Concrete Ceilings: African Canadian Women and the Pursuit of Leadership in the Public Sector

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Abstract

This research consisted of qualitative interviews with 21 Black women who currently held, had held, or were qualified for managerial-level positions in the public service sector. The research questions were as follows: (1) What internal and external supports contribute to Black women obtaining leadership positions in the public sector in Canada? (2) What internal and external barriers have Black women faced in obtaining leadership positions in the Canadian public sector? We conclude that Black women experience various forms of discrimination, racism, oppression, and typecasting, which have been prevalent in their journeys through public sector employment. Participants identified many barriers to being successful in the workplace, most of which can be attributed to racism. In spite of these barriers, a number of Black women identified internal and external supports and strengths that had enabled them to obtain these positions. The most prevalent supports found in this study include self-determination, faith, colleagues and mentors, community supports, friends, and family. Many participants identified these supports as helping them to be successful in the public sector, in spite of the systematic racism that exists. By participating in this study, Black women reported feeling heard and validated. Three recommendations arose: the establishment of a formal support system for Black women interested in public sector employment; commitment from public sector leaders to assist in system-wide changes; and a call to action for African Canadian women to engage in activities that promote ongoing self-advocacy and self-empowerment.

Keywords: Black women, public sector, barriers, racism, sexism

Introduction

The Intersection of Race and Gender in the Workplace

For several years now, the intersection of race and gender has received attention in the academic literature. In the 1990s, for example, Moore (1991), Wyche and Graves (1992) and Bernard, Lucas-White, and Moore (1993) examined how race and gender curb professional advancement. While there remains limited Canadian research specifically addressing the experiences of Black women in professional roles, African American women are underrepresented in academia and high-status professional positions.

For the purposes of this study, *systemic racism* is defined by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2005) as follows:

Systemic or institutional discrimination consists of patterns of behaviour, policies or practices that are part of the social or administrative structures of an organization, and which create or perpetuate a position of relative disadvantage for racialized persons. These appear neutral on the surface but, nevertheless, have an exclusionary impact on racialized persons. ("4. Systemic or institutional dimensions," para. 2)

Systemic sexism is defined by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (n.d.), as

complex and "systemic," embedded in patterns of behaviour, policies and practices that are part of the administrative structure or informal "culture" of an organization, institution or sector. It can be hidden to the people who don't experience it. It can create or perpetuate a position of relative disadvantage for women who are, have been or may become pregnant. These behaviours, policies or practices sometimes appear neutral on the surface but can have an adverse or negative effect, creating or continuing disadvantage and limiting rights and opportunities. ("4.3. Systemic Discrimination," para. 1)

The presence of systematic racism and sexism not only illustrates challenges for Black women in achieving entry-level positions in the public sector but also illustrates the challenges Black women in the public sector face when it comes to advancing to leadership positions. They often find themselves hitting the *concrete ceiling*, in other words, stuck in entry-level positions throughout their career, without being offered opportunities to advance, despite being fully qualified and oftentimes more qualified than other candidates.

Intersectionality refers to the ways in which multiple facets of one's identity, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and class, interact with one another and work together to further oppress individuals in society. For those who face multiple oppressions, discrimination is experienced based on a combination of these identities, making it impossible to address one form of oppression without also addressing the others (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; James et al., 2010). African Nova Scotian women in this study reported being oppressed not only by their race but also their gender. Their individual experiences differed significantly from those of a Black male and those of a white woman, for example, as each additional characteristic adds another complex layer of oppression. While some common themes arose between the participants, it is important to note that the impacts of racism will ultimately affect each individual differently. Each Black woman involved in this study has had different experiences based on the multiple intersectionalities they have faced throughout their lives.

While women uphold higher rates of post-secondary education, they are often under-represented in leadership positions (Moyser, 2019). Pelletier, Patterson, and Moyser (2019) reported that women earned 13.3% less per hour than their male counterparts. It was also suggested that due to existing systematic gender-related biases, women accounted for more part-time and entry-level positions, while males accounted for more leadership and high-ranking positions. Women-dominated careers were characteristically lower paid, even when they required the same skill level as male-dominated careers, and women were often found working harder to prove themselves as capable, an indication of gender-based discrimination and injustice (Moyser, 2017).

Wyche and Graves (1992) examined how ethnicity, race, and gender influenced advancement within the profession of psychology and observed that racialized women are offered

fewer opportunities for professional advancement. Findings from that study support the contention that minority women are less likely to be represented in academia, particularly at high levels, as well as within high-status positions and professional ranks in academia. Moore (1991) noted that, within a profession, women are assigned to different roles than men and that this is especially evident in the military: "Historically, women were assigned only to work in such traditional female roles as nursing, kitchen helpers, and laundry workers" (p. 366). Moore (1991) further acknowledged that Black women experience the combined impact of racism and sexism, a term coined as "double jeopardy."

> The military experience differed for Black and white women from the outset because of their different social statuses. Not only did Black women have to contend with a society that refused to recognize them as human beings because of their gender but also with a society that refused to recognize them as human beings because of their race. (p. 366)

This powerful statement describes the unique challenges African American women may face in the workplace and highlights the importance of considering the impact of intersecting oppressions when examining an individual's experiences.

Wyche and Graves (1992) and Israel-Trummel (2014) explored the harm of covert and overt racism, including the ways it affects African American women in the workforce. Previous research on racism in the workforce typically explored overt factors such as the number of employees from "x" minority group compared to the number of employees from "y" majority group (Black & Erikson, 2003) or reports of racism experienced in the workplace filed through human resources departments (Israel-Trummel, 2014). These measures do not accurately represent the experience of racism as they do not account for covert racism arising from conscious or unconscious racist attitudes. Minority-group[1] employees who hold higher credentials than their majority counterparts but are working in the same position is an example of covert racism (Black & Erikson, 2003; Este et al., 2012; James et al., 2010; James, 2012). This type of racism often goes unnoticed because both employees hold the same position and power within the organization even though the Black employee worked harder to get to this position than the white employee (Black & Erikson, 2003). Indeed, Carroll (1982) suggested that Black women in the United States worked twice as hard but receive much less in return for their efforts. Furthermore, Black women in academia were found to experience more barriers and isolation and an overall lack of support, leading to heightened psychological distress.

The concept of intersectionality is essential to understanding this research, as Black women experience covert racism in addition to covert sexism (Black & Erikson, 2003), which therefore requires them to hold more credentials than white men or white women in order to obtain high-level positions (Israel-Trummel, 2014). For example, Barrett (1997) explored the experiences of Black women in positions of political leadership to better understand the pressure they feel to represent their visible minority groups as compared to their white male/female and Black male counterparts. The study found that while white women feel pressure to pay specific attention to women's issues, Black women find themselves torn between trying to meet the needs of Black and female groups. This can result in less favourable polls for Black women politicians because both female and Black constituents may feel their needs are not being heard.

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[1] The terms "minority group," "person of colour," and "racialized person" are used interchangeably in this research paper.

Linnabery, Stuhlmacher, and Towler (2014) examined "the impact of Black women's social support and coping strategies on job-family role strain, career satisfaction, and life satisfaction" (p. 541). Their article highlighted evidence that, in the workplace, Black women have more negative experiences than white men and women and that Black women rely heavily on self-care and social supports. In her research, Tillman (2012) narrated her own experience in academia as a "Black female graduate student and professor" (p. 119). She received support and love from her family, friends, and community. She received numerous academic awards from the Black community. Despite the support she received, she suffered from subtle messages and experiences of unfairness in the predominantly white academic institution. Tillman offered suggestions "for developing a strategic plan, perfecting the art of networking, and making the most of mentoring relationships" (p. 124).

The Nova Scotian Context

As outlined above, most published research on the experiences of Black women in professional roles focuses on African American women. The current study draws on 21 qualitative interviews with African Nova Scotian[2] women who are currently or have previously worked in the public sector. African Nova Scotians have a unique history within Canada and have encountered systematic racism since the 1700s (Etowa, Beagan, Eghan, & Bernard, 2017; Maddalena et al., 2013; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2017). To date, however, little research has been conducted on employment and professional mobility of African Canadian and African Nova Scotian women.

Este et al. (2012) emphasized that African Canadians experience considerable racism-related stress in their places of employment and have few supports that help them experience success in the workplace. Furthermore, many stop applying for promotions because of being passed over so many times, often blaming themselves for what is perceived as personal failure. For some women, the experiences of racism-related stress in their employment can lead to health issues (James et al., 2010), but they stay because they are forced to work in toxic environments to support their families, commonly referred to as "golden handcuffs." It is inferred from Bernard and Fingard's (2004) study with Black women domestics in post-war Halifax that many Black Nova Scotian women have experienced employment success, yet little is known of their experiences.

In Nova Scotia, Bernard et al. (1993) explored various ways that the intersection of race and gender impacts professional women of African descent. They noted that although Black women had been disempowered by their experiences of racism and sexism, many managed to turn their adversities into strengths. A common factor was that Black women worked twice as hard to survive and succeeded against the odds, a finding that corroborated Carroll's (1982) study of African American women. Building on Moore's (1991) concept of double jeopardy, Bernard et al. (1993) explored the *triple jeopardy*, that is, the race, class, and gender oppression that Black Nova Scotian women face, particularly in the social work sector, and advised a multi-layered approach to addressing these issues such that these women could achieve success and upward mobility.

Bernard (2003) examined oppressive practices that negatively impacted her career within academia in Nova Scotia. She identified many challenges faced by Black women in a white male–dominated workplace. Despite reporting that she worked three times as hard as her colleagues, she

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[2] In this definition of "African Nova Scotian," we include historic African Nova Scotians, whose ancestors have lived in Nova Scotia since the 1700s, and all people of African descent who live in Nova Scotia.

noted that "it is a struggle to get the job and to keep the job" (p. 71). With a lack of other people of colour in her department, Bernard experienced isolation and marginalization and at times felt unsafe in her place of work. Bernard highlighted the absence of and need for formalized African Canadian support groups to provide opportunities for Black women to connect with other Black women.

Anti-Black Racism in the Public Service

In her memoir *Can You Hear Me Now?* Celina Caesar-Chavannes (2021) reflected on her experience as a Black woman working in politics. Caesar-Chavannes entered federal politics with motivation and intention to create systemic change for Black Canadians through policy change and by transforming the presence of Black women within the system. After four years of representing her riding, pushing for legislative change through her role as Parliamentary Secretary, she decided against running in the next election. She was tired of being tokenized to create an image of diversity, just to be passed over when it came to implementing her proposed legislative changes. Caesar-Chavannes relied on her own strength, overcoming barriers and challenges to advocate for changes she wanted to see. She then used her own resources to speak out about her experience, which mirrored that of many Black people working in the public service, especially other Black women who are faced with the compounding impact of intersecting sexism and racism.

On December 1, 2020, a class-action lawsuit was filed that addressed the historic and ongoing systemic racism and discrimination against over 30,000 Black people in the public service. The damages cited include "wrongful failure to promote, intentional infliction of mental suffering, constructive dismissal, wrongful termination, negligence, and in particular, violations of employment law, human rights law, and Charter breaches" (Black Class Action, 2020). The stories of many of the claimants mirror those expressed by Caesar-Chavannes (2021).

Theoretical Frameworks

Three approaches were used in this research: Africentric theory, critical race theory, and anti-Black racism. While each framework has its own unique and distinctive qualities, they are strengthened when used collectively to provide a holistic understanding of the experiences of the Black women in the public sector.

Africentric Theory

Africentricity is a method of conducting research in a way that reflects the first-hand experiences and perspectives of people of African descent, while also recognizing the rich history and profound struggles that have existed throughout the diaspora (James et al., 2010). The concept of Africentricity was developed as a means of "studying the world and its people, concepts, and history from an African worldview" (Asante, 1991, p.171). Africentricity helps to centralize and normalize the narratives of people of African descent (Lynn, 2005), and to empower communities that have been historically oppressed by supporting their community and self-help efforts (Schiele, 1997). In upholding an Africentric framework, "research is grounded in the history, culture, economics, race, gender, language, and religion of those involved" (James et al., 2010, p. 22). Africentric theory places strong emphasis on self-determination, culture, collective identity, and sense of connectedness within communities as a means of coping with racism. Africentric theory is vital, in this study, to helping us develop an accurate interpretation of the complexities African Canadian women face, specifically within public sector employment.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory "provides a framework for the examination and discussion of racial issues, especially the lives of Black female leaders who work in culturally incongruent racial settings" (Alston, 2012, p. 128). *Race* can be defined as a social construct that determines one's status in society, and *racism* can be defined as individuals and communities being colonized, excluded, and deemed inferior based on the racialized group they belong to (James, 2003). Critical race theory examines race and racism, particularly in the many ways society works to systematically oppress and exclude racial minorities (James 2008). By working within the framework of critical race theory, we acknowledge the unique perspective of Black women, a demographic that, historically, has been socially, structurally, and intellectually marginalized (Alston, 2012). This framework combined with Africentric theory provides us an opportunity to convey the narratives of Black Nova Scotian women, in an effort to challenge the multilayers of oppression that exist, while influencing systematic change and social justice.

Anti-Black Racism

With regard specifically to racism targeted at Black people in Canada, anti-Black racism takes into account the experiences of Black Canadians throughout history (James et al., 2010). The historical context of Black people arriving to Canada colonized, seeking freedom, enslaved, displaced from their communities, and segregated from economic opportunities set the stage for modern day anti-Black racism. In addition, Black people in Canada have faced racist policies and practices embedded in the law, education, housing, and employment, which have influenced and justified the racial discrimination of Black Canadians that continues to exist to date (James et al., 2010). Through the personal narratives of Black Nova Scotian women, this study also uses the lens of anti-Black racism to analyze their experiences in the public sector.

Methodology

Objectives

Drawing on the studies discussed above, we set out to answer two questions: (1) What internal and external supports contribute to Black women obtaining leadership positions in the public sector in Canada? (2) What internal and external barriers have Black women faced in obtaining leadership positions in the Canadian public sector? Findings from this study will be used to influence systemic change and develop resources that support the promotion of African Nova Scotian women in the public sector.

Participants

The research team conducted a study with a population of 21 participants who self-identified as women between the ages of 25 and 65 and as African Nova Scotian, African Canadian, of African descent, of Caribbean descent, or Black. Participants either held senior-level or management positions in the public sector or had aspirations for such a position. They all had the education and experience required to make them eligible for these positions. Each participant was either born or living in Nova Scotia. All participants had completed post-secondary undergraduate, graduate and/or post-graduate degrees and had participated in multiple professional development opportunities. Among participants, the number of years of employment within the public sector ranged from one to 35 years. No other identifiable information will be provided in this report due to confidentiality limitations.

Recruitment and Interviews

The research team created an electronic recruitment flyer that included information about the study, the inclusion criteria listed above, and contact information. The electronic flyer was emailed to several community organizations in Nova Scotia, with emphasis on reaching African Nova Scotian communities. There was rapid interest in the recruitment emails, expressed in return emails. Some potential participants contacted the research team just hours after the recruitment flyer was sent out. Participants responded from across Nova Scotia and other provinces. Over 30 people responded, and 21 people were interviewed due to the timing of the study and the availability of participants. Some participants opted out of the study after initial contact due to concerns regarding the potential of being identified.

Interviews took place either over the phone or at a location that was mutually accessible to both researcher and participant. Prior to the interview, a research assistant emailed each participant a copy of the consent form and questionnaire. For the telephone interviews, participants read and signed the consent form and emailed the signed form back to the research assistant prior to the interview. Each interview took approximately 30 to 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded using an audio voice recorder.

Interviews were transcribed using the software Express Scribe. encrypted each interview file with a password to ensure that the files were secure and confidential. Participants' names were replaced with codes to mitigate confidentiality risks.

Data Analysis

To ensure that the experiences of interviewees remained at the centre of the data analysis, we used critical race theory and Africentric theory. Thematic analysis was used to make meaning out of seemingly unrelated qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998) and to identify themes across the transcripts (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Prior to transcription, we developed a general code book of themes they believed would emerge based on the literature review. Each of us then coded our interviews and added codes to the code book as new themes were identified. Each transcription was thoroughly examined, and many common themes emerged. Finally, the qualitative data analysis software Atlas Ti was used for additional sorting and categorizing of data. The research team then conducted further analysis for key themes and subthemes, which are discussed in detail below.

The results of the study were presented to two audiences as a form of member checking. The first presentation was to the Black Women's Network (BWN), as they had initially identified the need for the study. The BWN recommended that the findings be presented to a public community event. This became the second audience, which was hosted by the Halifax Regional Municipality Office of African Nova Scotian Affairs. The public event attracted a mixed audience of approximately 75 people, with politicians, policy makers, and members of the African Nova Scotian community.

Results

Supports

Participants identified several supports that had helped them attain leadership roles. These can be categorized as internal supports, supports inside the workplace, and supports outside the workplace.

Internal Supports

Internal supports refer to personal strengths and resiliencies. Significant internal supports that arose in the interviews included self-determination and spirituality. Many participants also discussed the courage, strength, and resiliency it took for them to move into their positions of power. Every participant stated that their desire for high achievement helped them to overcome the barriers they encountered on their journey to their current position. One participant defined self-determination as "wanting to know more, learn more, and to strive for more". She credited this belief as the main reason for her accomplishments. Many participants noted that their self-determination made them more confident when facing barriers and left them striving to achieve more.

Most participants described spirituality as being a strong internal strength. Participants said that they had been directly or indirectly impacted by faith and the spiritual community, and that their goals and beliefs were motivated and strengthened by their faith. One participant stated, "You have to put something in to have something come back, so in terms of faith, I believe, I need to go to church so I can be rejuvenated and I can hear a message."

Supports Inside the Workplace

Participants stated that supports from inside the workplace included supportive managers, supportive colleagues and mentors of the same race, professional organizations designed to assist Black women, and allies.

Supportive managers. Many women experienced enhanced career mobility and positive work environments when they were well supported by their manager. For example, one participant stated, "My manager believed I had the skills and abilities to be in a leadership role and signed me up for the management training.… I got encouragement and support to feel comfortable that I belonged in that particular role."

Same-race colleagues and mentors. Most of the Black women who participated in the study found that having other Black colleagues within the workplace had a significant impact. As stated by one participant,

> There was very few of us in those positions and there was very few of us that had post-secondary education in those days.… When I took the job with XXX it was only for a term. It was a Black woman working at the Public Service Commission that said sometimes those terms turn into something, and [she] explained what terms meant, helped me understand the Statement of Qualifications, helped me unravel what that meant and helped me prepare. Those are the kinds of supports I had.

Another participant explained that "the Black community [is] very communal and relational and we want to see each other succeed."

Professional organizations. Many women reported that African Nova Scotian support groups, such as the Black Women in the Public Service Support Group and the Association of Black Social Workers, were a significant contribution to their success. For example, one participant said: "[African Nova Scotian Support Group] was one of the most powerful pieces because [it] let you know that … we were all experiencing the same thing." On building supports through and within professional organizations, one participant stated, "My largest support I say would be through the Association of Black Social Workers."

Allies. Allies are individuals who understand the experiences of someone from a non-dominant group and are willing to use their privilege to support that person. Participants stated that they were able to maximize their efforts through working with allies. For example, as stated by a participant:

> In doing that [anti-racism] work, you cannot do it in isolation. You cannot do it alone.… You cannot fight the fight without allies. I also had good mentors because in my previous employment, even though my managers were white, many of them were white males; they were very supportive of me in terms of where I wanted to go for my career.

Supports Outside of the Workplace

Overall, most women in this study described external support outside of the workplace as being the most significant form of support received. Participants said that they felt a sense of comfort in knowing that they were understood by other African Nova Scotian women in their communities, and that being able to share similar experiences provided a sense of belonging among them. Participants identified several external supports such as family, friends, peers, mentors, and community, including the faith community.

Family and friends/peers. All participants noted a strong familial bond as their dominant external support throughout their careers. For example, one participant stated, "Support from my family. I'm fortunate to have a mother and a husband who have management and executive-level experience. They both encouraged me to pursue leadership opportunities." Another respondent said, "What supported me and helped me to achieve this position, in particular, is my family background. We were taught to set our expectations high and to achieve them. Also supports from my family when I was going to school."

In addition to family members, supportive peers helped to motivate and challenge these women. For example, one participant stated, "I have some really strong connections, both in Canada and around the world, and we are all just equally ambitious and push each other forward."

Mentors. Many participants noted the importance of having mentors who have supported them throughout their careers. One participant also expressed how she has been a mentor to Black women co-workers and how sharing experiences was beneficial to all involved. Other participants stated that mentors can help to show women that support networks are available; for example, "Certainly [what] helped me move ahead is finding the support of mentors. Really working with people [who were] able to see what I was able to do. You know, how good I was, what potential I had."

Community supports. All participants noted the importance of community support groups such as the BWN and the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women. One participant stated, "I have just a wonderful energy that I get from being around the Black community, particularly around women." Other participants referenced their spiritual and faith communities and described the support experienced within these communities as particularly affirming.

Barriers

Participants identified several internal and external barriers that hindered their professional growth and development within the public sector.

Internal Barriers

Most participants reported a lack of self-confidence, knowledge, and social capital. Many participants also experienced challenges associated with trauma, health, poverty, stress, and isolation. As one participant stated,

> There were many times where I would want to apply for a role or something and I would feel that internal voice saying you're not qualified for—you're not good enough for that.… Obviously, it wasn't a qualification barrier; it was possibly a confidence barrier, and then of course a racial barrier.

While it was often challenging to name internal barriers, many of the participants shared information about the painful ways in which these barriers had influenced their careers. For example, one woman stated, "Even though I have an executive MBA, which is more than a lot [of] individuals in senior-level positions in government, I don't feel good enough."

Another internal barrier identified was the lack of social capital and soft skills that are often required for promotion. As one participant said, "My own internal barrier is lack of knowledge, not knowing what soft skills actually mean."

Additional internal barriers included the impact of internalized and intersecting racism, ageism, and sexism, which is discussed below, following a review of external barriers.

External Barriers

Participants highlighted numerous external barriers that have impeded their ability to progress within the public sector. The most significant external barrier was the experience of systemic anti-Black racism. Other barriers included lack of professional development opportunities (glass or concrete ceiling), being the only person of colour within the workplace, financial barriers, and historical racism within Nova Scotia. Lastly, the intersections of oppression, including race, gender, age, and typecasting created significant barriers for these participants.

Systemic anti-Black racism. All participants stated that systemic racism in the workplace had impacted their perceived abilities throughout their careers in the public sector. One participant described anti-Black racism as "very implicit and I think it's very ingrained." Many other women described feeling unsupported by management: one participant noted that

> the barriers that I faced were very systemic, with a lack of support, a lack of belief in my skills and abilities, no financial aid, no mentors with similar cultural beliefs or my ethnicity and background, and just a real unfair treatment that exists systemically within the provincial government or the Public Service Commission.

One participant described the oppressive practices that she had experienced within the workplace when aiming for promotion: "It's like [in] one case the rules are being used to exclude me, but in other cases the rules don't apply." Most participants shared similar recollections of not being granted the same opportunities in the workplace as their white colleagues. One participant explained that she was never successful in obtaining supervisory positions, despite being qualified and actively applying for them; her white colleagues attained these positions despite having less experience than her. Similarly, another participant acknowledged that there are many barriers in the workplace, most of which can be attributed to racism. She provided a detailed account of an experience in which her white colleague was elevated to the director position while she was not

even given the opportunity to apply or compete for that position, despite having more experience and education.

Many women described themselves as being compelled to work harder than their white counterparts to prove themselves as competent and capable. One participant explained, "Each and every day I am trying to figure out always how I do more, how can I do it better, and there's only so much that you can do." Several participants noted that the intense pressure on Black women in leadership roles can have negative effects on one's overall health and well-being. Most participants noted the prevalence of systemic anti-Black racism. As one participant said: "Unless that [anti-Black racism] is addressed, nothing will ever change."

The glass and concrete ceiling. All participants noted that the glass ceiling was a barrier they had faced throughout their careers. However, several participants described the glass ceiling as something only white women face. For example:

> I think it's a concrete ceiling. Think about it: a glass ceiling is something that you know you'll eventually break through. If you work hard enough and try hard enough, you'll eventually break through that. But the concrete ceiling, you can work as hard as you want, you can go at it and go at it, but it's going to be pretty difficult to break through the concrete ceiling.

Participants highlighted how this barrier is explicitly different for Black women than it is for any other individual. One participant described her experience of being denied advancement to a managerial position:

> We are a threat to white women and a threat to the system because I think they recognize that we bring a race analysis along with us, and they don't have a response to that. So they would rather say to you—which is insulting yet empowering—that you are smarter than us, but you are too progressive at this point.

Only person of colour. Most participants noted that they were the only person of colour in their workplace and identified this as a significant barrier to their success. One participant stated, "Every meeting I go to, I am the only person of colour. Sometimes I feel really isolated, because there are so few of us in the roles that we are in."

Being the first Black woman in a workplace was described as challenging due to the lack of mentorship or support systems in place. As one respondent said, "There are no Black women in those management positions to champion or to mentor and bring alongside to have those particular opportunities."

As discussed further below, being the only person of colour can manifest into internalized racism. One participant described the importance of having a certain level of cultural awareness when connecting and communicating with white colleagues: "All work environments [are] relational, and if you are going to survive where you are [as] one of or the only person of African descent, you have to be able to read how white people can formulate relationships."

Financial barriers. Many women reported a lack of financial freedom and noted that the departments in which they were employed were not financially supportive. One participant stated that minority groups were disadvantaged in that they received less financial support than majority groups. She explained that some of her colleagues were paid to attend professional development

programs, whereas she was expected to pay for her own way. Some women faced difficulties accessing funding for continued education, compared to their white colleagues. Some women who are also mothers faced financial barriers to accessing the post-secondary education needed to advance in their careers.

Historical province-wide barriers. Many women spoke of racism that exists in Nova Scotia and the historical underpinnings of Black women being viewed as "less than":

> We live in a province that has a longstanding history [of] systemic racism or interpersonal prejudice.… You know, if something happens we have anti-racism, we have a cultural diversity staff person, and they relegate the issues of race to that particular person to figure out or to navigate instead of looking at how the system will change. The province is historically racist.

One participant stated that many Nova Scotians lack an overall respect for "who we are," which has ultimately led to racism within the workplace and in African Nova Scotian communities. Additionally, many women discussed diversity policies and practices as a veil to disguise racism within the workplace. One participant shared her perception of these policies:

> The fact is people often don't want to hear about diversity and inclusion outside of the work environment; you have diversity and inclusion, and it's like you know it becomes part of the statement, the mission. But in terms of doing anything significantly about it, I don't think people are really ready because as soon as you raise something about diversity and inclusion or mention something that they are not comfortable with, you are accused of playing the race card.

Intersectionality of Oppression

According to study participants, intersectionality, particularly among race, gender, and age, creates added oppression for Black women working in the public sector. Some women reported experiencing unjust treatment in the workplace based on a disability and lack of recognition of foreign credentials.

Systemic sexism. Many participants acknowledged that systemic sexism in the workforce impacted their careers in the public sector. Many shared stories of intersecting oppressions, as they not only faced racism related to their Black identity but also sexism related to their gender. One participant stated that during her time in a management position, other managers regularly mistook her for an employee:

> You know, often here's this Black female coming in who's the manager, and I'm bringing my staff with me who may be supervisors, coordinators, or whatever, and people would extend their hand, and all they knew was the name, my name.… but they would extend their hand to the white colleagues and … call them by my name, thinking well it can't possibly be this Black woman that's the manager.

One woman described these barriers as being "primarily structural in nature." She stated that resources to support employees within the public sector are gradually decreasing, placing pressure on many women to perform beyond their means. Many women are unable to meet these high expectations and are ultimately forced out of their jobs.

Ageism. Some participants experienced ageism within the workplace and discussed the inter-section of being an older or younger Black woman. As one woman explained, "Ageism, now

that I am XXX plus, ageism starts to rear its head and how those intersect with being an aging Black female in the workplace is totally different than my white counterparts." In contrast, another woman experienced discrimination due to appearing young: "I had a senior manager who told me I was not ready for that yet, and almost like I need more time or more experience, but I could not get the experience."

Typecasting. All the participants noted that typecasting was prevalent throughout their careers. They were pigeonholed as the token Black woman who would speak for all other Black women on issues they face. As one participant said,

> I was always the only person of colour and so all of the issues pertaining to any person of African descent.… I was always asked, well what's the opinion on that, or how do I deal with that.… And sometimes, you just get a little bogged down.… you can't possibly know it all.

Internalized Systems of Oppression

Many women discussed the negative effects internalized oppression could have on their professional advancement. One participant described the challenges she experienced working with other Black colleagues:

> Unfortunately, other Black women are also a barrier. Because I find that there's a lot of internalized systems of oppression, and so sometimes we are each other's allies and friends and sometimes we are not. Sometimes we contribute to our own pain.

It is a common belief within Black communities that lack of progress for one Black woman represents a lack of progress for all other Black women. However, many women in our study did not hold the same belief. Some women discussed feeling threatened by other Black women in the workplace and being in competition with them rather than in collaboration. Consequently, we have concluded there is need for further discussion of this sensitive topic.

Recommendations from Participants

Support System

Participants of this study offered several suggestions to support other women in moving forward in the public sector. Most participants expressed the need for more African Canadian leaders working together in the public sector, more African Canadian mentors and stronger support systems overall. For example, with more African Canadian women coming into leadership roles, there is an increasing need to create safe spaces to discuss the challenges they experience and to share strategies to overcome these challenges. Many participants discussed the need to implement more formalized support groups and mentorship programs created specifically for African Canadian women to reflect on and share their experiences.

Developing allies and having white partners identified within organizations who advocate with their power and influence, in government and in all senior leadership positions within the public sector can be beneficial, given that allies can use their power and privilege to uplift and advocate on behalf of Black women.

Empowerment

According to respondents, more effort must be made ensure the public sector is a supportive and safe environment. Community outreach can help break through systemic barriers by actively

supporting and encouraging Black women to pursue public sector education. Suggestions made by participants to help Black women gain the knowledge needed to apply for and pursue such opportunities included learning how to access resources and implementing formal professional development programs to assist African Canadian women to advance into leadership positions. While many participants noted the benefits of being involved in the Black Women in the Public Service Support Group, some women faced barriers in participating or lacked the resources to become involved.

Many participants discussed the importance of implementing and applying for employment-equity policies: merit-based appointments and designated management-level positions that are open, transparent, and fair. One participant suggested conducting more research to document the individual experiences and progress of employees within the public sector.

Self-Advocacy

Almost all participants spoke of the significance of self-advocacy. They suggested that Black women entering the public sector should be better prepared to understand and address systematic racism. As one participant noted:

> To come in with a conscious level of knowing that you are going to come against barriers, systemic barriers, and to be prepared to address them.… I don't mean to conform, I mean that you are arming yourself with the skills, emotionally, to be able to address the issues.

A few participants discussed the importance of furthering their own professional development by taking advantage of post-secondary and continuing education opportunities. To become a leader or obtain a management position, one must "remain in a path of continuous learning" and "invest in yourself," as one respondent noted. If there is a lack of opportunity within the workplace to further one's knowledge base, it is critical to actively seek these opportunities elsewhere.

Discussion

As noted above, there is a paucity of research on women's experiences of work in the African Diaspora, in employment in general, and in professional roles. Furthermore, it is difficult to find instances of these women telling their own stories in their own voices. In work published over the past 30 years, some researchers have begun documenting the double and triple jeopardy of Black women who are caught at the intersection of gender and race oppression in the workplace. The everydayness of racism, sexism, and the triple jeopardy traversed by Black women in employment is clearly documented in available literature (Bernard, et al., 1993; Black & Erikson, 2003; Este et al., 2012; Israel-Trummel, 2014). The need to work two or three times as hard as white colleagues, just to be taken seriously or to be seen as credible and competitive, is a theme that resonated with participants of previous studies.

The current study underscores the reality that over 25 years after the Bernard, et al. (1993) article on the triple jeopardy that African Nova Scotian women face in the social work profession, Black women in public sector employment continue to face barriers, have few supports, and encounter what they call a concrete ceiling. The metaphor of the concrete ceiling serves as a reminder of just how difficult it is for Black women to break through the challenging barriers created by the intersection of systemic racism and sexism. Women in such difficult situations

might develop a sense of hopelessness or helplessness. However, for many of these participants, just the opposite occurred: the comments of participants reflect the idea of critical hope like the ways in which James et al. (2010) identified critical hope, or hopeful action to effect change.

Comments that reflect the concept of critical hope made by participants in our study include seeking out supports and mentors to help them navigate rocky terrain. Many participants stated that they found support in their own self-determination as well as in their faith and spirituality, all of which helped them to grow and push themselves, especially in the face of persistent systemic racism. The current study has shown that internal supports are just as valuable as external supports: believing in oneself, having faith in oneself, and being willing to both ask for help when needed and offer support to others. These factors all helped participants maintain that sense of critical hope.

There were three primary themes of recommendations that arose from the participants in this study who benefited from the support systems that were available. First, the establishment of a formal support system to assist those women who want to prepare for career advancement in the public sector. Second, the identification of champions in the public service sectors who could be beneficial in effecting system-wide changes. Finally, a call to action for Black/African Canadian women to engage in activities that promote ongoing self-advocacy and self-empowerment. Participants in this study clearly articulated the need to understand the policies that govern one's workplace, and to know how to effectively use those policies. They noted the need to invest in oneself and to be prepared for opportunities that may emerge.

We applaud these women and their call for individual preparation, recognizing success can happen when preparation meets opportunity. We acknowledge their hard work, their individual strengths and abilities to overcome barriers through internal and external supports; however, we recognize that this is not enough. Systems changes are needed to truly address the systemic barriers preventing Black women from progressing within the public service. As seen in the class-action lawsuit concerning systemic racism in the public service, the individual stories of discrimination need a platform to fully expose the burden of systemic racism. The actions of individual people alone cannot be expected to mobilize systemic change. This became evident to Celina Caesar-Chavannes (2021), whose own wellness and professional reputation suffered until she was eventually pushed out from fatigue, and had to decide to step away, despite her best efforts to make systemic change from within the system. We agree with the assertion made by Este and Bernard (2003): a high degree of responsibility must also be placed on those in positions of power to address the structural and systemic barriers that exclude and further marginalize African Canadians. Successful systemic change requires that systemic barriers that build concrete ceilings and hold them in place be removed. It would mean that we no longer need employment-equity legislation because all equity-deserving groups, including African Canadian women, would be adequately represented at all levels of public sector employment.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

A major strength of this study is that participants were eager to tell their stories and to have someone listen to them. Through participating in the study, they felt heard and validated. Participant involvement was facilitated by most of the research team having "insider status," being women of African descent. The study was strengthened by strong affirmation by women of African

descent or other racialized women during the member-checking process when the findings were shared with the community. The experiences of the participants resonated with other marginalized women. The concrete-ceiling concept was especially resonant for many community members.

Limitations

Some women chose not to participate in this study for fear of lack of confidentiality, due to the small number of African Nova Scotian women in leadership in the public sector. While the study was opened to women in other parts of Canada, some African Nova Scotian women did not feel comfortable participating. Some women are trapped into silence by golden handcuffs: they may currently be employed and experience anti-Black racism; however, they fear losing their reputation, promotions, or their job if they report anti-Black racism in their workplace. These women opt to remain silent to protect themselves.

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