digging into these experiences unearths the dramatic diversity in how women experience racism. Some women are disproportionately targeted with racism at work, particularly women with darker skin tones (colorism), those with more Afro-textured hair (texturism),[6] trans women (cissexism), and queer women (heterosexism).

Colorism and Texturism

We found that the darker a woman's skin tone, the more likely she was to experience racism at work.[7]

Women With Darker Skin Tones Are More Likely to Experience Racism at Work



% of Women Experiencing Racism in Their Current Workplace by Skin Tone

These findings are likely due to rampant global anti-Blackness—a term that describes more than just racism against Black people but also a disdain, disregard, and disgust for Black existence and the refusal to recognize Black humanity.[8] Across the globe, features that are "stereotypically Black" (e.g., wide nose, Afro-textured hair) are devalued relative to features that are "stereotypically White."[9] Stories from survey respondents illustrate how colorism as well as texturism play out at work. They also highlight how women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups experience what scholars have called intersectional invisibility—where intersecting marginalized identities render some aspects of women's identities invisible and other aspects of their identity hypervisible.[10]

"I have had racial slurs used against me or been belittled for being from a 'savage' culture. Some coworkers believe that skin colour equates to knowledge and my ability to do my job."

—Māori, queer,[11] cisgender woman, Australia

"A group of male coworkers were looking at my [dreadlocks] and sniggering. I later found out that they posted several Instagram photos doing blackface with a loc wig, specifically making fun of me."

—Mixed-race White and Black Caribbean, queer, cisgender woman, United Kingdom

"A co-worker would regularly comment on how nice fair skin is and how lucky she is to have straight blonde hair. While myself, an Indigenous Australian, and another coworker of Indian background would pretty much sit there with our darker skin tones and unruly dark hair looking at our feet while the manager and deputy would make similar comments and praise her. It was indirect but felt direct. The emotions those comments bring out were negative about myself and who I am."

—Aboriginal, straight, cisgender woman, Australia

"I remember when I had box braids and a coworker said they were unprofessional and not appropriate for the workplace."

—Black, queer, cisgender woman, South Africa

"A client was racist... [and said that] people of my [skin] color are impotent."

—Mixed-race, queer, cisgender woman, South Africa

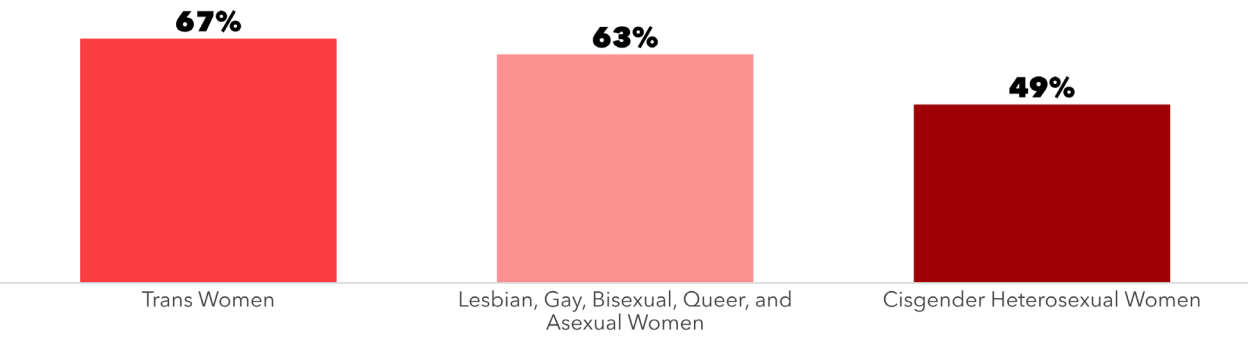
"My hair was in an Afro and my coworker, a White male, was saying I should be clean and do my hair."

—Black, queer, cisgender woman, Canada

Cissexism and Heterosexism

Experiences of racism are also shaped by cissexism (discrimination against nonbinary and trans people) and heterosexism (discrimination against queer people). We found that trans women (67%)[12] and lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and asexual women (63%)[13] are more likely than cisgender heterosexual women (49%) to experience racism at work.

LGBTQ+ Women From Marginalized Racial And Ethnic Groups Are More Likely to Experience Racism at Work



% of Women Experiencing Racism in Their Current Workplace by LGBTQ+ Identity

Discrimination and mistreatment don't always clearly reflect the biases that drive them.[14] Experiences of racism certainly reflect beliefs about race—but they can also involve underlying, less transparent beliefs about sexual orientation and gender. In this study, LGBTQ+ women's experiences of racism often encompass not only bias against their race and ethnicity, but also cissexism and heterosexism, as evidenced by the disproportionate rates of racism toward LGBTQ+ women and the specific content of their experiences of racism at work.

"A coworker never spoke to me because I am a lesbian and Black."
—Black, lesbian, cisgender woman, United States

"I've been treated unfairly before because I am a gay woman."
—Mixed-race White and Sri Lankan, gay, cisgender woman, United Kingdom

"I am a lesbian woman and have been profiled as a result."
—Cuban, lesbian, cisgender woman, United States

"A coworker made a joke about the color of my skin."
—Black Caribbean, demisexual, trans woman, United Kingdom

"One time a man at work told me he hopes I'm not Black or else he wouldn't trust me with work."
—Brazilian, queer, trans woman, Canada

"[As] a lesbian, [I] voiced my opinion in a primarily religious [US] state and I was reprimanded by the company."
—Latinx, lesbian, cisgender woman, United States

Intersectionality and Experiences of Racism

Women who are marginalized based on colorism, texturism, cissexism, and/or heterosexism were more likely to experience racism than their counterparts.

Indeed, women from many different marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds told wrenching stories about the racism they have endured, illustrating the breadth of ways that racism shows up at work. As their stories lay bare, racism occurs intersectionally, and it frequently targets not only a person's race but also their other marginalized identities such as gender, sexual orientation, religion, and immigration status.

Leaders: These findings reveal that antiracist leaders must address experiences of racism at work—and discrimination more broadly—through an intersectional lens that is mindful of colorism, texturism, cissexism, heterosexism, and other systems of oppression. **Without an intersectional lens, your antiracist efforts risk falling short.**

Quick Reference: Systems of Oppression

Oppression shows up at work through interpersonal behaviors as well as practices and expectations built into larger organizational and societal systems and structures.[15]

Racism values White people and devalues people from other racial and ethnic groups.

Sexism values men and devalues women and nonbinary people.

Colorism values people with lighter skin tones and devalues people with darker skin tones.

Texturism values people with straighter and finer hair and devalues people with kinkier and coarser hair.

Cissexism values cisgender people and devalues trans and nonbinary people.

Heterosexism values straight people and devalues queer people.

Are Some Workplaces Really Free of Racism?

You may be wondering about the 49% of women who did not report experiencing racism in their current workplace. Are their leaders and workplaces truly free of racism? We are not so sure.

- We have learned that some women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups have deliberately chosen to avoid working in predominantly White organizations where they may encounter racism. Instead, they have chosen to work at identity-affirming organizations that demonstrate inclusion in deed, not just in performative words.[16] These organizations are often composed of other people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups. The challenge with this self-care and survival practice is that because of structural racism, predominantly White organizations are often more financially resourced than organizations with large proportions of people of color.[17]
- Other women may experience racism but not necessarily identify or name it as such.[18] This could happen when racist actions occur covertly or behind the scenes, or when racist behavior is so normalized that women are accustomed to it as just the way things are.
- Lastly, the structure of some women's organizations and jobs may insulate them from interpersonal racism while they still experience the effects of structural racism.[19] For example, racism can be embedded in systems that are not visible to individuals and can therefore go unreported (e.g., when AI algorithms are biased against women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups,[20] which could influence job opportunities and hiring decisions).

Call to Action

1. Use Allyship and Curiosity to Prevent Experiences of Racism

Senior leaders must recognize the reality that racism is pervasive at work and redouble efforts to lead organizational change that will address these all-too-common experiences. They can do so by demonstrating allyship and curiosity, which our data show can decrease the likelihood of experiencing racism at work.[21] We find that 56% of respondents experienced racism when leaders did not demonstrate allyship and curiosity, compared to 46% of respondents when leaders did exhibit these behaviors.[22]

Previous Catalyst research has already called out these two leadership behaviors and their importance to experiences of inclusion for people of color in the United States.[23] In that work, we defined allyship and curiosity in the following ways:

- **Allyship** means actively supporting people from marginalized groups.[24] It's about using as much institutional, social, and/or cultural privilege or power as you have to advocate for people who face oppression. Allies amplify unheard voices, call out barriers and biases that can inhibit progress, and act as role models in their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- **Curiosity** is about proactively seeking out different points of view,[25] listening to others, learning, and reflecting on what you've heard. People who are curious are open to new perspectives, welcome respectful exchanges of ideas, and channel their learning into action. They recognize that each of us is exposed to just a fraction of the world, and they value the insights that diversity and difference bring.

Our data show that senior leaders are falling short. Many women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups say that they do not see their senior leaders demonstrating allyship or curiosity.[26]

5 in 10

report senior leaders do not engage in **allyship**

4 in 10

report senior leaders do not engage in **curiosity**

Next Steps

Acting with curiosity will help you understand how your own biases might be influencing your inactions and contributing to racial harm and trauma in your workplace. Your inclusive and antiracist allyship actions will show that you value the diverse experiences and voices team members bring to your organization and that you have zero tolerance for racism. Here are some steps to take.

Interrupt Racism Through Allyship

Allyship is not an identity. It involves continuous and reflexive practices that interrupt systemic and intersectional racism.[27]

Own Up to Your Challenges: Get out of the wishful thinking that racism is "out there, not here."[28] Showing empathy toward people "out there" while not taking action to protect your colleagues at work is disingenuous and indicates a lack of self-, social, and organizational awareness.

Speak Up: Interrupt colleagues and clients who make racist comments. You may be afraid that speaking up will create more divisiveness, but tolerance of racism creates a toxic workplace and impacts organizational effectiveness.

Do Your Own Work: Stop placing the burden on women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups—who already endure intersectional forms of racial oppression—to interrupt racism and navigate racist workplaces.

Co-create a Vision: Inspire your colleagues to co-create a shared vision of thriving together at work. When people are thriving, they experience both a sense of vitality and learning. They have energy, feel alive, have positive relationships at work, acquire new knowledge, and apply their expertise and skills—all of which help organizations thrive as well.[29]

Be Genuine: Align your team and organizational value statements with what you are actually doing, as opposed to what you wish you were doing.

Get Curious

Be curious about how your emotions, attitudes, experiences, and organizational practices are impacting women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups.

Interrogate Yourself: Try to better understand and interrupt your tolerance of racism, sexism, and the multiple ways in which interlocking forms of oppression harm team members.

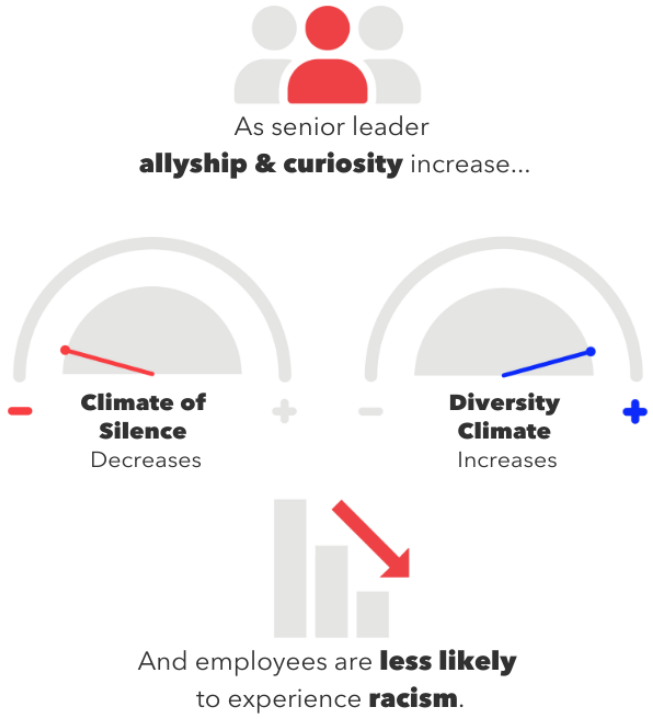
Cultivate Empathy: Take the time to get to know the lived experiences and different perspectives of marginalized people in your organization by leaning into your curiosity to hear, feel, understand, and interrupt racism in the workplace.

Practice Organizational Awareness: Practice recognizing how power and other organizational dynamics exacerbate racism in your workplace; if you can get better at recognizing the subtext behind intersectional forms of racism, you can become a more inclusive leader.

Dig Into the Data: Collect qualitative and quantitative data to understand employee experiences of racism. Share the findings with your staff, board, investors, and the general public—even if it hurts to hear or see on paper.

2. Strengthen Organizational Climate

Executives' experiences, values, ideologies, and personalities greatly influence their decision-making, actions, and inactions, and therefore the type of workplace they lead. When senior leaders demonstrate allyship and curiosity, they are strengthening their organizational climate. More specifically, our analysis shows that allyship and curiosity help senior leaders modulate two organizational conditions: climate of silence and diversity climate. And when the climate of silence decreases and diversity climate increases, the likelihood of experiencing racism at work declines.[30]



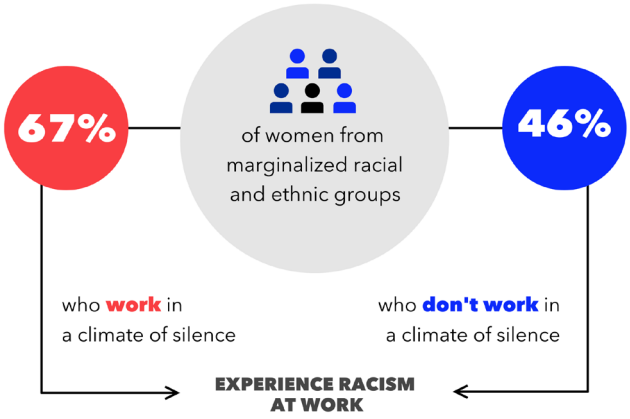
Definitions

- **Climate of silence:** "An environment where employees feel restrained from constructively speaking up about organizational or work-related problems, concerns, or challenges."[31]
- **Diversity climate:** The degree to which an organization values diversity and advocates for fair policies.[32]

Climate of Silence

The data from this study tell us that an organizational climate of silence is related to an increased likelihood of experiencing racism at work:[33]

- 67% of women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups who work in a climate of silence experience racism at work, compared to 46% of those who do not work in a climate of silence.[34]

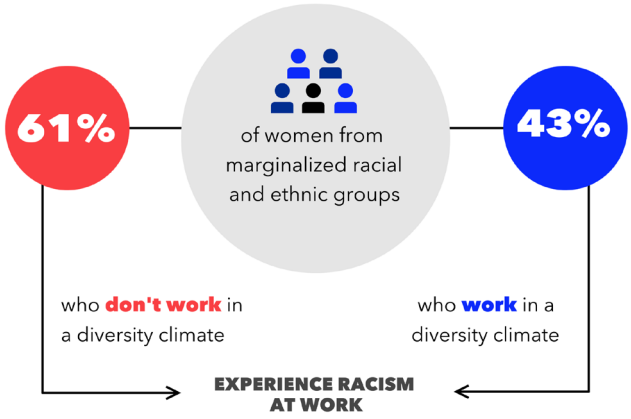


When employees speak up in a climate of silence, they risk being excluded, shut down or ignored, passed over for promotions, and/or punished with a mountain of work.[35] Catalyst research finds that climates of silence help enable discrimination; for example, in climates of silence, men are less likely to interrupt sexism at work.[36] In these climates, inappropriate, sexist, and racist behaviors can flourish, in part because employees are discouraged from speaking up when they witness these behaviors. Climates of silence are harmful for employees as well as their organizations and are linked with increased turnover rates and decreased employee job satisfaction and well-being.[37]

Diversity Climate

Our data also show that diversity climates are associated with a decreased likelihood of experiencing racism at work:[38]

- 43% of women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups who work in a diversity climate experience racism at work, compared to 61% of those who don't work in a diversity climate.[39]



Diversity climates benefit all employees and are associated with less discrimination at work,[40] increased job satisfaction, organizational commitment, engagement, and performance, and decreased employee withdrawal.[41] Research also suggests that its associations with positive outcomes are particularly strong for those from marginalized racial and ethnic groups.[42]

Next Steps

Naming issues directly can spur personal and organizational responsibility for addressing them. For example, instead of using less direct phrases such as "unconscious bias," specifically name issues such as racism, White supremacy, anti-Blackness, anti-Asian racism, anti-Latinx racism, and systemic gendered racism.

Lift the Silence: By speaking out against racism as an ally and actively listening with curiosity to others' perspectives, you can demonstrate your expectations for employee behavior, encouraging others to do the same—lifting the silence that hides and sustains experiences of racism at work.

Value Diversity: Demonstrate a willingness to listen to, and actively consider, the perspectives of employees from historically marginalized groups. Strive to minimize power differentials in decision-making and encourage norms of collaboration among coworkers.[43] When you nurture a diversity climate, you can make a difference in employees' experiences of racism.

Examine Your Policies for Fairness: Critically evaluate your hiring and promotion practices for bias and implement safeguards to ensure employees are evaluated objectively. For example, job postings with gender-neutral words,[44] masked or blinded resume screenings,[45] and a diverse set of hiring managers[46] have all been shown to reduce bias and increase applicant diversity during the hiring process. In addition, determine whether policies such as sick leave are interpreted and applied similarly for all employees. Fairness perceptions play an important role in experiences of racism.

3. Create Accountability Programs

These findings paint a vivid picture of the workplace reality for women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups: **Racism is pervasive**. When asked to describe their experiences, survey respondents reported a wide range of covert and overt forms of racism, including negative assumptions, belittling insults, disparaging remarks, discriminatory actions, and outright racial slurs. The emotional weight of these episodes contributes to enduring racial trauma, a form of psychological injury,[47] as well as the Emotional Tax[48] that many women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups experience in predominantly White organizations. As such, the quotations shared here contain racially sensitive material that may be harmful or traumatizing to some readers.

"[I was] told Black is disgusting."

—Mixed-race White and Black Caribbean, cisgender woman, United Kingdom

"[Someone] made fun of the color of my skin and said I was a border hopper."

—Mexican, cisgender woman, United States

"'Why are you people always late and... very loud?' A colleague once asked me this question. It was my first time being late."

—Black Native African, straight, cisgender woman, South Africa

Some Asian women described traumatic and hurtful experiences of racism, including being blamed for the Covid-19 pandemic: *"When Covid-19 broke out in 2020, my colleagues described my ethnic group as 'carriers.'"*

—South Asian, straight, cisgender woman, Canada

"White people laughed at me and called me a monkey."

—Black British, queer, cisgender woman, United Kingdom

A number of women said they were called a n*** and that no one addressed or interrupted this blatant form of racism:** *"One time at work, I was called the n-word. They laughed at me, and made jokes with my name. Then I told the manager. She said she will get back to me when she is done talking to them about the situation, which she never did."*

—African, straight, cisgender woman, Canada

"When I was in a meeting my colleague made a passing comment like, 'I thought you would have [been] eating in the ground being Aboriginal.' Nothing was done. I felt so awkward I just half laughed it off and moved on."

—Aboriginal and African American, straight, cisgender woman, Australia

"Someone told me that my accent is difficult to understand so I should write more and talk to them less."

—Black, straight, cisgender woman, Canada

"I made a comment that as a Muslim, I didn't want to hear about Christianity all the time and coworkers discussing Jesus and the church. From then on, I saw coworkers snicker every time I came around."

—East Indian and Iranian, queer, cisgender woman, Canada

Even when women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups advance in their careers, they continue to experience racism: *"A Christmas party was planned by the White nationals I work with, but I wasn't informed or invited even though I am an executive."*

—Black, straight, cisgender woman, South Africa

All of the encounters described above happened at work and serve to reinforce how toxic racism is in the workplace. The rampant and unfettered nature of the racism we report on here suggests that people tolerate racism and that they do not believe racism is a problem. These two factors hinder accountability, as it is difficult to motivate people to stop being racist when there is no cost involved.

In addition, the stories we heard from our survey respondents are not just about racist acts carried out by peers—many stories describe racism coming from superiors. Indeed, **nearly a quarter** (25%) of women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups **believe that senior leaders in their organization would discriminate against an employee** based on ethnicity, race, or culture.

"My manager chose to give my White colleague credit for a project that I have worked hard for. He did not apologize or try to resolve the issue. Instead, he continued giving her praise for the work that I have done."

—Black, queer, cisgender woman, South Africa

"I was mocked at a social event. A senior manager deliberately kept calling me by the other Black person's name, implying that he could not tell us apart."

—Black, straight, cisgender, woman, United Kingdom

"I had one manager actually tell me she prefers White [women] because they attract more business."

—Mexican, straight, cisgender, woman, United States

"A young White [man] was said to be more skilled to take the position I was fit for, only for me to end up having to train him. I am Black and female. The dichotomies and bias in the workplace are horrible."

—Black, straight, cisgender woman, South Africa

"I applied for a senior position and there were two contenders, myself and a White lady. I was more experienced and had worked with the company much longer. I did not get the job and when I inquired, I was told that they based their decision on what looks good for the company and that their Black Business Enterprise (BBE) requirements were well fulfilled."

—Black, straight, cisgender woman, South Africa

Next Steps

When you and your colleagues are held (and feel) accountable for your actions and inactions, your behaviors will shift. Incentivize employees to practice inclusive leadership, penalize those who breach organizational values, and dismiss employees who engage in egregious forms of racism in and out of the workplace. Accountability, as a component of allyship, entails consequences.[49]

Be an Antiracist Leader: When you fail to actively ground your leadership practices in antiracism, you help perpetuate racial hierarchies and toxic organizational climates. Your silence on these issues contributes to the status quo of White supremacy and legitimates the unequal distribution of resources in workplaces.[50] It also protects and promotes White comfort.[51] It's time to center the intersectional forms of racial harm experienced by women in your workplace over White comfort so women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in your workplace are no longer forced to endure racial trauma.

Measure Experiences of Racism: Create systems to gather feedback to measure if there is a gap between what leaders say about wanting to create inclusive workplaces and what women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups actually experience at work.

Change the Culture: It's up to you to create an organizational culture that does not perpetuate racial harm and trauma, and where women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups can thrive like their White colleagues.

Hold Staff Accountable: If you are genuine in your desire to create an antiracist workplace, you need to make clear that racist behaviors are unacceptable in your organization and that you believe that racism is an urgent problem that you can help solve. Then, you need to create accountability programs that identify and track employee behaviors that are out of step with your organization's espoused values so you can take swift action when needed.

About the Authors

The authors are all cisgender women living in the United States, and have a diverse set of identities, including Afro-Latina, Black Caribbean, White, queer, and straight. They have heritage from Jamaica, Costa Rica, Panama, and the United States.

Samantha E. Erskine, PhD, was a Catalyst research fellow focused on gender, race, ethnicity, and culture. She is currently an Assistant Professor in the College of Management at the University of Massachusetts Boston and an executive/life coach. As a critical qualitative scholar, Samantha focuses her research on the emotions and practices of Whiteness, patriarchy, and antiracist feminist leadership. She has also published on White allyship, resilience, and flourishing/thriving in the workplace.

Sheila Brassel, PhD, is a mixed-methods, interdisciplinary researcher committed to building more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces. At Catalyst, she contributes expertise in intersectionality, inclusion, sexual harassment, and experiences of bias related to gender, race, and sexual orientation to Catalyst's global research programs. Sheila uses data-driven insights on these and other DEI topics to provide organizations with actionable solutions for building inclusive workplaces.

Kathrina Robotham, PhD, is an organizational psychologist whose research aims to understand the experiences, perceptions, and consequences of workplace mistreatment for marginalized groups and discover individual and organizational factors that foster diversity, equity, and inclusion. At Catalyst, Kathy is a Senior Research Associate where she uses her expertise in DEI, research methods, and statistics to conduct rigorous research on DEI in a rapidly changing world of work.

Methodology

About the World of Voices Series

This study is part of our World of Voices research series, which aims to amplify the voices of employees from marginalized racial, ethnic, and cultural groups; provide global business leaders with data-driven, intersectional insights; and help organizations not only drive positive change but also illuminate a path forward for equity and inclusion. Through this series, we tell untold, authentic, and unapologetic stories from marginalized voices, leveraging both qualitative and quantitative data.

The first report in the World of Voices series drew on qualitative interviews from expert business leaders and scholars around the world; this report draws on mixed-methods data to center the experiences of women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in racism research.

About This Study

The intent of this study is to understand the extent to which women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups experience racism in their workplace and investigate mitigating and exacerbating factors from senior leaders and organizational climate. Our aim was not to draw comparisons or conclusions between the experiences of women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in different countries. Instead, this research sought to take a deeper look into the experiences of women within each country.

We surveyed 2,734 women from marginalized ethnic and racial groups in Australia, Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. A number of gender options were presented to participants, and this report draws on data for those who identified as a woman or as a trans woman, specifically.

These countries were selected because of the ability to collect sufficient racial and/or ethnic demographic data from survey respondents. In each of these countries, people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups may have similar, though certainly not identical, experiences in navigating bias, unfair treatment, and discrimination in the workplace and society as a whole.[52]

Identities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, nonbinary, queer, and many others (LGBTQ+) have meaningful distinctions within and across individuals and countries.[53] At the same time, LGBTQ+ employees often have similar, though certainly not identical, experiences navigating bias and discrimination within and outside of work.[54]

We simultaneously recognize, respect, and value the integrity of each unique identity within the LGBTQ+ umbrella; emphasize the importance of providing data on experiences of bias and discrimination that would not otherwise be possible for each distinct identity group due to sample size limitations; and honor the social and cultural significance of broader LGBTQ+ communities.

Procedure and Analysis

- Study participants were asked about experiences of racism at work, their perceptions of their work environment, and perceptions of their senior leaders in their organization.
- Participants were also asked demographics questions, such as their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and skin tone. For skin tone, participants were asked to select which of the eight skin tone options best matches their skin tone.
- When responding to questions about whether they had experienced racism in their current workplace, participants could respond with "*yes*" or "*no*."
- Responses to questions about their work environment ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).
- When asked to share their perceptions of their senior leaders, participants' response options ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*a great deal*). These questions were combined to create a composite measure of senior leaders' allyship and curiosity behaviors because they were strongly associated with one another ($r = .86$, $p < .001$), which was used in all analyses except for those that break out senior allyship and curiosity separately. See endnote 21 for further discussion.
- To analyze this data, we conducted chi-square tests, logistic regressions, and hierarchical linear regressions. All results presented in this report were significant at $p < .001$ unless otherwise noted.
- For chi-square analyses and frequencies of senior leader and climate variables, high levels were coded as scale responses 5–7 (see continuous variable descriptions in above bullets).

Demographics

Gender

98%

Cisgender Women

2%

Trans Women

Sexual Orientation

14%

Identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, and/or Asexual

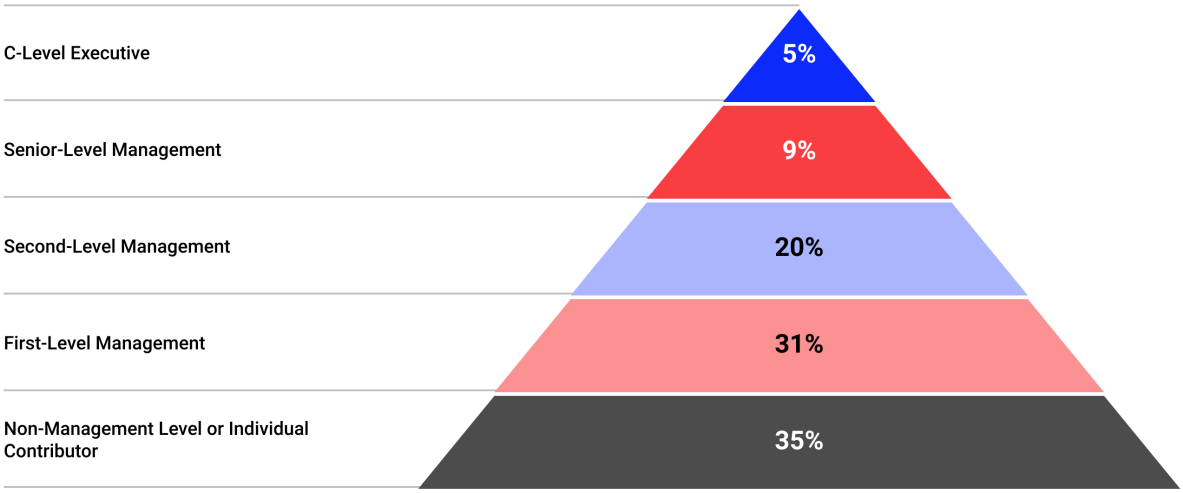
83%

Do not Identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, and/or Asexual

3%

Prefer Not to Say

Rank



Top Five Industries

20% Administration/General Management

12% Finance/Accounting/ Purchasing

8% Marketing and Sales

8% Other Non-Technical Role

8% Healthcare Delivery

Countries

10% Australia

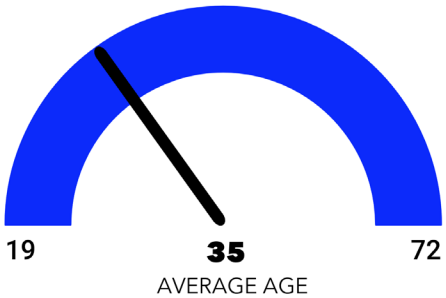
15% Canada

11% South Africa

22% United Kingdom

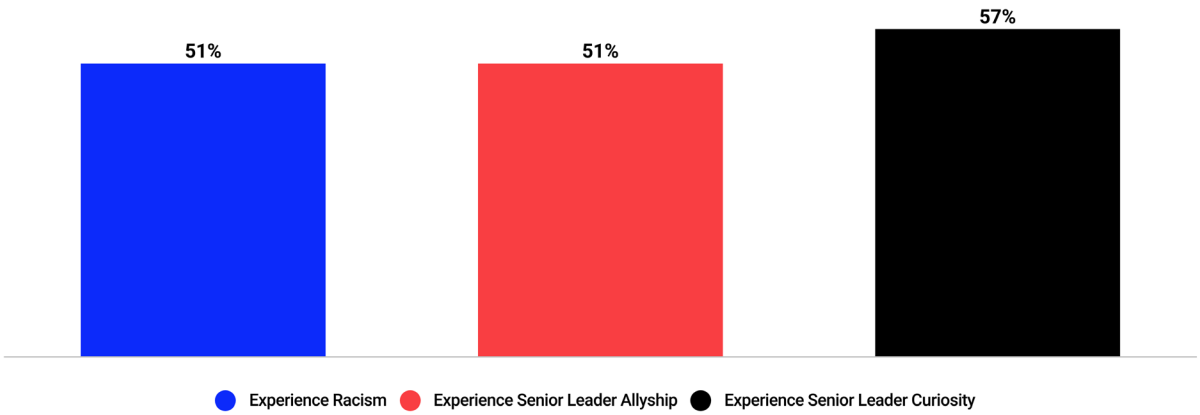
42% United States

Age

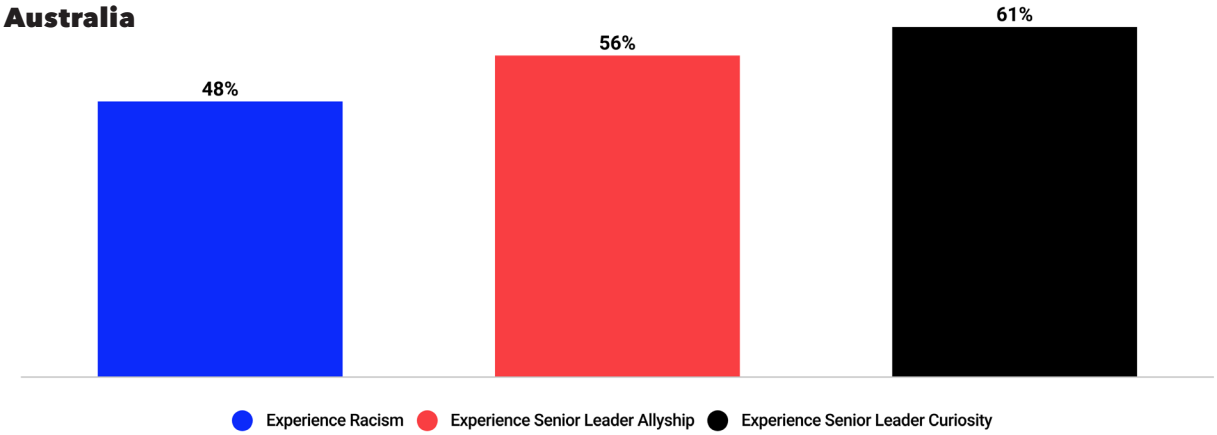


Country Breakouts: % Experiencing Racism, Senior Leader Allyship, and Senior Leader Curiosity

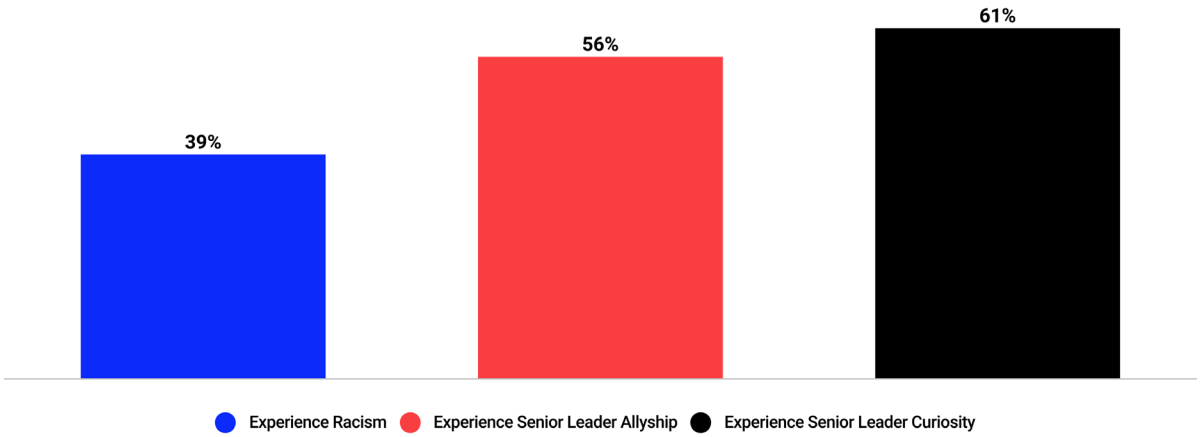
Total



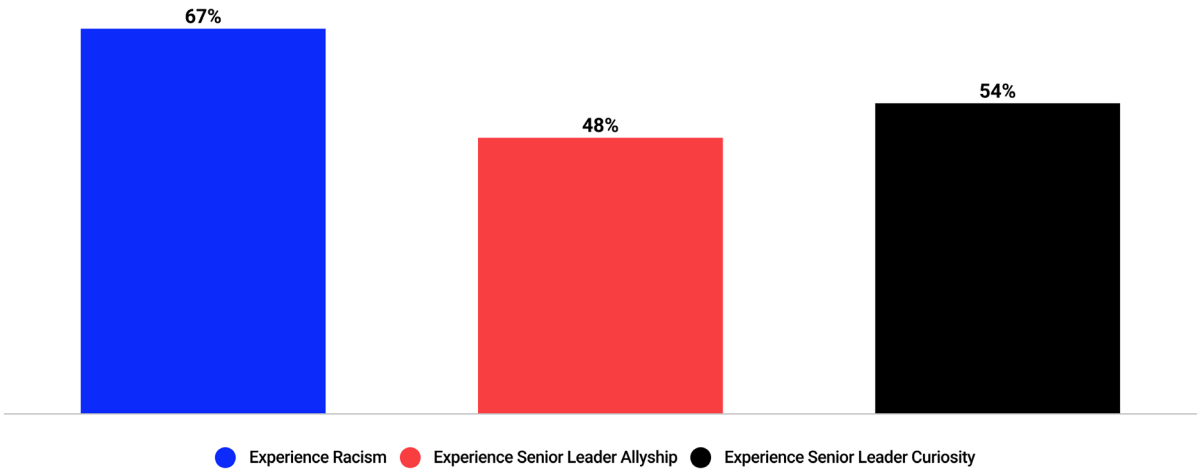
Australia



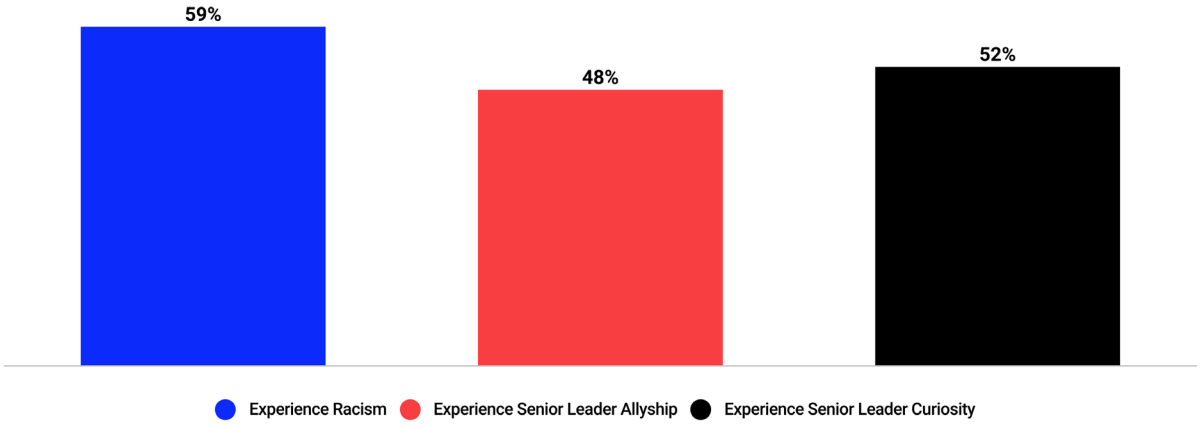
Canada



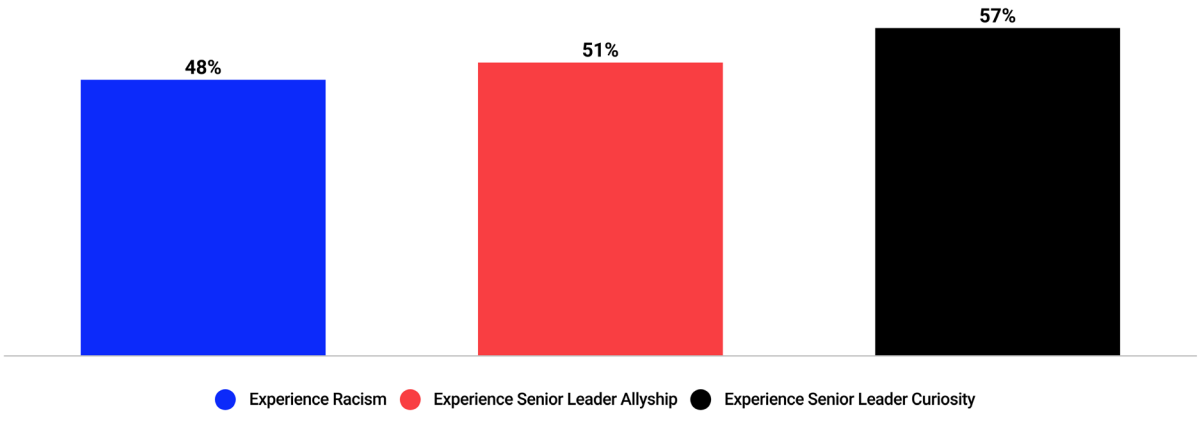
South Africa



United Kingdom



United States

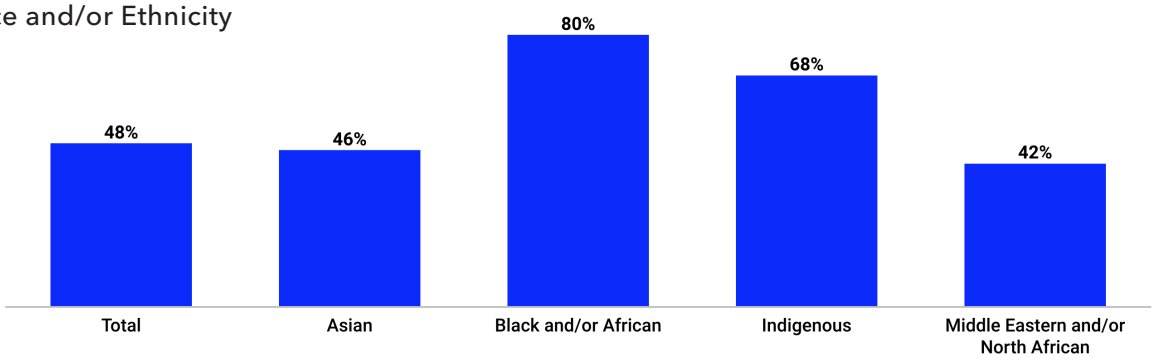


Country Breakouts for Experiences of Racism

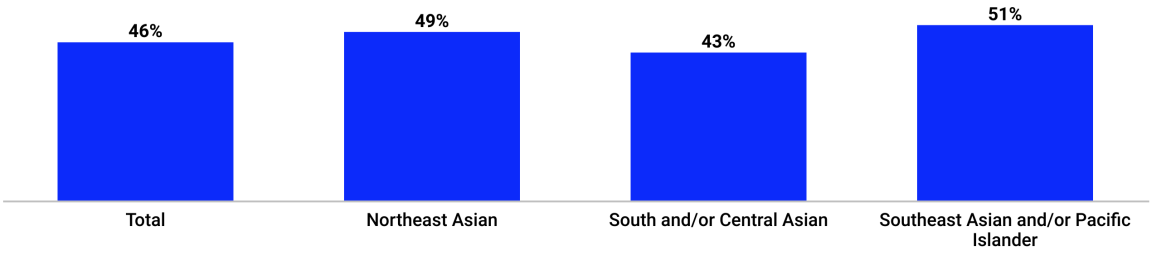
Australia

48% of 263 women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in Australia have experienced racism in their current workplace.

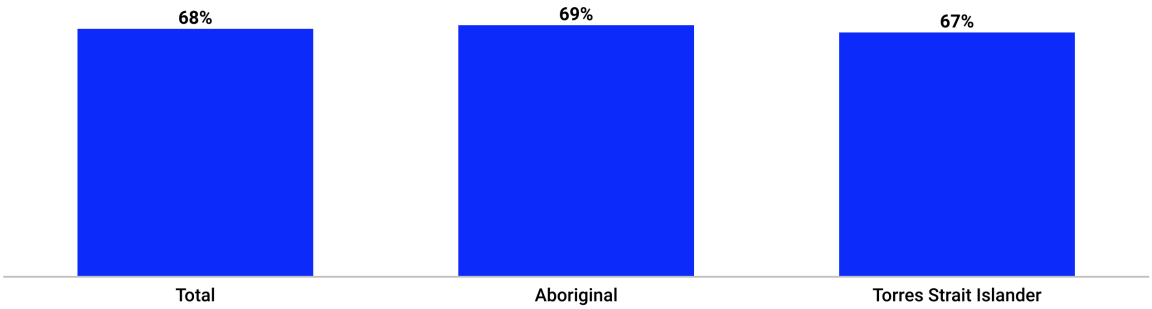
Race and/or Ethnicity



Breakout: Asian Women in Australia



Breakout: Indigenous Women in Australia



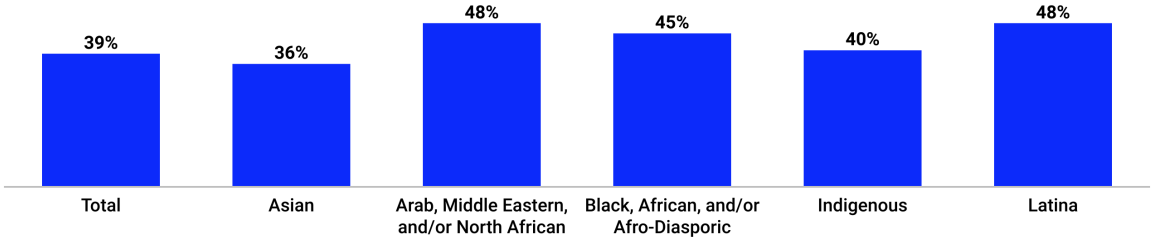
% Experiencing Racism in Current Workplace

Note: Percentages are provided for groups that have a large enough sample for reliable interpretation of results.

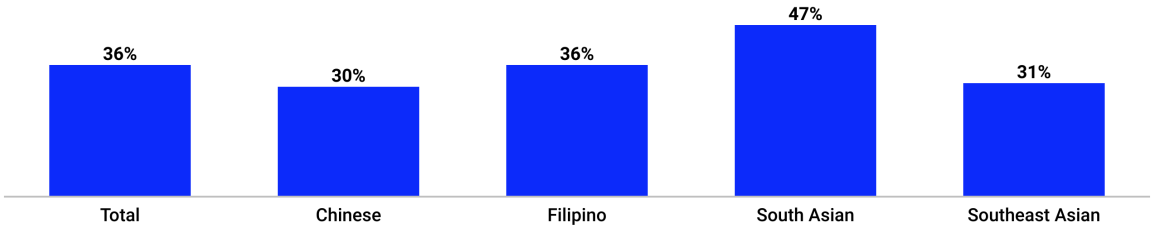
Canada

39% of 415 women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in Canada have experienced racism in their current workplace.

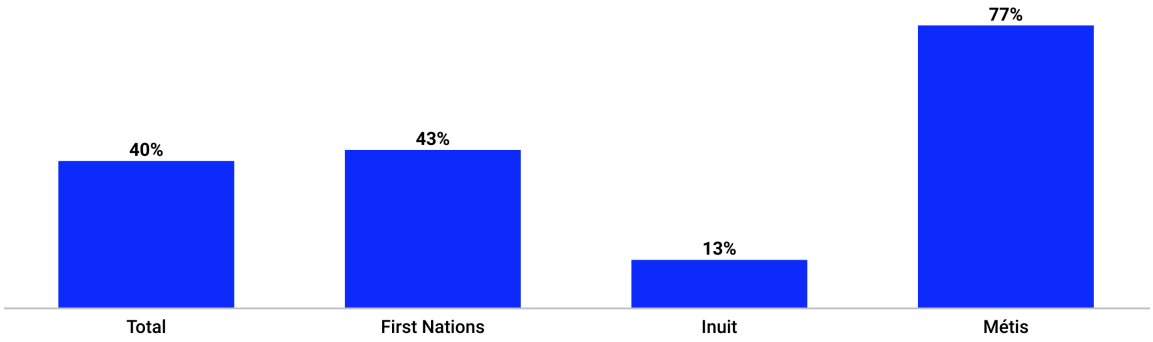
Race and/or Ethnicity



Breakout: Asian Women in Canada



Breakout: Indigenous Women in Canada

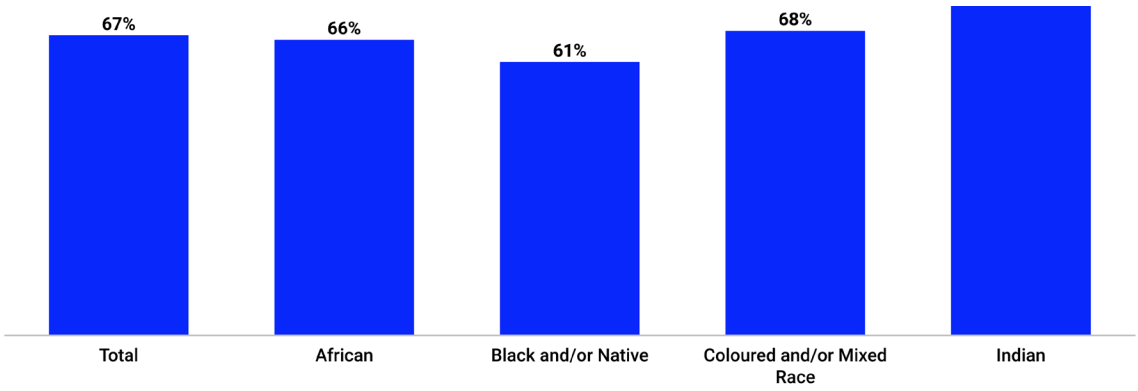


% Experiencing Racism in Current Workplace

Note: Percentages are provided for groups that have a large enough sample for reliable interpretation of results.

South Africa

67% of 308 women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in South Africa have experienced racism in their current workplace.



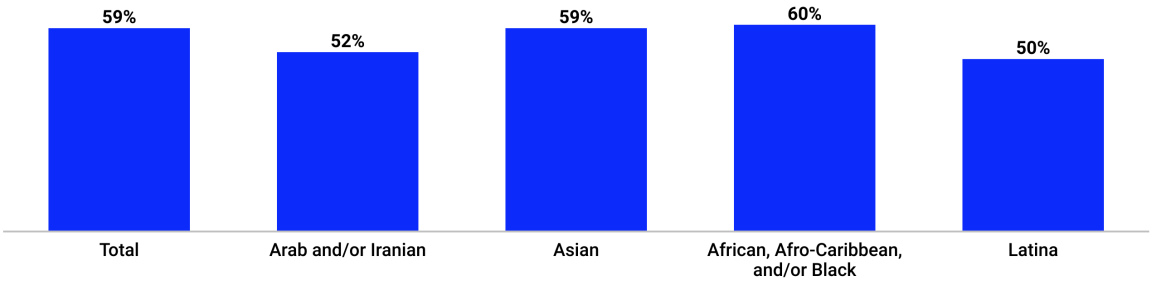
% Experiencing Racism in Current Workplace

Note: Percentages are provided for groups that have a large enough sample for reliable interpretation of results.

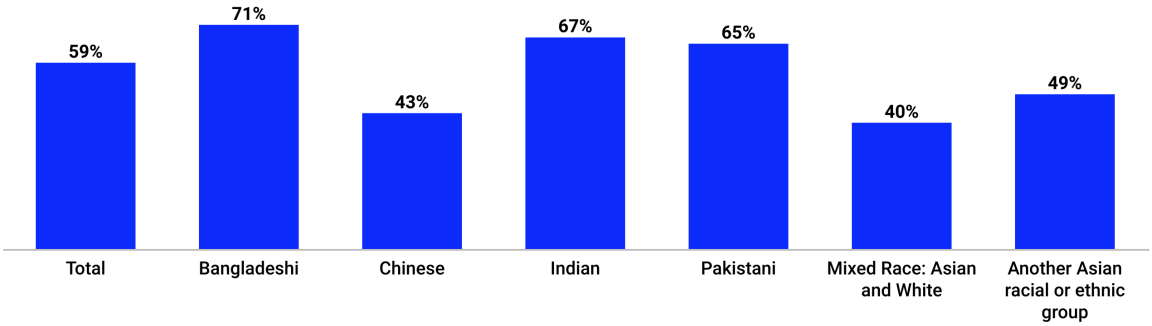
United Kingdom

59% of 604 women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in the UK have experienced racism in their current workplace.

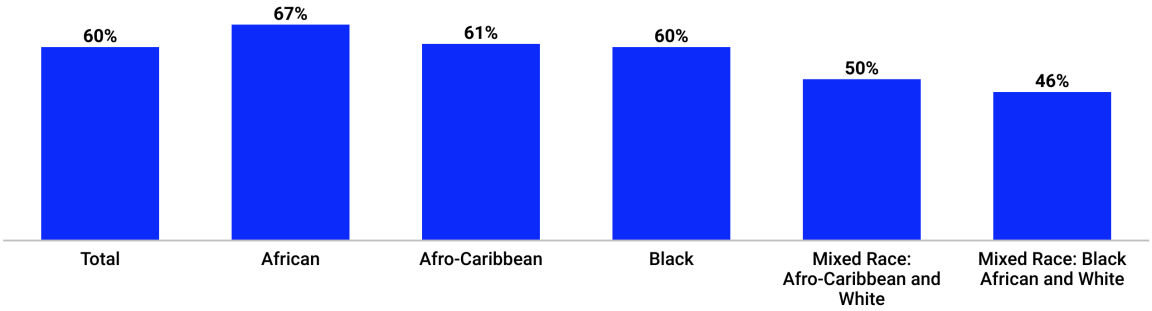
Race and/or Ethnicity



Breakout: Asian Women in the United Kingdom



Breakout: African, Afro-Caribbean, and/or Black Women in the United Kingdom



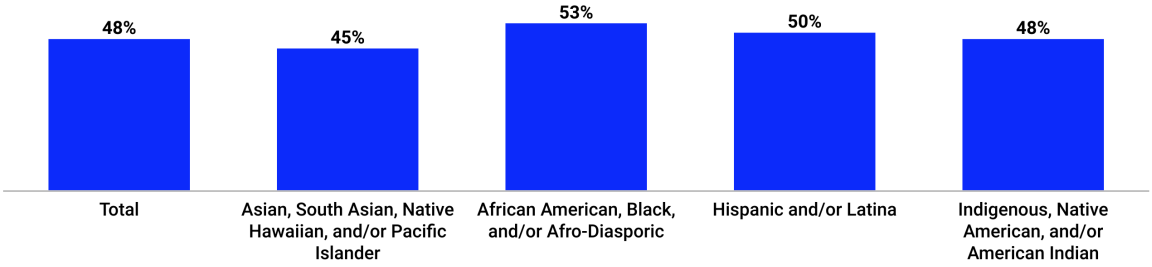
% Experiencing Racism in Current Workplace

Note: Percentages are provided for groups that have a large enough sample for reliable interpretation of results.

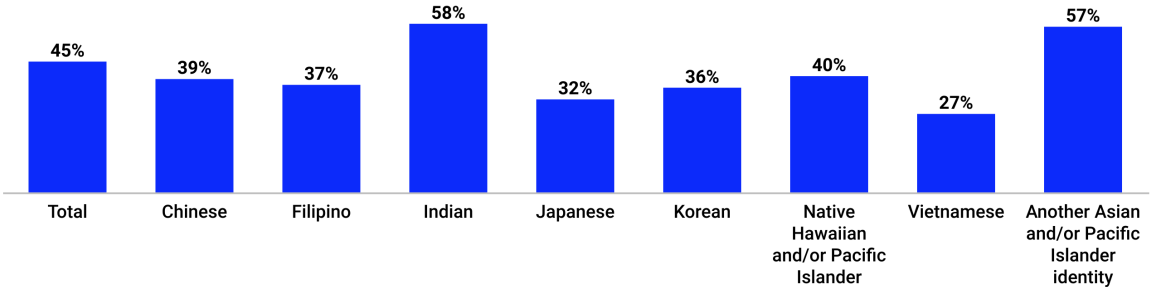
United States

48% of 1,144 women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in the US have experienced racism in their current workplace.

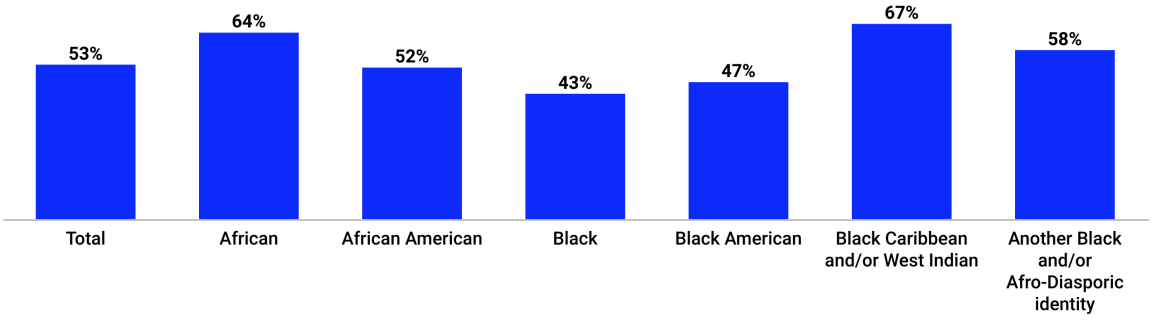
Race and/or Ethnicity



Breakout: Asian Women in the United States



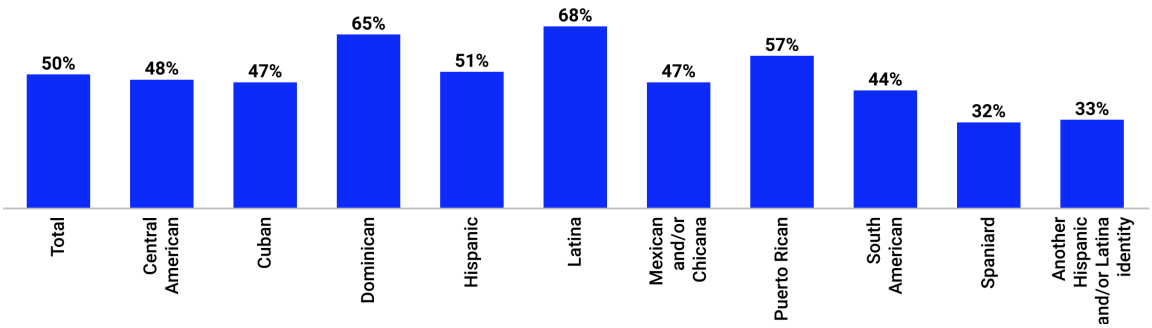
Breakout: African American, Black, and/or Afro-Diasporic Women in the United States



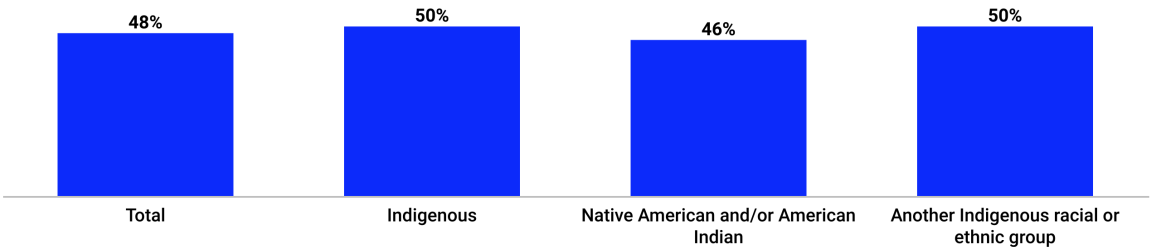
% Experiencing Racism in Current Workplace

Note: Percentages are provided for groups that have a large enough sample for reliable interpretation of results.

Breakout: Hispanic and Latina Women in the United States



Breakout: Indigenous, Native American, and American Indian Women in the United States



% Experiencing Racism in Current Workplace

Note: Percentages are provided for groups that have a large enough sample for reliable interpretation of results.

Acknowledgments

We thank our Lead for Equity and Inclusion donors for their generous support of our work in this area.

Lead Donor

Pfizer

Major Donors

accenture

Morgan Stanley

Nationwide is on your side

Partner Donors

The Coca-Cola Company
Dell Technologies
KeyBank
Kimberly-Clark Corporation
KKR
KPMG LLP
Raytheon Technologies Corporation
UPS

Supporter Donors

Edward Jones
Pitney Bowes Inc.

How to cite: Erskine, S., Brassel, S., & Robotham, K. (2023). *Exposé of women's workplace experiences challenges antiracist leaders to step up*. Catalyst.

1. Purdie-Vaughns, V. & Eibach, R. P. (2008). Intersectional invisibility: The distinctive advantages and disadvantages of multiple subordinate-group identities. *Sex Roles*, *59*(5-6), 377-391.
2. Brassel, S., Ohm, J., & Travis, D. J. (2021). *Allyship and curiosity drive inclusion for people of color at work*. Catalyst.
3. Brassel, Ohm, & Travis (2021).
4. Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach (2008).
5. Experiences of racism were measured with a single item, "Have you experienced racism or discrimination because of your ethnicity, nationality, race, or religion in your current workplace?" Participants could respond "yes" or "no".
6. Opie, T. R. & Phillips, K. W. (2015). Hair penalties: The negative influence of Afrocentric hair on ratings of Black women's dominance and professionalism. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *6*, 1311.
7. Using the scale that appears in-text, respondents were asked to select the number that best represents their skin tone. We then conducted a logistic regression analysis to examine how skin tone shapes experiences of racism at work. Age, rank, sexual orientation, and country of work were included as covariates. The logistic regression was statistically significant: X^2 (8) = 211.30, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke *R* Square = 0.10. Women with darker skin tones are more likely to experience racism at work, $b = .21$, Exp(*B*) = 1.23, $p < .001$.
8. Bashi, V. (2004). Globalized anti-blackness: Transnationalizing Western immigration law, policy, and practice. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 27* (4), 584-606; Ross, K. M. (2020, June 4). Call it what it is: Anti-Blackness. *The New York Times*.
9. Eberhardt, J. L., Davies, P. G., Purdie-Vaughns, V. J., & Johnson, S. L. (2006). Looking deadworthy: Perceived stereotypicality of Black defendants predicts capital-sentencing outcomes. *Psychological Science, 17* (5), 383-386; Gassam Asare, J. (2022, July 24). 4c hair discrimination: An exploration of texturism. *Forbes*; Pilane, P. & Iqani, M. (2016). Miss-represented: A critical analysis of the visibility of black women in South African *Glamour* magazine. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Sciences in Southern Africa*, *35*(1), 126-141.
10. McCluney, C. L. & Rabelo, V. C. (2019). Conditions of visibility: An intersectional examination of Black women's belongingness and distinctiveness at work. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 113*, 143-152; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach (2008); Smith, A. N., Watkins, M. B., Ladge, J. J., & Carlton, P. (2019). Making the invisible visible: Paradoxical effects of intersectional invisibility on the career experiences of executive Black women. *Academy of Management Journal*, *62* (6), 1705-1734.
11. Sexual orientation was measured using a single item: "Do you identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, or Asexual?" with response options of "yes", "no", "other", and "prefer not to say". Because we cannot be certain how participants identify specifically, we have interpreted responses in the following way for quotation attributes—and acknowledge the limitations of lacking precise measurement. Respondents who selected "yes" are described as queer. This term is commonly used in the LGBTQ+ community and has been reclaimed and embraced as an umbrella term by many. See the Human Rights Campaign for further discussion. Respondents who selected "no" are described as straight. Respondents who selected "other" had the option to write in their specific sexual identity, and we have provided this information when given. Respondent quotes that do not have a sexual identity reflect any of the following situations: a) the respondent selected "other" but did not provide an identity, b) the respondent skipped the question, or c) the respondent selected prefer not to say.
12. A chi-square analysis revealed that trans women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups are more likely to experience racism in their current workplace compared to cisgender heterosexual women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups, X^2 (1) = 6.31, p =.012. We found that 67% of trans women (n = 34 of 51 trans women) compared to 49% of cisgender heterosexual women (n = 1,093 of 2,236 cisgender heterosexual women) experience racism in their current workplace.
13. A chi-square analysis revealed that lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and asexual women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups are more likely to experience racism in their current workplace compared to cisgender heterosexual women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups, X^2 (1) = 25.39, $p < .001$. Overall, 63% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and asexual women (n = 240 of 382 lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and asexual women) compared to 49% of cisgender heterosexual women (n = 1,093 of 2,236 cisgender heterosexual women) experience racism in their current workplace.
14. Cortina, L. M. (2008). Unseen injustice: Incivility as modern discrimination in organizations. *The Academy of Management Review, 33*(1), 55–75.
15. Bonilla-Silva, E. (1997). Rethinking racism: Toward a structural interpretation. *American Sociological Review*, *62*(3), 465-480; Bonilla-Silva, E. (2021). What makes systemic racism systemic? *Sociological Inquiry, 91*(3), 513-533; Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge; Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. One World.
16. Thorpe-Moscon, J., Pollack, A., & Olu-Lafe, O. (2019). Empowering workplaces combat emotional tax for people of colour in Canada. *Catalyst*.
17. Ray, V. (2019). A theory of racialized organizations. *American Sociological Review, 84*(1), 26-53.
18. McDaniel, M., Richardson, A., Gonzalez, D., Alvarez Caraveo, C., Wagner, L., & Skopec, L. (2021). Black and African American adults' perspectives on discrimination and unfair judgment in health care. *Urban Institute*.
19. Bonilla-Silva (1997).
20. Buolamwini, J. & Gebru, T. (2018). Gender shades: Intersectional accuracy disparities in commercial gender classification. *Proceedings of Machine Learning Research, 81*(1), &1–15.
21. Senior leader allyship was measured with 4 items (α = .88) and senior leader curiosity was measured with 3 items (α = .87). These scales were strongly correlated at r = .86, $p < .001$; thus we combined them to create a composite variable that reflects the average of the two scales (α = .93). We conducted a logistic regression analysis using this composite measure to examine how senior leader allyship and curiosity shape experiences of racism at work. Age, rank, sexual orientation, and country of work were included as covariates. The logistic regression was statistically significant: X^2 (8) = 214.91, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke *R* Square = 0.10. When senior leaders engage in allyship and curiosity, women from marginalized ethnic and racial groups are less likely to experience racism at work, b = -.22, Exp(*B*) = .80, $p < .001$.
22. The senior leader allyship and curiosity composite variable was dichotomized according to the coding scheme described in the Methodology section. We then conducted a chi-square analysis for the association between these senior leader behaviors and experiences of racism at work. The results were significant, revealing that 56% of women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups experience racism when their leaders do not demonstrate allyship and curiosity, compared to 46% when leaders do, X^2 (1) = 26.50, $p < .001$.
23. Brassel, Ohm, & Travis (2021).
24. Travis, D. J., Shaffer, S., & Thorpe-Moscon, J. (2019). *Getting real about inclusive leadership: Why change starts with you*. Catalyst.
25. Travis, Shaffer, & Thorpe-Moscon (2019).

26. 51% of our sample of women from marginalized ethnic and racial groups report that their senior leaders consistently engage in allyship behaviors and support employees from marginalized groups. 57% of our sample of women from marginalized ethnic and racial groups report that their senior leaders consistently lead with curiosity by actively listening to others and seeking out different points of view.
27. Erskine, S. E. & Bilimoria, D. (2019). White allyship of Afro-Diasporic women in the workplace: A transformative strategy for organizational change. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 26*(3), 319–338.
28. Hurst, C. (2021, May 3). The 'not here' syndrome: Racism denial, workplace inequity, and the futility of speaking out. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.
29. Spreitzer, G., Sutcliffe, K., Dutton, J., Sonenshein, S., & Grant, A. M. (2005). A socially embedded model of thriving at work. *Organization Science*, *16*(5), 537-549.
30. We conducted a multiple mediation analysis using the PROCESS Macro for SPSS to examine whether climate of silence and diversity climate mediate the relationship between senior leader allyship and curiosity (using the composite variable) and experiences of racism at work. Age, rank, sexual orientation, and country of work were included as covariates. The association between senior leader allyship and curiosity on climate of silence [b = -.24, SE = .02, t(8, 2678) = -11.22, p < .001], and diversity climate [b = .68, SE = .02, t(8, 2678) = 44.97, p < .001], were significant, indicating that higher scores on senior leader allyship and curiosity are associated with less organizational climate of silence and more diversity climate. The associations between both climate of silence [b = .33, SE = .03, z(10, 2678) = 11.78, p < .001] and diversity climate [b = -.26, SE = .04, z(10, 2678) = -6.55, p < .001] with experiences of racism were also significant. The indirect effects of senior leader allyship and curiosity on experiences of racism through climate of silence (b = -.08 [LLCI = -.10, ULCI = -.06]) and diversity climate (b = -.18 [LLCI = -.23, ULCI = -.13]) were significant. Although significant in the logistic regression reported above, once climate of silence and diversity climate are in the model, the direct effect of senior leader allyship and curiosity on experiences of racism was not significant [b = .01, SE = .04, z(10, 2678) = .34, p = .74], indicating a complete mediation through the climate variables.
31. Shaffer, E., Sattari, N., & Pollack, A. (2020). *Interrupting sexism at work: How men respond in a climate of silence*. Catalyst; Morrison, E. W., & Milliken, F. J. (2000). Organizational silence: A barrier to change and development in a pluralistic world. *Academy of Management Review, 25*(4), 706-725.
32. McKay, P. F., Avery, D. R., & Morris, M. A. (2008). Mean racial-ethnic differences in employee performance: The moderating role of diversity climate. *Personnel Psychology*, *61*(2), 349-374.
33. See endnote 30 for regression results from mediation model.
34. A chi-square test was conducted to examine whether experiences of racism differed based on an organization's climate of silence. The observed values were significantly different than expected values, X^2 (1) = 95.89, p < .001.
35. DiMuccio, S. & Sattari, N. (2022). *How to tackle negative workplace climates head-on: A guide for senior leaders and managers*. Catalyst.
36. Shaffer, Sattari, & Pollack (2020).
37. DiMuccio, S. & Sattari, N. (2022). *How organizations can encourage men to interrupt sexism*. Catalyst; Knoll, M. & van Dick, R. (2013). Do I hear the whistle...? A first attempt to measure four forms of employee silence and their correlates. *Journal of Business Ethics, 113*(2), 349–362; Vakola, M. & Bouradas, D. (2005). Antecedents and consequences of organisational silence: An empirical investigation. *Employee Relations*, *27*(5), 441–458.
38. See endnote 30 for regression results from mediation model.
39. A chi-square test was conducted to examine whether experiences of racism differed based on an organization's diversity climate. The observed values were significantly different than expected values, X^2(1) = 90.22, p < .001.
40. Boehm, S. A., Dwertmann, D. J. G., Kunze, F., Michaelis, B., Parks, K. M., & McDonald, D. P. (2014). Expanding insights on the diversity climate-performance link: The role of workgroup discrimination and group size. *Human Resource Management*, *53,* 379-402.
41. Holmes IV, O., Jiang, K., Avery, D. R., McKay, P. F., Oh, I.-S., & Tillman, C. J. (2021). A meta-analysis integrating 25 years of diversity climate research. *Journal of Management, 47*(6), 1357-1382.
42. McKay et al. (2008).
43. Jiang, Z., DeHart-Davis, L., & Borry, E. L. (2022). Managerial practice and diversity climate: The roles of workplace voice, centralization, and teamwork. *Public Administration Review, 82*(3), 459-472.
44. Gaucher, D., Friesen, J., & Kay, A. C. (2011). Evidence that gendered wording in job advertisements exists and sustains gender inequality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(1), 109-128.
45. Bertrand, M. & Mullainathan, S. (2004). Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A field experiment on labor market discrimination. *American Economic Review, 94*(4). 991-1013.
46. Kazmi, M. A., Spitzmueller, C., Yu, J., Madera, J. M., Tsao, A. S., Dawson, J. F., & Pavlidis, I. (2022). Search committee diversity and applicant pool representation of women and underrepresented minorities: A quasi-experimental field study. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *107*(8), 1414-1427.
47. McCluney, C. L., King, D. D., Bryant, C. M., & Ali, A. A. (2021). From "Calling in Black" to "Calling for Antiracism Resources": The need for systemic resources to address systemic racism. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 40(1), 49-59.
48. Travis, D. J. & Thorpe-Moscon, J. (2018). *Day-to-day experiences of emotional tax among women and men of color in the workplace*. Catalyst.
49. Roberts, L. M. & Grayson, M. (2021). Businesses must be accountable for their promises on racial justice. *Harvard Business Review;* Roberts, L. M. & Washington, E. F. (2020, June 1). U.S. businesses must take meaningful action against racism. *Harvard Business Review*; Travis, D. J., Shaffer, E., & Ohm, J. (2022). *How to hold your organization accountable to DEI goals*. Catalyst.
50. Ray (2019).
51. DiAngelo, R. (2011). White fragility. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, 3*(3), 54-70.
52. Ramos, C. (2021). Racism in the workplace: Expert voices from around the world. Catalyst.
53. van Anders, S. M. (2015). Beyond sexual orientation: Integration gender/sex and diverse sexualities via Sexual Configurations Theory. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 44*(5), 1177-1213.
54. Cech, E. A., Montgomery, G., Settles, I. H., Elliott, K., Cheruvelil, K., & Brassel, S. T. (2021). The social is professional: The effects of team climate on professional outcomes for LGBTQ persons in environmental science. *Journal of Women and Minorities in Science and Engineering, 27*(5), 25-48; Gates, G. J. & Newport, F. (2012, October 18). Special report: 3.4% of US adults identify as LGBT. *Gallup.*