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 Future Skills
Centre

Leaders' Insights About Inclusive Career Development in Canada

Executive Roundtables on the Advancement of
Indigenous, Black, and Racialized Women

Knowledge Brief
August 2026

Honouring Indigenous Peoples in Canada

Accelerate Her Future® was founded on land and waters of the traditional territory of many nations including the Haudenosaunee, Anishnaabeg, the Attawandaron, and the Métis within the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant. We respect Indigenous peoples' deep connections to the land and waters, and affirm our commitment to continued learning while engaging our head, heart and hands to advance the TRC Calls to Action and the MMIWG2S+ Calls to Justice.

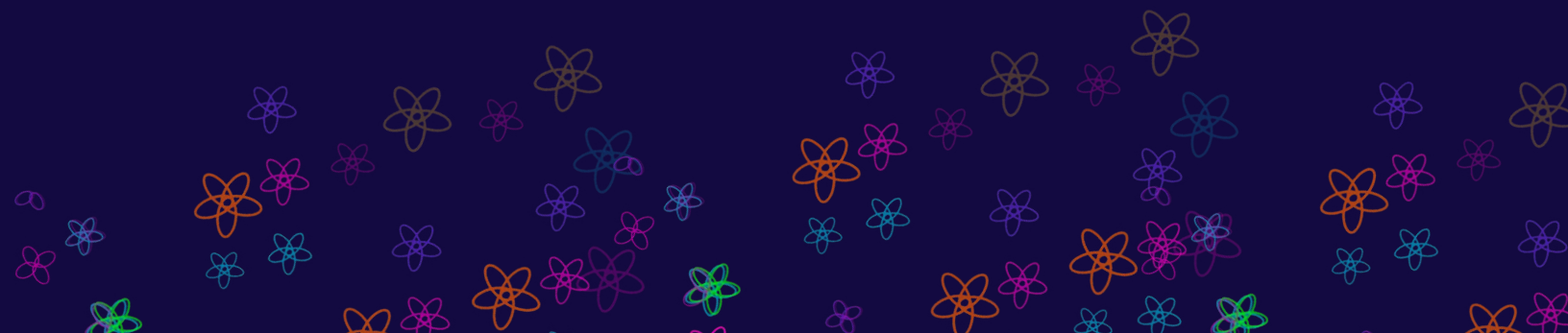


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About the Executive Roundtables

In October 2025 and January 2026, Accelerate Her Future, with the support of the Government of Canada's [Future Skills program](#), gathered 149 leaders in five Canadian cities - Toronto, Mississauga, Montreal, Vancouver and Calgary. Our purpose was to have an honest conversation about what it actually takes to advance Indigenous, Black, and racialized women into senior leadership in Canada.

The people in the rooms were HR, DEI, senior leaders and advocates. People who have dedicated careers to making organizations more inclusive and equitable. They showed up with honesty, with enthusiasm, with frustration, and with ideas. They spoke openly about hard truths with their peers. Many also said the issue is not just who is in the room, but whose voices influence and shape the decisions that are made.

And across five cities, across sectors, across organizations of every size, one pattern emerged so consistently it became impossible to ignore:

"We have a focus on Indigenous, Black and racialized women in our DEI strategy — but it is still at the awareness, sharing experiences level. No systemic work is currently under way."

— Roundtable participant

This brief shares the insights, highlights, and themes that emerged from those conversations.

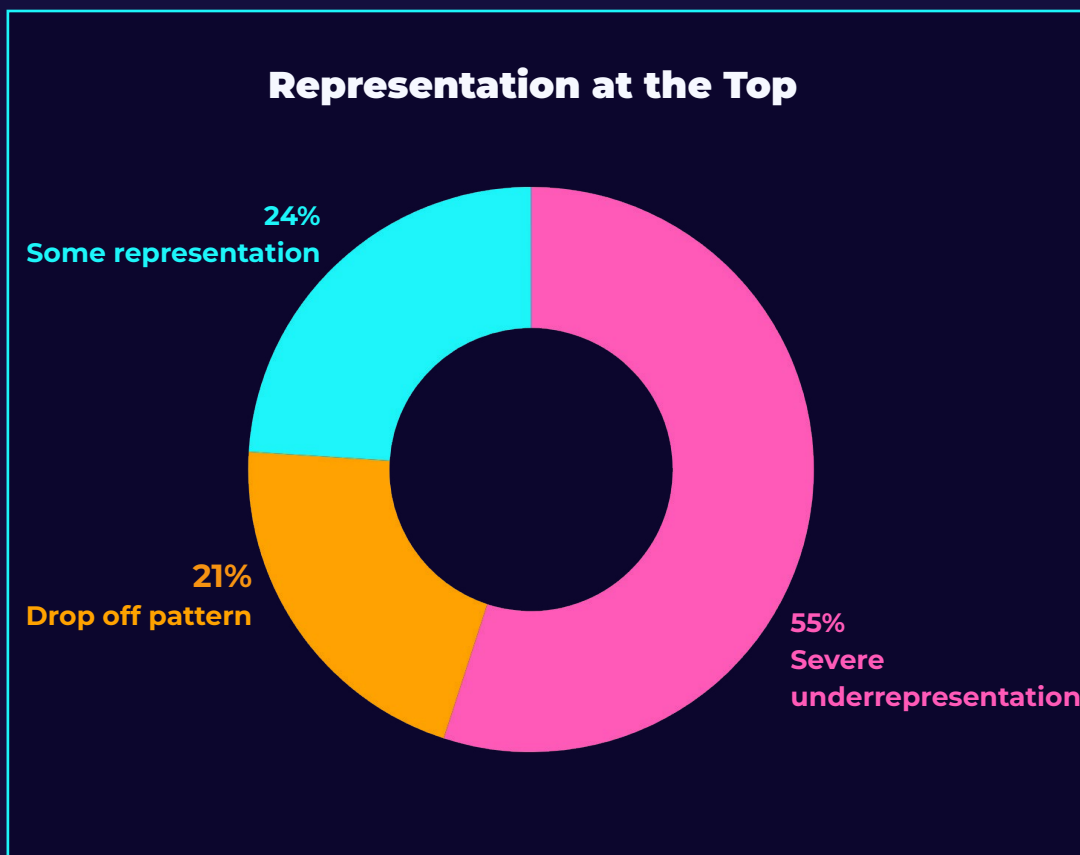
Representation at the Top:

What Leaders Told Us

We asked participants to describe what representation of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women looks like at senior manager level and above in their organizations. What we heard was sobering and consistent with our research findings.

Among the 75 participants who responded to this question, 55% described outright absence or severe underrepresentation of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women in senior leadership. A further 21% described what we came to call the drop-off pattern, representation at manager and director levels that disappears sharply at VP levels and above. Approximately 24% described some representation at the top.

Many participants described organizations where the numbers look acceptable in the middle, where racialized women hold manager and director titles, but where the senior leadership table remains largely unchanged. Homogeneous at the top. Diversity below it. The gap between those two realities is where careers stall and where the message, however unintended, is received loud and clear.



It raises a harder question: when Indigenous, Black, and racialized women do reach the table, what power do they hold there? Representation without voice, without influence, and without the authority to shape decisions is not progress.

The sharpest gap: Indigenous women

The one finding that cut through every city, every sector, and every roundtable was that Indigenous women are the least represented group or absent in senior leadership. Thirty-six percent of respondents who spoke to a lack of representation specifically named Indigenous women as the group for whom the gap is deepest and the progress most elusive.

What the data also tells us is that the barriers facing Indigenous women do not begin at decision-making for the promotion. Rather, they begin before ever entering the organization, and include limited access to education, recruitment systems not designed with Indigenous candidates in mind, and industries that carry deep-rooted assumptions about who is qualified and who belongs. Addressing the representation gap for Indigenous women requires interventions that start earlier and reach deeper than most organizations have been willing to go.

The weight of being the only one

Across our roundtables, a thread emerged that no percentage can fully capture. That thread was the experience of being the only one. The only racialized woman at the leadership table. The only Black woman in the room. The only person who looks like you, thinks like you, carries what you carry, in a space where decisions get made.

“I am the only racialized executive in the room in my company.”

“I am the only Black woman at the leadership table. No Indigenous.”

These are the norm for the women our roundtables were designed to centre. They point to something the data alone cannot convey. Underrepresentation is a daily experience of isolation that shapes how women show up, how long they stay, and whether they believe the top is a place they are meant to reach. For many participants in our roundtables, the experience of the women remains invisible numerically. Without disaggregated data, data that tracks Indigenous, Black, and racialized women separately across every stage of the lifecycle, organizations are making decisions in the dark. You cannot address what you can't see.

The Pipeline is Not Empty. It's Leaking.

There is a story told often about why Indigenous, Black, and racialized women are absent from senior leadership. It goes like this: the talent isn't there yet. The pipeline needs time to develop. Give it a few more years.

Our roundtables told a different story.

Among the 50 responses describing their organization's leadership pipeline, 84% said it was broken, thin, or invisible. But the number that stopped us wasn't 84%. It was the language people used to describe what was happening to the women already in the pipelines; women who had demonstrated outstanding results, who had been identified as high performers, who were ready. And who left anyway.

"High performing racialized women who have demonstrated outstanding results face barriers to succession and promotion. So many exit."

When the process is invisible, so are the people

A finding that deserves its own attention: 16% of participants could not describe their organization's pipeline at all, mainly because processes governing who gets identified, tagged, and moved forward are invisible to the people they most affect.

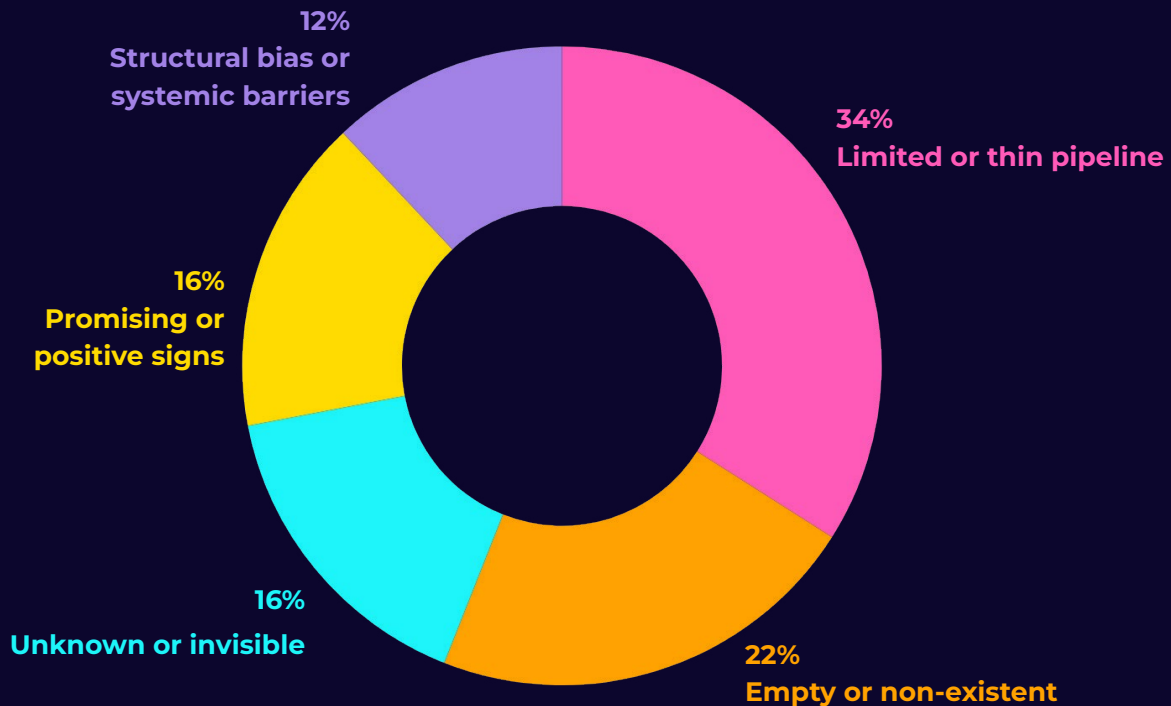
Succession in many organizations happens through what participants described as informal systems such as conversations between senior leaders that never get documented, and talent tags that are applied without the knowledge of the people who receive them.

"There is an emerging talent indicator. It feels secret, so I don't even know who has the tag."

When the process is invisible, the people excluded from it have no way to advocate for themselves, no way to understand why they are being passed over, and no way to challenge decisions that may be shaped by bias.

Opacity is not a neutral condition. It is a structural advantage for those already inside the network, and a structural barrier for those who are not. Participants also named what those informal systems look like in practice: a lot of internal, pre-conceived bias and "back pocket lists".

Pipeline Status How Respondents Describe It



84%

Combined problem rate

Limited, empty, unknown, or structurally blocked

16%

Promising or positive

Some signs of progress in the pipeline

What this means

The pipeline problem and the exit problem are connected. When advancement is opaque, when sponsorship is informal, when the criteria for being identified as ready are unspoken and unevenly applied, women often leave.

Fixing the pipeline requires two things simultaneously: making the process visible, and making it equitable. Transparent criteria. Documented succession decisions. Sponsorship that is intentional rather than incidental. And a serious reckoning with the exits that have already happened, because every woman who left took with her talent, leadership, and institutional knowledge.

Awareness Is Not **Advancement**

The work is happening. The change is not. That tension sits at the heart of what participants told us when we asked how their organizations are investing in the advancement of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women.

The responses we heard were not uniform. Among those who responded to the question: “How is your organization specifically investing in and developing Indigenous, Black, and racialized women for senior leadership roles?”. 30% described meaningful and targeted investment, including structured programs, intentional sponsorship, and development pathways. That is a genuine bright spot, because it tells us that meaningful investment is possible, and that organizations are figuring out what it looks like.

But it also means that 70% described something different. Of these, 21% said their organizations are doing nothing and have no dedicated investment, while 17% described programs that are generic or non-intersectional, designed for broad audiences rather than the specific barriers faced by Indigenous, Black and racialized women. A further 21% described efforts that are stalled, unknown, or moving backwards. Lastly, 11% named ERGs as their primary mechanism.

This is what we are calling the awareness trap. It is the space between naming the problem and solving it. Between launching a mentorship program and changing the conditions that determine who actually gets identified, developed, and moved into senior roles.

Organizations have become skilled at the first part. The second part remains where the real work lives. The measure of a real accountability framework is not what it produces in a report. It is what it produces in the daily experience of the women it is meant to serve. When the people most affected by a system are not the ones defining whether it is working, organizations will keep measuring the wrong things.

The gender-equity split

One of the more telling findings from our roundtables sits inside the bright spots. In many cases, what was described as a bright spot was progress for women broadly. Not specifically for Indigenous, Black, and racialized women.

This distinction matters enormously. Gender representation and intersectional representation are not the same goal. They require different strategies, different metrics, and different accountability structures. An organization that has made meaningful progress on getting more women into senior leadership has done important work and may simultaneously have made no progress for Indigenous, Black, and racialized women specifically.

The gender agenda and the equity agenda are running on separate tracks in most organizations. And as long as progress on one is counted as progress on both, the gap will persist.

What investment actually looks like

When participants described what their organizations were doing, a pattern emerged. The most common responses named mentorship programs, ERGs, broad leadership training, and awareness sessions. These are important steps but they are not sufficient on their own.

“Investment in development is leader specific and white coded.”

That phrase “white coded”, points to something specific and structural. It is not just that development programs exist and exclude. It is that the implicit model of what a leader looks like, how a leader communicates, what a leader’s background should be, is built into the programs themselves. A woman who does not fit that model is not just underserved by the program, she is being asked to develop toward a version of leadership that was not designed with her in mind. This points to a design problem as much as a delivery problem. Programs built without meaningful input from the communities they are meant to serve will reflect the assumptions of those who built them.

What this means

Moving from awareness to advancement requires a different kind of investment. An investment that is intersectional by design, structural in its targets, and honest about the gap between what programs promise and what they deliver.



What Participants Said

About Why

Understanding why Indigenous, Black, and racialized women are absent from senior leadership requires looking underneath the symptoms to the conditions that produce and sustain those outcomes. Across 154 responses, what emerged was not a single cause but a cluster of interconnected ones, each reinforcing the others.

Root Causes Across All Life Cycle Stages Named by Participants	%
Structural and systemic barriers	34%
Bias and affinity	31%
Leadership failure and C-suite disengagement	10%
Sponsorship and visibility gap	8%
Accountability deficits	6%
Intersectionality blind spot	4%
Cultural safety and belonging	3%
Lack of meaningful data	3%

These are not abstract concepts. Participants named them in concrete terms such as homogeneous leadership reproducing itself, talent review processes shaped by who leaders already know and trust, development frameworks that do not account for the specific barriers Indigenous, Black, and racialized women face.

What works and what the data shows is possible

One of the most important findings from our roundtables is also the most encouraging: a third of respondents described meaningful, targeted programs that are producing results for Indigenous, Black, and racialized women. These are concrete initiatives, and they share recognizable patterns that other organizations can learn from and adopt.

One participant described a cohort-based program specifically designed for women, Indigenous, and Black talent. In the most recent cohort, 9 out of 25 women were promoted. That is what intentional, intersectional design produces when it is paired with organizational commitment.

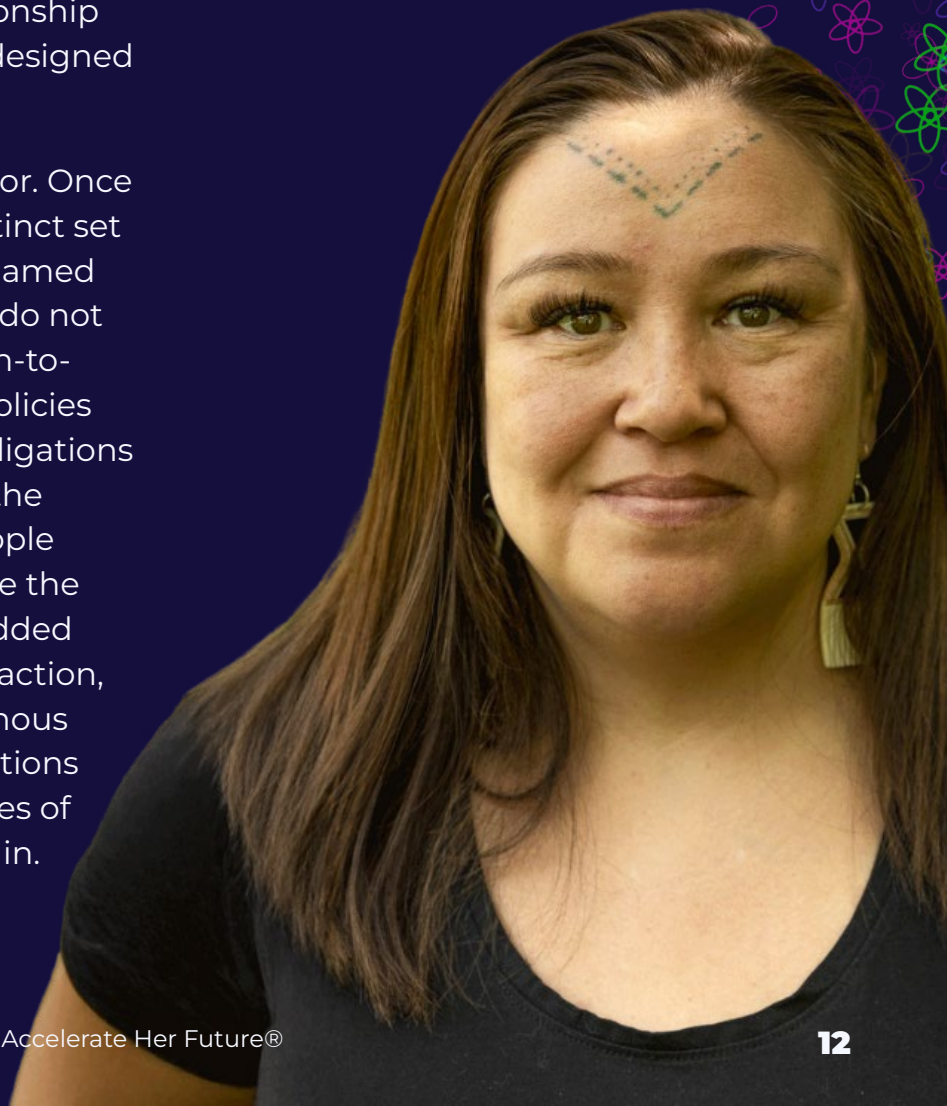
Across cities, the programs that are working share several things in common. They are targeted and specific, designed for Indigenous, Black, and racialized women rather than for women broadly or for all employees. They combine multiple levers simultaneously: mentorship and sponsorship working together, paired with stretch roles, leadership exposure, and peer support.

For Indigenous women, the barrier begins before the door

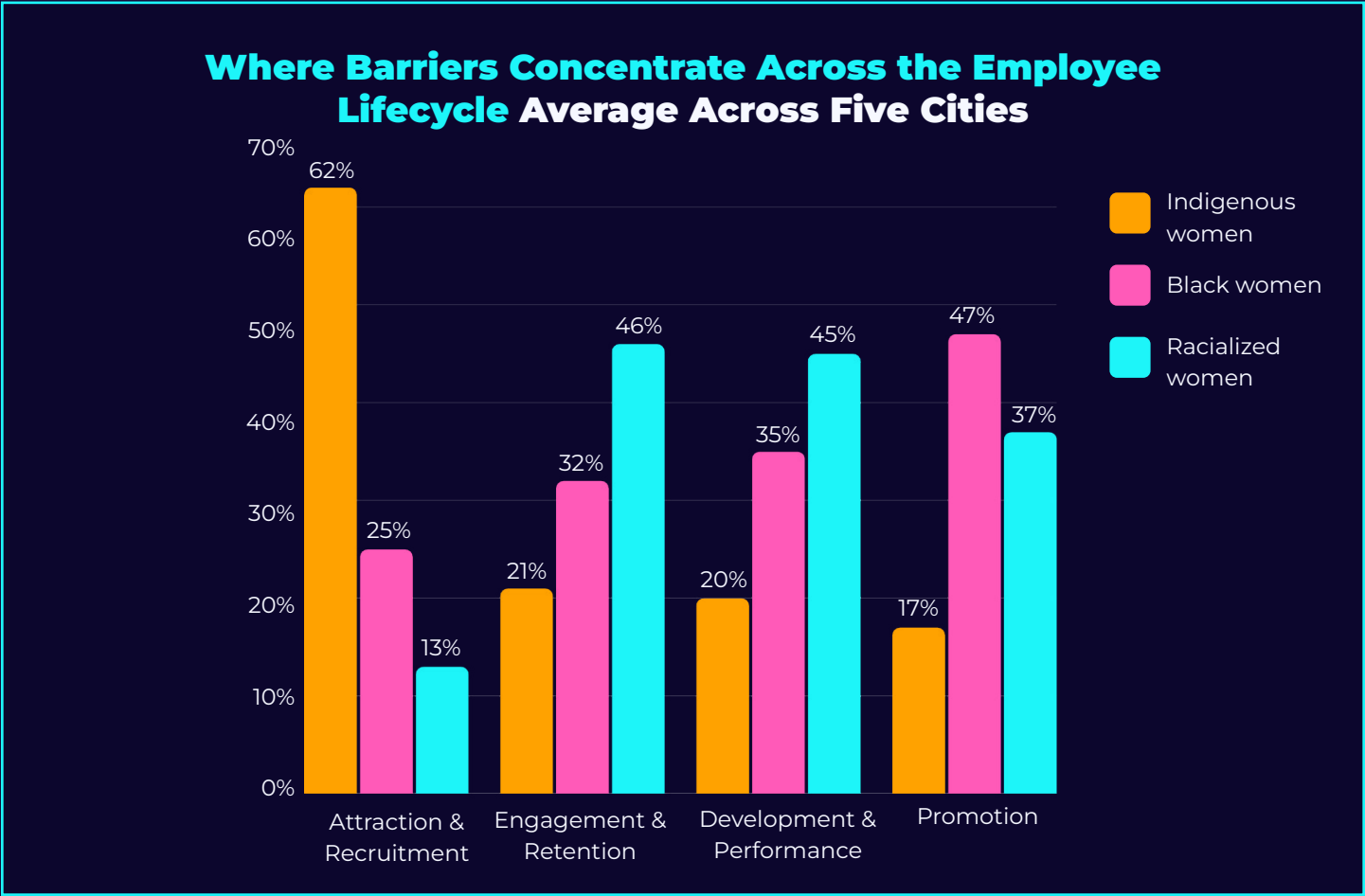
For Indigenous women, the barriers named by participants do not begin at the talent review or the promotion decision stages. They begin before the organization enters the picture at all. Participants named a distinct cluster of concerns specific to Indigenous workers, from the absence of pathways connecting Indigenous communities to employment opportunities, to recruitment systems and brand recognition that do not reach those communities, to deeply embedded assumptions about qualification and readiness that filter Indigenous women out before they are ever seen.

These are pre-organizational barriers. They require pre-organizational responses, community partnerships, early relationship building, and recruitment practices designed for the communities being reached.

But the barriers do not end at the door. Once inside, Indigenous women face a distinct set of challenges that our respondents named including policies and practices that do not understand cultural difference, return-to-office mandates and bereavement policies that do not recognize Indigenous obligations and protocols, tokenism that places the burden of representing an entire people on one person, and workplaces where the dominant culture is so deeply embedded that belonging feels conditional. Attraction, recruitment, and retention of Indigenous women starts with building organizations where they do not have to leave pieces of themselves at the door in order to fit in.



We asked roundtable participants the question, “Looking at the employee lifecycle below, where do you see the biggest barrier for Indigenous, Black, and racialized women’s career development in your organization?” And looking at their responses, a pattern emerged that makes the case for differentiated solutions more clearly than any single statistic can.



What this means

Fixing the pipeline, investing in targeted intersectional development, redesigning succession, all matter and are necessary. But the organizations that will make the most progress are those willing to combine intersectional, evidence-informed interventions with the longer work of shifting the cultures that produce these barriers in the first place. The bright spots in this data, the promotions, the partnerships, the programs that are working, are proof that the path forward exists.

Key Bright Spots Shared by Roundtable Participants



BRIGHT SPOT 01

“When leaders advocate, outcomes change.”

Senior leader advocacy was the most consistently named driver of progress across every roundtable city, from executives held accountable for outcomes to formal sponsorship from those with real positional power.

BRIGHT SPOT 02

“Targeted programs are producing real promotions.”

One organization’s cohort-based program for women, Indigenous, and Black talent promoted 9 of 25 participants. This suggests that intentional, co-designed, intersectional development changes outcomes.

BRIGHT SPOT 03

“You cannot fix what you cannot see.”

Organizations tracking representation through disaggregated data were more able to set meaningful targets, identify where progress stalls, and identify strategies for closing the gap.

BRIGHT SPOT 04

“Community partnership begins before the job posting.”

For Indigenous women, the organizations making progress build trust with community before recruitment starts, grounded in formal frameworks and sustained, reciprocal relationships.

BRIGHT SPOT 05

“Sponsorship works when it is formal, not incidental.”

Across every research method and every group, structural sponsorship - sponsors who use real power to advocate, put names forward, and open doors - was the single most replicated driver of career advancement.

BRIGHT SPOT 06

“Equity embedded across the full lifecycle produces different outcomes.”

Organizations that build equity into the full employee lifecycle - hiring, development, engagement, promotion, retention, and exit - are the ones where Indigenous, Black, and racialized women experience the impact.



What The Room Called For

We asked participants to reflect on the root causes they had identified and to imagine what real change would require. The responses that generated the most energy pointed toward two interconnected needs: accountability and measurement (17% of all responses) and structural and systemic redesign (14%). Nearly a third of everything participants called for sits in these two categories and that proportion matters. It tells us that the people closest to this work have moved past awareness. They are asking for the conditions that make change inevitable rather than optional.

What is needed is accountability that has real weight: tied to compensation, embedded in scorecards, visible to boards. Also systems that are redesigned from the inside out, so that the structures themselves stop producing the same outcomes year after year.

From Insight to Action

DO NOW — NEAR-TERM

- Tie manager and leader goals to DEI outcomes this cycle, not the next one.
- Launch formal sponsorship programs targeting the levels where Indigenous, Black, and racialized women most often stall.
- Review job postings to ensure language is inclusive and accessible for Indigenous, Black, and racialized women.
- Make promotion criteria visible and transparent to everyone, not just those already in the room.
- Collect disaggregated data across the employee lifecycle to understand where Indigenous, Black, and racialized women are losing ground and make decisions based on what it shows.
- Invest in training middle managers; they are where culture is either reinforced or changed.

BUILD TOWARD — LONG-TERM

- Move reconciliation commitments from principle to practice through community partnerships, tangible pathways into employment, and workplaces that are genuinely prepared to welcome and retain Indigenous women.
- Redesign promotion and career pathways so they work equitably across the full lifecycle.
- Embed DEI goals in executive scorecards and tie them to compensation.
- Overhaul performance management and talent review systems so they are equitable, transparent, and documented.
- Build organizations where Indigenous, Black, and racialized women belong, not just where they are hired.
- Advocate for pay transparency legislation with real consequences for non-compliance.
- Create formal, funded development programs and fellowships specifically for Indigenous, Black, and racialized women.

The actions in this table are drawn from the voices of leaders who are asking for more impactful efforts; targeted where the barriers are sharpest, sustained long enough to change the conditions that produce them, and tied to consequences that make progress a requirement rather than an aspiration.

Some of what is needed can begin immediately. A manager whose goals include this work. A sponsorship program designed around the levels where Black, Indigenous, and racialized women stall. A job posting reviewed before it excludes someone who never applies. The long-term actions are harder and more honest. They ask organizations to look at the systems they have built and reckon with what those systems were designed to produce. For most, that reckoning is overdue. But the leaders represented in these roundtables showed up and imagined something better. That is, in fact, exactly where change begins.



A Final Word

What participants brought into these rooms was not just expertise. It was candour, about what is not working, about what has been tried, about the distance between where organizations say they want to go and where they actually are. They named hard things. They imagined better ones.

We opened this brief with a participant who named the gap plainly: the focus is there, but the systemic work has not begun. We close it with another voice.

“Make it important to shareholders.”

That is not a cynical statement. It is a practical one. It is a participant telling us exactly where the lever is.

The question this brief leaves with every reader is not whether change is possible. It is whether you are willing to make it matter enough to be held accountable for it.