Nurturing Black women leaders

The case for sponsorship, skills development, and anti-racist action

IBM **Institute for Business Value**

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What does it mean to belong?
Of course, there's an expected sense of acceptance, comfort, and trust. But that's just the baseline. True belonging comes when an individual is free to be their authentic self. It's an understanding that others in the group will treat them with fairness and equity. It's having your needs met without a struggle.

But belonging is difficult to achieve when you live and work in a system that wasn't designed with you in mind. And Black women know this all too well.

Take the example of Nikole Hannah-Jones. The Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for *The New York Times* became the center of controversy when she publicly protested the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's decision to rescind her tenure offer in response to political pressure.[1] Public outcry led UNC to eventually reinstate its tenure offer, which had been extended to previous chairs of the position, but it was too late for Hannah-Jones.

"To be denied [tenure], and to only have that vote occur on the last possible day, at the last possible moment, after threat of legal action, after weeks of protest, after it became a national scandal—it's just not something that I want anymore," she told *CBS This Morning*.[2]

Her decision speaks to a broader sentiment that has been echoed by Black professionals across sectors. It emphasizes that inclusion and belonging aren't created by programs that exist on paper. These concepts must be understood and lived by leaders to create a more equitable work environment.

In this environment, organizations that fail to demonstrate a deep commitment to diversity and equity are going to be passed over by talented individuals unwilling to be held to a double standard. The writing is on the wall, and businesses ignore it at their peril.

Black women are being left behind

When Black women aren't given equal opportunities, that shortfall is felt across communities—and the economy. In its 2021 report, "How The Advancement of Black Women Will Build a Better Economy For All," S&P Global estimates the productivity losses associated with racial inequality between 1960 and 2019. It found that, if Black women had been in positions that better matched their skill sets, the boost would have added $507 billion to the US economy over that timeframe.[3]

What does it mean when you sit at the intersection of both race and gender and both identities are often invisible? Black women have radiant, complex stories to tell. However, they sometimes leave behind their life-shaping experiences to adopt a more widely acceptable persona in predominantly white spaces.

In the workplace, Black women feel underpaid, under-appreciated, under-supported, undervalued, and alone, especially in a corporate setting. Additionally, Black women develop the "quit and stay mentality." Quit and stay is the phenomenon of employees becoming disengaged and less productive while waiting for other roles to become available. Quit and stay is an unfortunate but avoidable phenomenon in the workplace.

Companies have a lot to gain from hiring and promoting Black women. Despite the obstacles they face, Black women are substantially more likely than white women to say they are interested in pursuing executive leadership roles, according to research from the Center for Talent Innovation.[4] They are also more likely than their white female peers to have clear long-term career goals. Their primary motivation for success is to empower others within their organizations.

However, according to LeanIn's 2020 report, "The State of Black Women in Corporate America," for every 100 men promoted to their first manager role, only 58 Black women receive the same advancement.[5]

Black women must be seen, heard, valued, and recognized. It's time for organizations to create initiatives that will let Black women lead and thrive.

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> *The one thing that's key to growing a career is the ability to see someone like you in a leadership position. Having role models you can look up to helps create the confidence and hope of rising to the top."*
>
> **— Nel Akoth, Senior Partner, Global F&A Practice Leader
> IBM Global Business Services**
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> *If the United States is going to accelerate growth post-COVID, in the context of the most contentious racial conflict since the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 60s, we will need the talents and ingenuity of more women—especially black and brown women—in the corner office.*
>
> *For that to happen, we have to determine the conditions that not only enable but celebrate diversity, inclusion, and belonging.*
>
> **—Carla Grant Pickens**
> **Global Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, IBM**
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Understanding intersectionality

While many leaders see that change is essential, far fewer understand exactly *what* they need to change to establish equity for Black women.

It starts by understanding the problem. That is, the workplace is worse for Black women. According to LeanIn, Black women are underrepresented in leadership roles, they are less likely to get the support and access they need to advance, and they face more day-to-day discrimination at work.[6]

This spread is also reflected in the wage gap: Black women make 63 cents to every dollar earned by White men.[7]

The workplace is particularly difficult for Black women who are one of the only Black people on a team or in an organization. Roughly half of Black women who are "onlys" feel they are seen as representatives of their entire race—and that they're pressured to perform in order to prove themselves. About 1 in 4 feel their actions are closely monitored and that they must be ready to defend themselves at all times.[8]

And many Black women don't feel safe speaking out about this experience. One participant in the January 2021 Women's Leadership Jam hosted by IBM and the National Organization for Women—NYC (see details in "About IBM Innovation Jam" on page 10) shared the following:

"A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned to a White colleague that minorities live with trauma at work and are often unable to speak about it because we fear retribution, because we fear it will fall on deaf ears, or because we have just gotten used to existing in this state. As predicted, my colleague brushed it off with a 'I certainly hope that's not true' statement, further proving my point."

While many of these experiences are also shared by Black men, Black women face additional barriers due to the intersection of their gender and race. "We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality, or immigrant status," Kimberlé Crenshaw, the law professor who coined the term "intersectionality" told *Time*. "What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts."

These intersectional challenges become clear when examining the economic impact of the pandemic. In December 2020, 154,000 Black women left the US labor force—accounting for 99% of the jobs lost that month, all of which were lost by women. Overall, men gained 16,000 jobs in the same month.[9]

While each woman had her own reasons for leaving the workforce mid-COVID, the broader trend highlights a systemic flaw. Black women, more than other groups, lacked the support they needed to remain in the workforce amid the pandemic. When the economy started to shrink, their jobs were the first to go.

What does this mean for the career prospects of Black women? And how can organizations level the playing field? To better understand the unique experiences of Black women in the workforce, and the challenges that hold them back, the IBM Institute for Business Value (IBV) interviewed nearly 7,000 people in August 2020 and January 2021, including more than 750 Black women.

Our findings quantify an ongoing struggle. Our survey shows that more than half of Black women feel their employer discriminates against Black people—and roughly 1 in 4 believe their employer discriminates against women. And while 84% of Black women believe discrimination against women exists, only 64% of White women feel the same.

Due to this unique experience with discrimination, Black women are less likely to feel successful than White women or Black men. However, the difference is much greater between Black and White women, with 43% of Black women saying they feel less successful than the broader community, compared with only 9% of white women (see "Skewed perspectives on success").

Perhaps most telling, more than 1 in 3 Black women who are senior executives say they personally feel less successful than the general population. When you look at Black women who are junior managers, that figure jumps to 65%. This speaks to the unique pressures Black women face in the workplace, including Imposter Syndrome—persistent doubt in their skills or accomplishments despite evidence to the contrary.

"I struggled a lot with this, especially early in my career," said one Jam participant. "I regularly tried to 'hide behind the curtain' until others noticed my potential and gave me opportunities. Although I'm better at it now, I don't know if it goes away altogether."

Skewed perspectives on success

43% of Black women feel they are less successful compared to the broader community.

Compared to the broader community comprising everyone of all races, genders, and sexual orientations, I am personally less or more successful?

Black women

43%	41%	16%

White women

9%	44%	47%

Black men

40%	40%	20%

Less successful	Same	More successful
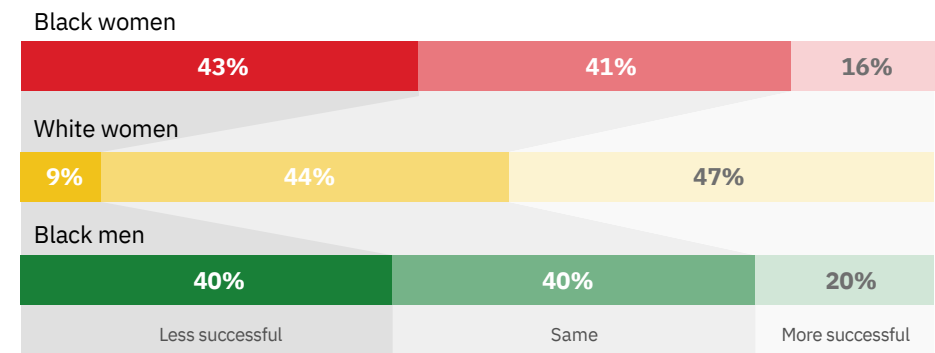
The only way my voice can be heard is if I force it to be heard. It shouldn't be that way. Yet, it continues to be an uphill battle regardless of how progressive the culture at an organization claims to be.

—2021 Women's Leadership Jam participant

Filling the leadership funnel

There's no doubt that Black women are reaching new heights in government, business, and STEM fields. Kamala Harris became the most powerful woman in US history when she assumed the vice presidency in January.[10] In May, when Thasundra Brown Duckett became the CEO of TIAA, the Fortune 500 boasted two Black women CEOs for the first time in its history.[11] And later this year, Jeanette Epps is slated to become the first Black woman to serve on a mission to the International Space Station.[12]

Given these record-breaking firsts, one might assume that the portion of top-tier positions held by Black women will rise as the United States continues to tackle issues of social and racial injustice. But our data tells a different story.

Of the Black women we surveyed, 43% were senior executives, while fewer than 1 in 4 were either senior managers or junior managers (see "A shrinking leadership pipeline"). This speaks to a shrinking pipeline of Black women leaders—at a time when companies are in dire need of their skills and insights.

What's worse, our survey found that younger Black women report experiencing more intense discrimination than their older peers. Nearly 40% more Millennials than Gen X say they've personally experienced discrimination to a great extent due to their race. The spread is the same when comparing Millennial and Gen X Black women who feel less successful than others who share their gender or race. And more than twice as many Gen Z Black women report feeling less successful than people in the broader community as compared to their Gen X peers.

Discrimination needs to be addressed by people who aren't directly affected before this behavior will change, says Justina Nixon-Saintil, Vice President and Global Head, Corporate Social Responsibility, IBM CHQ, Communications.

"What I've seen work best is when someone who is respected by that person actually stands up and says, 'That's wrong,'" she says. "If you have more people doing that, I think it will start getting better."
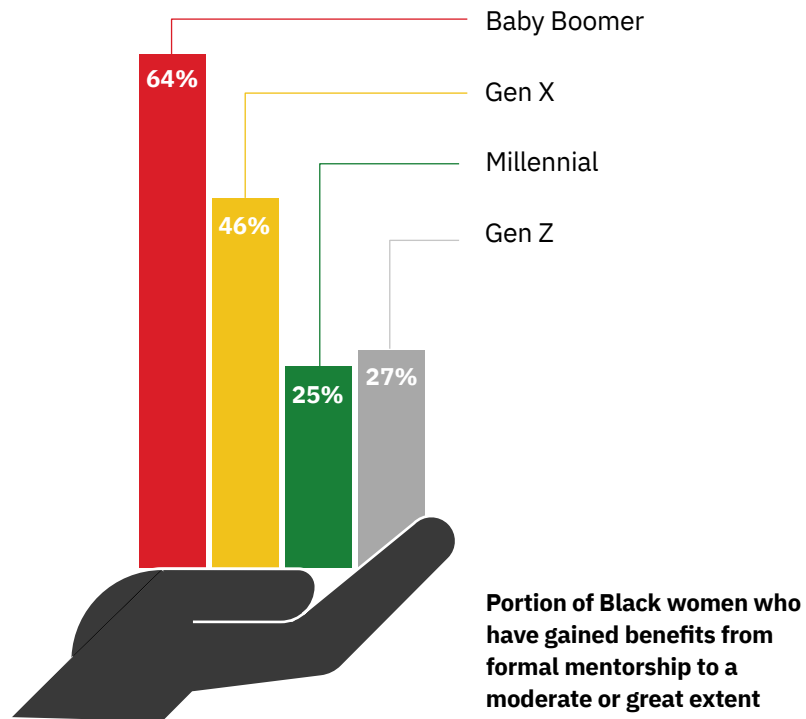
A shrinking leadership pipeline

Black women hold nearly as many CXO positions as junior and senior manager positions combined.

43%
Senior executives (CxOs)

22%
Senior managers

23%
Junior managers

12%
Entrepreneurs
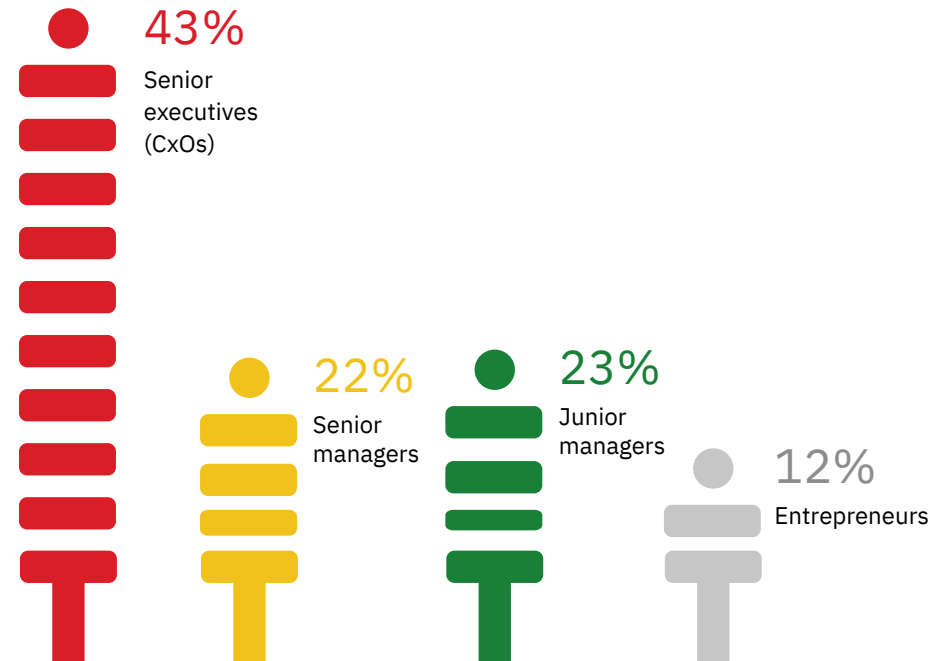
The mentorship gap

Younger Black women have gained far fewer benefits from formal mentorship than their older counterparts.

Baby Boomer — 64%
Gen X — 46%
Millennial — 25%
Gen Z — 27%

Portion of Black women who have gained benefits from formal mentorship to a moderate or great extent

Celebrating diversity and expanding inclusion

A *USA Today* analysis found that more than a year after George Floyd's murder spurred corporate pledges for change, deep racial inequalities persist at every level of the nation's largest and most highly valued companies, creating sharply disparate outcomes for people of color, especially women.[13]

To get talented Black women into positions where they can best use their skills, organizations need to do more to help them overcome the outsized obstacles they face. But our research found that nearly 1 in 3 Black women feel they are less empowered and supported to overcome professional challenges than the general population, as compared to just 7% of White women.

One way that companies can support the advancement of Black women is through formal mentorship programs and informal networking opportunities. Building personal relationships with influential leaders—relationships they may not feel comfortable initiating without help—can open the door to new opportunities for Black women.

"Having a diverse 'board' of mentors has been invaluable in my career," said one Jam participant. "Not only do they provide career advice, they also can act as a proxy for you when discussions are happening regarding leadership opportunities."

However, our research found that younger Black women have less access to these types of relationships than their older counterparts. 61% fewer Millennials than Baby Boomers say they've benefitted from formal mentorship to a moderate or great extent in their professional careers. 71% fewer millennials say the same of informal mentorship (see "The mentorship gap"). Sponsorships are equally elusive.

> *Black women have the skills. They just need the opportunity. Give them the opportunity and you will see them thrive.*
>
> **—Nel Akoth, Senior Partner, Global F&A Practice Leader
> IBM Global Business Services**

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> *Having a diverse 'board' of mentors has been invaluable in my career. Not only do they provide career advice, they also can act as a proxy for you when discussions are happening regarding leadership opportunities.*
>
> *Sometimes we are over-mentored and under-sponsored.*
>
> **—2021 Women's Leadership Jam participants**
> "

Fostering these types of relationships within an organization can help young Black women gain access to the rooms where decisions are made. Mentors, coaches, and sponsors can also help Black women develop the business acumen that will help them succeed as they rise in the ranks.

"It's making sure they speak the language of the corporation, that they can connect the dots and present themselves as a leader," says Nixon-Saintil. "That's what you need to get ahead."

But mentorship and sponsorships only work if an organization already has Black women in its ranks—which many do not. Especially in high-growth, high-paying industries, Black people overall are underrepresented, according to McKinsey. Almost half of Black private sector workers (45%) work in 3 front-line sectors: healthcare, retail, and accommodations and food service. In retail, 73% of Black workers make less than $30,000 a year. In accommodations and food service, that figure is 84%.[14]

To correct this imbalance, the youngest Black women put their faith in technology. Our survey found that 82% of Black women in Gen Z agree that the use of AI-based technologies for personnel decisions—such as recruiting, hiring, or promotions—can lead to a more diverse workplace, compared to just 36% of Baby Boomers. For their parts, almost two-thirds (64%) of Gen X and more than half of Millennials (57%) also agree.

Proponents of AI-supported hiring practices believe AI helps counteract the unconscious biases—both positive and negative—that fuel the cycle of discrimination. For example, managers looking for the "right fit" often gravitate toward people that make them feel the most comfortable or who seem most like them. And "like them," even when it's unintentional, often translates to "White."

"Many times, it's not purposeful, but it just happens," said one Jam participant. "And as long as it happens, others get fewer opportunities and less visibility, which hurts careers. It will take a process of forcing people to review all possible candidates for opportunities—instead of just selecting those they are close to."

Start with trust

Building an inclusive organization is a cultural activity. It requires dialogue around different experiences and expectations—and a willingness from people with power and privilege to learn and change. Perhaps most importantly, it takes trust, which is currently at a deficit. According to McKinsey, Black employees in the private sector are 41% less likely to view promotions as fair than White employees at the same company.[15]

Trust only comes with time. It comes from a lived daily experience that tells Black women they can express themselves authentically without feeling ostracized—or enduring the microaggressions, the subtle insults and indignities, that create a hostile work environment.

Setting clear priorities around advancing equity, and transparently tracking progress toward those goals, can help organizations lay a strong foundation for building trust. And while their policies and programs must meet the baseline for inclusion, what was sufficient 5 years ago is no longer enough. Identifying and investing in the work that will make the biggest impact on Black women's lives, rather than what seems easiest to execute, is what's necessary to create a workplace where they feel they belong.

Perhaps most importantly, leaders need to make sure they're including Black women in these conversations—and giving as much trust as they'd like to receive. This means proactively looking for opportunities to give Black women decision-making authority, and then trusting them to wield it well.

But creating a culture of belonging can't be a top-down activity. For Black women to be included, respected, and promoted equally within an organization, non-Black people need to embrace opportunities to learn and change. And companies have an opportunity to facilitate that learning with everything from immersive anti-racist training to sponsored social events that help people from different backgrounds get to know each other.

"You have to get people to think differently," says Nixon-Saintil. "And it has to include everyone, no matter their background or ethnicity."

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—Justina Nixon-Saintil, Vice President and Global Head Corporate Social Responsibility, IBM CHQ, Communications

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Action guide

Building belonging and a foundation for future success

Understanding the unique challenges Black women face is the first step to removing the barriers holding them back. The next step is taking action, through HR policies and practices, meaningful engagement efforts, strategic skills development, and measurable advancement programs.

Here are a few ways organizations can begin to dismantle the systemic inequality facing Black women in the workforce.

Develop anti-racist HR policies

– Address the pay gap by conducting an equity audit across positions by race and gender, correct any inequities, and publish the results.

– Extend benefits, including health insurance and paid leave, to all employees, even if they are part-time.

– Adopt advancement practices that open doors for people of color—especially front-line workers.

Give Black women a platform to share their experiences

– Create Board positions for Black women.

– Ensure there is a process for Black women to submit grievances, and that the team handling grievances has received proper anti-racism training.

– Proactively seek out the opinions of Black women when making decisions that will affect their lives or their daily work.

Commit to culture change

– Invest in building a diverse workforce where Black women are represented more equitably across the business.

– Host anti-racist trainings that help non-Black employees understand which behaviors need to change—and how to be a better ally.

– Model respect, acceptance, and inclusion at the executive level to cultivate these values throughout the company's ranks.

Set targets and measure progress

– Measure representation by race and gender combined to make sure Black women aren't left behind by diverse hiring initiatives.

– Support the advancement of Black women by setting goals around mentorship, sponsorship, and other professional development opportunities.

– Share results and reward leaders who meet diversity targets by incorporating these goals into performance reviews.

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About IBM InnovationJam®

IBM hosted a global two-day virtual jam—the IBM Women's Leadership Jam—in cooperation with the New York City chapter of the National Organization of Women in January. Six concurrent sessions covered topics ranging from how technology can help eliminate gender biases to allyship and the role men play.

With more than 2,600 comments contributed and nearly 30,000 data points generated from polls, we used the IBM InnovationJam® AI Dashboard with Watson Natural Language Understanding (NLU) and IBM Research Project Debater Key Point Analysis to identify conversation themes, sentiment, and insights for suggested improvements. To learn more, visit https://www.collaborationjam.com.

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