Black Women Thriving

Table of Contents

> " *I don't know how to describe what it means to thrive at work, but I know that I'm not. I'm focused on trying to survive.* "

— BWT focus group participant

While doing the research for this report, I repeatedly heard Black women make some variation of this statement. Each time I heard it, it deepened my frustration and strengthened my resolve.

Black women deserve to thrive at work, and I'm committed to figuring out how.

As a DEI professional and a Black woman, I can say with confidence that organizations are failing us. I know firsthand the energy and toll it takes to navigate workplaces rife with bias and systemic inequities. It's a big part of why I left the nonprofit sector and started my own firm a decade ago.

Not thriving in the workplace goes far beyond power, pay, and upward mobility. Even when Black women achieve the pinnacle of traditionally defined "success," we are **still** not thriving.

That is because Black women, at all levels of organizations, have to navigate workplace structures and cultures that were not built for us, a reality which is made clear in many implicit and explicit ways —through pay gaps, performance and promotion bias, a mentor and sponsorship gap, daily microaggressions, and discrimination.

Still, we survive workplace cultures that aren't made for us, that don't invest in us, that are not welcoming to us. Until now, there has never been another option.

Our lives *outside* the workplace are **full** of
meaning, community, and joy.

That is where we experience thriving.
We deserve the same at work.
Everyone does.

It's time we thrive.

—Ericka Hines

Deepening Your Analysis

> " *Black women have amplified and supported this work, and us, from day one. At the heart of this project is community, and Black women create community in ineffable ways.* "
>
> —*Ericka Hines & Dr Mako Fitts Ward*

While I have seen many workplaces trying to figure out how to become more diverse, more inclusive, and more equitable, they often have not given much thought to how to help people thrive. At the same time, I've watched more organizations start using the term "thriving" without understanding what it truly means, how it differs from DEI, and/or how to actually create an environment conducive to thriving for anyone, especially for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).

We can't hope to create workplaces where people thrive if we don't have a nuanced analysis of the interpersonal bias and systemic inequities they face *and* what they, themselves, tell us they need.

I've also watched over the last few years as many organizations lacking a systemic analysis have made statements such as

Invest in Black women.

Trust Black women.

Choose Black women.

and still haven't addressed the inequities impacting the Black women working at their company. It's way past time to move beyond platitudes and promises. It's time to push our organizations to embrace the work of equity, justice, and thrivance.

The heart of my work is to deepen organizations' awareness and analysis of the realities that BIPOC employees, especially Black women, experience, while also providing ways they can take informed action and, most importantly, create mechanisms for accountability.

Action, even well informed action, is not enough. Accountability cannot be overlooked.

This is long-term organizational change work.

I hope that this initiative, Black Women Thriving, will help you plot your course.

Centering Black Women

> **"** *When Black women win victories, it is a boost for virtually every segment of society.* **"**
>
> —*Angela Davis, educator and activist*

Black women are confronted with both gender- and race-based inequities at work. They must navigate multiple vectors of oppression simultaneously and are often lauded for their "grit" or "resilience" while doing so.

Being "resilient" and "gritty" isn't a choice; it's a necessity, a necessity created by the ways that sexism, racism and anti-blackness coalesce to create systemic disparities that are experienced solely by Black women. It's critical that organizations and leaders understand the specific ways their practices, policies, and organizational culture impact Black women.

Time has shown us that progress for women doesn't mean progress for all women. Black women have not reaped the same benefits/outcomes that white women have from gender equity initiatives.

Due to the interplay of sexism, racism, and anti-blackness, traditional from-the-box DEI strategies haven't worked for Black women.

In fact, many DEI efforts have had negative impacts on Black women by making bold promises that aren't kept, by making optical changes only, and/or by placing the majority of DEI work on the plates of Black women without any additional compensation or workload reduction. Many of the Black women who participated in this study discussed their frustration and mistrust of traditional DEI efforts.

Organizations need to grapple with the ways in which white dominant norms dictate so much of how work is done—and just how radical our vision and strategies must be to move beyond them. Centering Black women is one such strategy.

Creating organizations in which Black women thrive will break so many institutional inequities that everyone will be significantly better off.

For Black women reading this, we did this research for us because we wanted to

Amplify and highlight Black women's voices so they can be centered in every organization's DEI efforts

More sharply define the experience of Black women and gender expansive people in workplaces
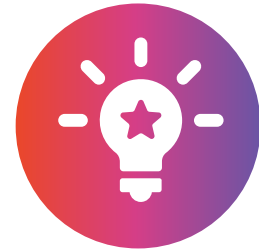
Generate innovative thinking about what it means to "thrive" in the workplace that goes beyond equity with respect to hiring, pay, and promotion

Organizations, this is not just a report. It is a guide and a call to action.

Our goal is for you to take the time to reflect on these findings and use them to help you make informed choices about how to better support Black women and create the opportunities, resources, policies, and practices needed for them to thrive within your organization.

Black women have the highest rate of workforce participation among all women[1] yet are denied training, promotion, and advancement at a significantly higher rate than white women across all industries.[2]

First, we're going to ground ourselves in shared language and concepts. Then we will move on to hearing from Black women through data. We will end by discussing what organizations can do to create the conditions for thriving.

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN

>> What does thriving mean? How is it different from DEI and belonging work?

>> Why is it critical to center organizational DEI efforts on Black women?

>> The experiences of Black women in the workplace and what their needs are.

>> How creating and maintaining an inclusive, equitable, and thriving workplace is an attainable goal.

>> Ways organizations can create policies, practices, and cultures in which Black women thrive.

We want to challenge you as you read this report to compare and contrast a traditional DEI approach to a **thrive-centric DEI approach** that also improves employee health, success, and satisfaction as well as employee engagement.

What is Thriving?

> " *Centering relief and recovery policies around the needs of Black women and other vulnerable workers will ensure an inclusive economy for everyone.* "
>
> — US Department of Labor [3]

Research shows that there are characteristics inherent to thriving in the workplace. A group of researchers at the University of Michigan developed what they call a "socially embedded model" where they defined thriving at work as "the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning at work."[4] The combined sense of vitality (positive feeling ascribed to having available energy) and learning (feeling that one is gaining and can apply information and skills) conveys a sense of movement toward one's personal development.

We know what the components and impacts of thriving are, but **how** do we get to thriving?

WE BELIEVE IT'S BY

>> Providing access to opportunities and creating stable work environments where challenges are manageable

>> Giving employees the autonomy to ask for and receive the support and resources they need

>> Assuring that employees have the ability to focus and complete tasks in creative ways

>> Deepening our understanding of how a team works collaboratively toward a common goal

>> Making sure that employees have the agency to make decisions that create more feelings of autonomy

Strong relationships are key. They require mutual trust, respect, and a willingness to take risks to achieve individual and organizational goals.

While these concepts of thriving are helpful, they do not address the affect of white dominant culture on the work lives of Black and Brown folks which impact their ability to thrive. People of Color, particularly Black women, cannot thrive in workspaces that don't actively push back against and work to eradicate the norms of white dominant culture.

For People of Color to thrive, solutions must begin by addressing historical legacies of structural racism and sexism embedded within our economy. From pay equity to access to education, health care, and housing, solutions must be based in a recognition that these systems of racial and gender oppression are operating within and outside our organizations. Our analysis and recommendations take this intersectional systemic understanding into account and center the lived experience of Black women in the process.

> **"** *White dominant culture describes how white people and their practices, beliefs, and culture have been normalized over time and are now considered standard in the United States.* **"**
>
> —*National Museum of African American History and Culture*

Key Findings

The findings are based on a survey of 1,431 Black women (cisgender and transgender) and gender-expansive professionals working in the public sector, private sector, and at non-profit organizations across the United States. Participants were solicited via social media through Every Level Leadership and its network of affiliate organizations to complete this quantitative survey hosted on ASU Qualtrics.

Participants were not required to complete the survey and were able to opt out at any time. Responses were 100% confidential. Participants' names, locations, and organizations were at no point collected nor attached to their data in any way. While 1,564 respondents completed the survey, we included only the 1,431 responses that were complete and submitted by individuals who identified as Black women (cis and trans) and gender expansive. We also conducted 19 moderated focus groups, with an intergenerational cross-section of 54 Black women, between June and August of 2021.

For the full demographics breakdown, see page 46.

Based on focus group interviews and our review of leading research on Black working professionals, we used a baseline understanding of thriving as the extent to which an individual feels they are growing or flourishing within their work environment. We define surviving as a state of being whereby individuals exist or are simply managing in their work environment, oftentimes under difficult circumstances. Mixed experiences refer to a combination of flourishing and managing hard situations within the work environment.

The rate of thriving and surviving are captured by the gauge on the bottom of each of the findings pages. Our rating system is based on the survey data and focus group interviews, our professional experience as DEI experts, and our lived experiences as Black women.

Performance and Promotion

Performance and promotion are two of the most bias-ridden processes within organizations. Even though Black women are confident in their abilities and report a desire to take on more responsibility, that is not happening at the pace that it should be in most sectors. When the best way to get a promotion or raise is to secure and leverage an external offer, we know the system is broken.

> *Despite the credentials that I had, the training and the project management, I still was denied a recent promotion. The person that was picked was a white female. I knew the odds were against me because the whole organization is mostly white and female, but still, I thought all of the credentials that I was bringing to the table, all of the work that I had done, and all of my references would put me over the edge. But there wasn't that willingness to even take a chance.*
>
> —BWT focus group participant

Performance and Promotion

33% of Black women believe that job performance is evaluated fairly.

39% agree that reward and recognition are received for good work performance.

71% of respondents have put themselves on the job market to get a promotion or earn a higher salary.

50% Among those who have applied for a promotion within their organization, only half received the promotion.

34% of Black women feel comfortable asking for a raise or promotion.

SURVIVING THRIVING

Current Workplace Status for Black Women

SURVIVAL MODE

Compensation and Earning Potential

Black women's labor has never been adequately compensated, from enslavement to the massive wealth gap Black families experience today. Nationally, we know that Black women earn 63% of white, non-Hispanic men's earnings, creating a massive pay gap across race and gender. Addressing this very tangible reality, paying Black women equitably, should be a primary goal of any DEI effort.

According to a National Women's Law Center's 2021 piece, *Black Women and the Wage Gap*[5], "conversations around the wage gap tend to over-focus on the numbers while ignoring the causes. But these numbers are more than facts and figures; they represent the tangible consequences of sexism and white supremacy in the United States and how our country systematically devalues women of color and their labor."

Compensation and Earning Potential

ONLY
34%

of Black women report that their compensation is fair relative to similar roles at their organization.

There is a high statistical significance between income and age.

As Black women (among the sample population) **age**, their **earnings increase**.

There is a high statistical significance between income and education.

Over **50%** of Black women who earned a **master's degree or higher** have an annual income of **$200,000 or more**.

There is a high statistical significance between income and relationship status.

Relationship status of those who earn over $200,000 per year

Married Black women		Separated or divorced		In a relationship		Single women
71%	VS	**41%**	VS	**39%**	VS	**30%**

Most non-married Black women earn between $50,000 and $100,000 per year.

SURVIVING — THRIVING

Current Workplace Status for Black Women
SPLIT

Access to Opportunities

Black women do not have equal access to opportunities, power, and organizational resources. There is a major lack of mentorship and sponsorship for Black women, and mentorship is near non-existent for gender expansive people. Black women's skills are underutilized and underdeveloped by organizations. Ultimately, the majority of Black women don't see a career trajectory for themselves at their current organization. This is a retention wake-up call for all organizations.

> *Personalized learning, development, and coaching appropriate for Black women, not the sort of cookie cutter executive coaching or training courses for leaders or people that want to become managers—they're not tailored towards us.*
>
> —BWT focus group participant

Access to Opportunities

When it comes to access to opportunities, **over half** of Black women report that opportunities and recognition are not distributed fairly to people of all identities.

59%
of Black women have participated in a workplace-sponsored leadership and/or skill development program.

78%
have never participated in a mentoring program sponsored by their organization. This number is higher for gender expansive (96%) and LGBQ+ (85%).

"[I want] an opportunity to be included in certain conversations and on other projects or to be in certain spaces. New partners are brought on or new relationships are being built. I just wanted to be in the mix."

—BWT focus group participant

"I feel misused, like the genius that I thought was recognized and was the reason for me being at my job, it's just not being leveraged accordingly. I feel misused [and] abused."

—BWT focus group participant

75%
report that their organization does not utilize their skills as much as it could.

63%
report that they might, probably not, or definitely do not see a pathway to advance their career within their current organization.

SURVIVING   THRIVING

Current Workplace Status for Black Women

SURVIVAL MODE

Workplace Satisfaction

Little of the research and strategies to improve worker satisfaction takes people's social identities into account. Employee satisfaction surveys are typically one size fits all and not disaggregated along demographics such as race and gender identity, and many marginalized folks report that they can't fully express themselves honestly without risking retribution from leaders and managers. To improve workplace satisfaction for Black women, organizations must learn from Black women's experiences and unique needs and shape strategies that are responsive to and inclusive of those needs.

> *It's just not worth it. I worked so hard every day for 10 years in this organization, clawing my way to where I am now. And it's like, for what? For what? I got the pay. Like I make good money, don't get me wrong. But is it good money compared to what I'm losing on the other side of it? It's not, it's just not worth it.*
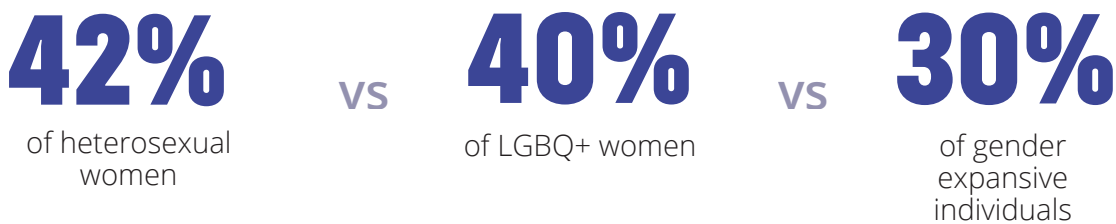>
> *—BWT focus group participant*

Workplace Satisfaction

Less than half of Black women across sexual orientation, age, marital status and income report feeling happy at their current job.

Satisfaction Percentages by Sexual Orientation

Black women, regardless of sexual orientation, did not report high rates of satisfaction with their current workplace.

42%
of heterosexual women

VS

40%
of LGBQ+ women

VS

30%
of gender expansive individuals

Satisfaction Percentages by Age

Ages 18-24	Ages 25-44	Ages 45-59	Over age 60
50%	**38.5%**	**41%**	**52%**

Marital Status

There is a high statistical significance between marital status and workplace satisfaction.

Married Black women comprise

45%

of those who **felt satisfied**

VS

Single Black women who comprise

41%

of those who **felt dissatisfied**.

Current Workplace Status for Black Women

SURVIVING — **THRIVING**

SURVIVAL MODE

Support

Due to implicit and explicit biases, Black women often aren't given the same type of stretch assignments as their colleagues or spend a longer time in roles when their work is on par or exceeds that of those colleagues. Black women have shared a deep belief and data to support that their competency is called into question in ways that their colleagues' are not. Key to Black women feeling supported within an organization: knowing that their work is valued, feeling that they're trusted to make decisions, and being given opportunities to grow.

> *My non-Black counterparts, they would question my level of competence. I would feel gaslighted occasionally to where I'm second guessing myself. I experienced being more transparent working last year through the pandemic. Me surviving at work was essentially question[ing] [and] sacrificing my responsibilities and working towards other people's responsibilities.*
>
> —BWT focus group participant

Support

62%
of Black women feel valued for their contributions in the workplace

76%
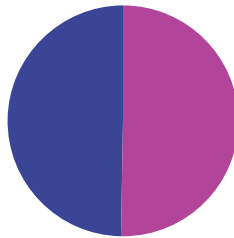of Black women feel that they are given the freedom to work and make decisions.

53%
of Black women believe that work is not distributed equally across their work team.

Black women are split over the reasonability of their workload.

50.5%
Say it's reasonable

49.5%
Disagree

While Black women report high levels of self-confidence, focus group data reveal the nuances around how others perceive Black women's competencies and how this impacts their confidence.

>> **93%** agree that they are aware of their strengths.

>> **71%** believe that if they work hard, they will achieve their goals.

>> **83%** feel comfortable admitting when they make a mistake.

>> **72%** find critical feedback helpful and motivating.

SURVIVING — THRIVING

Current Workplace Status for Black Women

SPLIT

Connectedness & Trust Amongst Work Colleagues

Feeling connected, included, and trusting of colleagues and managers is a prerequisite for workplace thriving. Black women want to feel connected to their team, manager, and leadership, as well as their organization's mission, but often have difficulty establishing those connections when they are placed on homogenous teams, expected to educate colleagues on the Black experience, and placed under managers who don't have an understanding of how race, power, and privilege impact their supervisory skills.

Black women feel most accepted when working with a diverse team that allows them to show up as their authentic selves.

> *Maintaining relationships are not necessarily measurable. Those things are not necessarily quantifiable and are undervalued.*
>
> —BWT focus group participant

Connectedness & Trust Amongst Work Colleagues

Between 40–50% of Black women agreed with the majority of the questions related to connectedness in the workplace.

48%
Feel they are treated courteously and with respect
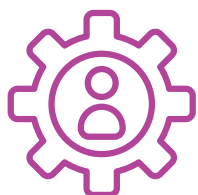
43%
Feel like part of a team

48%
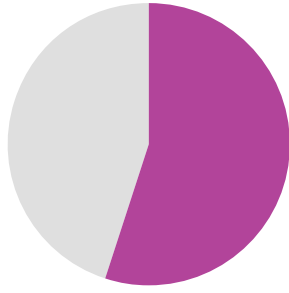Feel a sense of shared purpose

45%
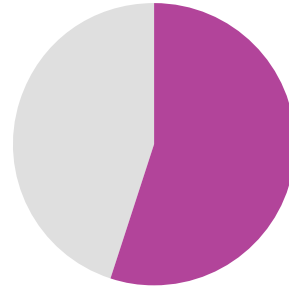Feel they receive care and support from others

40%
Feel they are supported in more than just getting the work done

Over 50% of Black women reported that they enjoy working with their coworkers and that they have a trusted group to confide in for support.

Over 50% of Black women report feeling the burden of educating their coworkers on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

There was less agreement (**42%**) on the question related to people working effectively together.
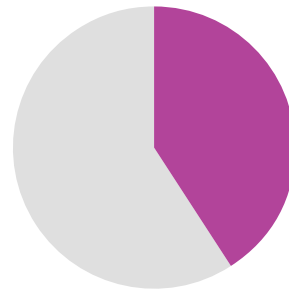
41% of Black women trust that their coworkers will stand up for what is just.

When considering the best work environment they've experienced, the majority of Black women reported rarely or never having worked in an organization that is predominantly made up of People of Color; had equal representation by race, gender, or sexual orientation; or where leadership is racially or ethnically diverse.

62% of Black women have never had a Black manager.

Over 50% of Black women report that leadership rarely or never openly discuss issues of race and racism.

SURVIVING   THRIVING

Current Workplace Status for Black Women

SPLIT

Burnout

Current research about burnout tells us that when burnout is not addressed it has long term negative health effects. The World Health Organization classified workplace burnout as an "occupational phenomenon" that ensues from chronic workplace stress that has not been managed effectively. While we are seeing more companies invest in wellness strategies, it is still not a widely accepted organizational practice. It needs to be.

Addressing burnout for Black women specifically goes beyond workload and stress reduction. Burnout strategies need to tackle microaggressions and bias, the compounded effects of code switching, navigating sexism and racism, and doing an immense amount of emotional labor (educating colleagues about DEI or being one of a few mentors/safe places for BIPOC colleagues).

Based on our research it's likely that your Black women colleagues are burnt out—from organizational and cultural stressors—and should have strategies for addressing burnout that meet their needs.

Burnout

While 45% of Black women report feeling happy at their current job, **over half** report fair or poor work-life balance.

6.8%	18.3%	36.8%	30.2%	7.8%
Very poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent:

88% of Black women have sometimes, often, or always experienced burnout, compared to 12% who have never or rarely experienced it. Most Black women report that the following factors contribute to burnout:

65%	53%	59.2%	61%	49%
Lack of Personal Time	Unclear Job Expectations	Negative Workplace Environment	Lack of Opportunities for Advancement	Bad Relationship with Manager, Supervisor and/or Leadership

78% of Black women report that they sometimes, rarely, or never have the ability to go home at the end of the work day with energy in reserve.

75% of Black women report feeling exhausted, tired, and contented at the end of the work day.

SURVIVING THRIVING

Current Workplace Status for Black Women

SURVIVAL MODE

The focus groups revealed that one of the key factors leading to burnout is the desire to perform excellence and perfection. Factors motivating this performance include the desire to be taken seriously, to dispel stereotypes perpetuated by dominant society, to be accepted in predominantly white organizations, and to adhere to beauty standards and work ethics learned within family and community.

> *As soon as I was 12 years old, my grandmother took me to a family friend and started relaxing my hair. It was always this strange thing because any time I would hang around the Black side of my family, it was always like, 'you have good hair'. It gives you this weird complex because it's, like, a compliment.*
>
> —*BWT focus group participant*

> *It's like you have to work twice as hard for half the pay. I feel like I am constantly, constantly trying to do at least twice as much as my coworkers to prove myself.*
>
> —*BWT focus group participant*

> *You're a Black woman. You need to always try harder. You need to be neat all the time.*
>
> —*BWT focus group participant*

> *I had to really fight hard to prove or become a professional woman, even with that sometimes I still don't feel I belong. I just graduated with my master's degree and I'm 54 years old, and it should not have taken that long. But when I look back at my life, I had to overcome a lot of obstacles to get to that point.*
>
> —*BWT focus group participant*

> *My mom and my aunts were older from that generation, but they gave me the blues. [They said] 'I can't believe you're going to work with your hair like that'. I was like, it's just hair.*
>
> —*BWT focus group participant*

As Black women climb within the leadership ranks of an organization and earn higher incomes, their levels of stress also go up.

Belonging

Belonging speaks to a sense of acceptance and comfort within a particular space, being viewed as a valued member of that organization who doesn't have to contort to be included. Black women working in predominantly white spaces have repeatedly shared that they don't feel a sense of belonging because they must be constantly vigilant about their tone and speech patterns and must conform to the pressure to contradict stereotypes. Maintaining this level of constant vigilance as a necessity is unhealthy and unsustainable. Organizations should know that having to code switch and fit within expected norms of "professionalism" both signal that you don't belong and drain individual performance and satisfaction, stymieing retention efforts by organizations.

> *I try to surround myself with people that understand, where you can just say it as it is and they get it. It's not a whole, dealing with somebody's pushback, dealing with someone's tears, dealing with, oh we're all the same, we're all Brown. Making sure I have other Black and mixed race Black women who I can just say something to who don't need the whole story. It's just understood and then we can move on.*
>
> —*BWT focus group participant*

Belonging

62%
of Black women reported having meaningful, trusted relationships with colleagues.

59%
of Black women feel respected by the people they work with.

52%
of Black women feel comfortable sharing their opinions.

"I was always afraid to go to work natural until about three [or] four years ago, just based on how they might accept me."

—*BWT focus group participant*

While the majority of Black women (86.9%) reported that they are able to wear their hair naturally to work, women in the focus groups noted the pressure to conform to white beauty standards and the fear of being judged for wearing their hair naturally.

41%
of Black women report that they are not free to talk about anti-blackness at work without negative consequences compared to 43% who report being able to talk about race at work without negative consequences.

42%
of Black women (cis and trans) report that they are not able to bring their authentic self to work without worrying about the repercussions. This percentage is higher for gender-expansive individuals (48%).

There was more nuance and disagreement among Black women respondents by age. Women over the age of 60 agree that they are free to:

Bring their authentic self to work
54%

Talk about race
60%

Talk about blackness
45%

Compared to less than 50% of women across all other age groups (18–59).

72%

of Black women engage in code switching

56%

have felt silenced or dismissed by others

Focus groups revealed the pressure to navigate stereotypes that prevent Black women from expressing vulnerability, discontent, or even disagreement with colleagues for fear of being labeled the "angry Black woman."

"To be the first Black person chairing the board with all those personalities really pushed me. I just had to, for fear of the angry Black women coming out, use a lot of my negotiating skills. I learned a lot about how certain people try to move and undermine. I saw undermining happen in different ways when I was board chair, as opposed to the white male before me."

—BWT focus group participant

"I don't have fight or flight. I'm always on fight. I don't freeze. I have been told I have a very good resting B face where people can't read me, and so that leads them to ask me these crazy questions or give me feedback that is pointless. Give me actionable feedback. Don't just give me things that I can't do anything with. And so, for me, I don't freeze. I'm not going to fly where we're going to fight it out."

—BWT focus group participant

While Black women across the gender (87.5%) and sexual orientation (87.2%) spectrums feel physically safe at work, feelings of emotional safety vary slightly. 44% of cisgender and transgender women feel emotionally safe, compared to the 40.5% of gender expansive women who do not feel emotionally safe at work.

Earners over $100k feel more emotional safety. ($100–$199k: 47.7% agree; over $200k: 52% agree.)

While Black women are rarely or never asked about their name, the way they talk, their physical attributes, socioeconomic background, and sometimes about their hair, there are slight distinctions in experience across the gender and sexual orientation spectrum.

29%

of LBGQ+ Black women are sometimes asked about the way they dress.

20%

of gender expansive and 21% of LBGQ+ are often asked about their educational background, compared to 13% of cis and trans women and 11% of heterosexual women.

20%

of gender expansive individuals are often asked about their gender identity, compared to 1% of cis and trans women.

23%

of gender expansive women are always asked about their family formation compared to 5% of women.

SURVIVING   THRIVING

Current Workplace Status for Black Women

SPLIT

# Strategies for Thriving

What Your Organization Can Do

Imagining what thriving means for your job will change the way that you work.

—Ericka Hines

Implementing recommendations is hard work. Often folks say, "these are too broad," "there's too much detail and I don't know where to begin," and "tell me what this looks like in reality." And in my experience as a DEI professional, these responses reflect a pattern of hesitation that organizations have about doing complex work around inclusion and equity, a lack of imagination about what a thriving workplace looks like, and a deeply ingrained resistance to change.

It is important that organizations and decision-makers proactively:
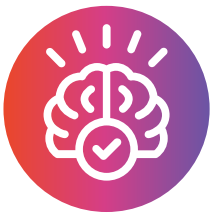
Shift their mindset around organizations and how they function.

Examine their assumptions about how people should perform within organizational cultures.

Assume their role as cultural change agents.

These recommendations were derived from research with Black women participants across sectors and may reflect your industry or not. They are not just plug and play. This is a long term, comprehensive, change-management effort that takes time, resources, and a willingness to shift your policies, practices, and procedures. This will change the way that you work. Your organization must identify the recommendations that fit your specific organizational culture and where it is at.

One way to work with the below recommendations is to sit down with a group of colleagues—perhaps a DEI team, a leadership team, an ERG, or an affinity group and read through them together. Get a collective sense of which recommendations resonate with your experiences and reflect your organization's trajectory.

Once you move into planning, consider these key questions:

>> **How** does a more thrive-centric model of DEI that centers Black women impact/interplay with current DEI work?

>> **Who** will ally with Black women by championing or centering Black women's experiences at your organization?

>> **What** will Black women being supported, resourced, and compensated in your organization look like?

>> **Why** hold leaders accountable for acting on these recommendations?

Focus groups revealed that Black women have never been asked about thriving in the workplace. Respondents struggled with articulating experiences that constitute thriving, and while they don't always know what it looks like, they intuitively "know" when they are not thriving.

Black women in the focus groups reported opportunities for childcare and flexible working hours as a needed structural response to promote thriving.

> *We're all resourceful, we're all creative. We know ourselves.*
> *We know when we're going to work best and be given opportunities*
> *to contribute and decision-making in how you work as well.*
>
> —*BWT focus group participant*

Organizations must create a climate where Black women can speak their truth and share perspectives honestly.

> *I feel like I'm thriving when I can say that truth on behalf of people*
> *who can't say it because of power and because of how we define*
> *whose story deserves to be told and who is worthy to be heard.*
>
> —*BWT focus group participant*

Access to professional development opportunities, mentorship, and pathways to leadership within their organization are key to Black women's ability to thrive in the workplace.

> *It was seeing someone who looks like me in a position of leadership and*
> *really clicking and connecting there and knowing that they shared my*
> *values and passion for the work that we were doing was helpful.*
>
> —*BWT focus group participant*

Access to Mentorship and Sponsorship Opportunities

>> Make intersectional retention a strategic imperative in your organization, tying it to your organization's mission, vision, and outcomes. As you grow, identify career growth trajectories for staff members and give clear expectations of qualifications for promotion. Start by reviewing all job descriptions and ensuring that they accurately reflect the work that is currently being done in that role.

>> A critical factor in the career growth for women and People of Color is mentorship, particularly from other women and People of Color. Trying to create mentoring opportunities that fill at least one of the needs that Black women staff may have include the following:

Career mentorship: Pairing staff who are in the beginning or mid-career with colleagues who are further along in their career, following traditional mentorship models.

Expertise mentorship: Pairing staff based on expertise with other more experienced colleagues to learn new skills or get feedback on challenges.

External mentorship: Supporting professional development, particularly for Black women, by looking for external mentors. We suggest making funds available to help support Black women in receiving external mentorship.

>> Once more robust mentorship opportunities are in place, promote and share this opportunity regularly and ask leaders and managers who have Black women as direct reports to tell them specifically.

Promotion

>> Carry out a values alignment check to assess how the values that drive your business or organization influence your criteria for raises and promotions. Pay special attention to those values expressly made around whether your promotion process aligns with your diversity, racial equity, and inclusion efforts.

>> Codify your promotion process by having a performance evaluation rubric that outlines the factors considered in performance reviews and promotions. Include in those reviews what data sources supervisors can cite for the performance ratings that they give.

>> Audit your promotion review process and practices by looking at disaggregated performance data and answering the following questions: Who is getting promoted? What are the factors being considered for promotion? Are you giving promotions based on competency as well as leadership potential? What is the duration of time in the role for Black women compared to other groups, in particular white men and women?

>> Prioritize the representation and support of Black women in leadership roles. Invest in your internal pipeline and succession planning process to make sure Black women are being promoted from within. Ensure that Black women in this future leadership pool are given the skills building, mentoring, sponsorship, and other strategic opportunities to succeed. Executive leadership needs to fully support and resource this work and hold people accountable for implementing it.

Compensation and Earning Potential

>> Create a compensation structure that is specifically designed to reduce bias towards individuals with marginalized and non-dominant identities. Share a breakdown of your organization's compensation structure with all staff members. Understand that your organization may have to change staff's current compensation to fit within the structure you've created.

>> Conduct an intersectional pay equity analysis. Ensure you are closing gaps not just based on race but on race and gender. Where gaps are identified, organizations should address them immediately and look at ways to address them retroactively as well.

>> Evaluate your organization's bonus structure from an equity lens and refine it to address the racial wage and wealth gaps. This may also include changes to your performance review process that create more fair and just evaluation metrics than those often used to determine bonus pay.

Work Performance and Job Satisfaction

>> Initiate an affinity peer mentoring process available among the Black women in your company. If possible, each Black woman team member would also meet 1–2 times a year with other Black women team members to discuss their goals and provide each other feedback using a predetermined set of mentoring questions as a springboard.

>> Deepen your understanding of Black women's experience in the workplace by understanding tropes like the "Angry Black Woman" and how they affect the interpersonal dynamics between you and your colleagues. Furthermore, understand how this stereotype impacts decision making among leadership. Identify and employ some of the strategies to mitigate the impact of this trope.

>> Prioritize how solutions can become a part of your retention strategy. Review your exit interviews at regular intervals and disaggregate the data by race, gender, and sexual orientation. Conduct stay interviews that assess employee job satisfaction as well as why employees are staying with your organization. This will allow you to identify why women of color, specifically Black women, are leaving or choosing to stay at your organization.

Connectedness and Trust Amongst Work Colleagues

>> Adopt transparent decision-making as a team value. Cultivate a team and organizational practice of sharing both the outcomes of decisions and the processes by which the decisions were made. The more transparency the better.

>> In employee engagement surveys, ask your team or staff to share whether they believe trust is an organizational value. Provide opportunities for employees to share ways that they see that value operationalized. This ensures accountability loops and creates space for members of your organization to feel heard and have their feedback valued.

>> Learn about the cumulative health impacts of racism (both systemic and interpersonal) on Black women, also referred to as "weathering." In order to ensure supportive wellness benefits and organizational support, it is important to recognize the specific ways in which Black women's mental and physical health outcomes differ from those of their peers and impact how Black women experience burn out.

Across the country, racial and ethnic minority populations experience higher rates of poor health and disease or chronic conditions, including diabetes, hypertension, obesity, asthma, and heart disease, when compared to their white counterparts. The life expectancy among Black/African Americans is four years lower than that of white Americans.

The disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color is another stark example of these enduring health disparities.

These health disparities underscore the urgent need to address systemic racism as a root cause of racial and ethnic health inequities and a core element of our public health efforts.

—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [6]

>> Consider implementing minimum PTO requirements for your organization. In fast-paced work cultures with unlimited PTO, staff often do not take enough time off. It is critical for employee well being and organizational health to encourage everyone to take a minimum amount.

>> Explore shutting down once or twice a year as an entire organization. Set the expectation that no one is to work those weeks. Incorporating seasonal breaks into the structure of the organization is a way of modeling well-being. This is especially important for Black women who often adhere to cultural norms and work ethics that set unreasonable expectations for labor and that push them beyond their limits.

Belonging

>> Develop shared language around what "belonging" means in your organization. Managers and leaders should examine the role of white dominant norms in shaping the culture of your organization and how those norms and expectations negatively impact Black women. Through increased learning opportunities, employees will have deepened their understanding of the larger sociohistorical legacies of race and gender discrimination. Organizations exist within the larger social context of American society. It's important to understand that accountability is not always tied to individual behavior and that organizations are tied to a larger system of societal harm without a direct point of liability.

>> Review the policies your company has in place about appearance, what they communicate, and what the reaction is if someone violates dress codes. If possible, consider eliminating any type of appearance-related policies. As your organization deepens its commitment to social responsibility, support local, state, and national efforts to end race-based discrimination like the Crown Act.[7]

>> Black women enjoy working with their coworkers and having a trusted group to confide in for support. Consider creating employee resources groups (ERGs), also known as affinity spaces. This might look like Slack channels or informal gatherings of folks with shared identities or interests. Gauge interest and have 1–2 people organize an initial meeting with participants to discuss structure and goals.

>> As organizations work to improve the wellness of their employees, develop a shared language that creates an expansive understanding of wellness. This should include social and health determinants by race, gender, and sexual identities to ensure that the benefits they offer are expansive enough to take the impact of those determinants into consideration and want to improve outcomes for all.

>> As a part of team development, everyone should investigate individual biases about what "bring your authentic self" means in the workplace and develop a deeper understanding of how Black women often feel the pressure to put on (1) "facades of conformity" in order to fit into workplaces and (2) to disrupt stereotypes that they face because of their race and gender identity.

Conclusion: An Invitation to Thrive

This work started with a basic premise:

Black women deserve to thrive, not just survive, at work.

We believe that it's possible for that wish to be a reality.

Thriving requires imagination, tenacity, and commitment.

This work isn't easy, and it is not quick, but real culture change never is. Culture change happens when people take informed action and are open to accountability.

We are steeped in a culture that takes Black women for granted; it can be hard to imagine a culture that centers, protects, supports, and celebrates Black women.

However, we know that when Black women thrive, an organization will have broken free of so many unquestioned and inequitable norms and power structures that thriving will replace surviving for everyone.

In order to break free, every member of an organization must commit to even deeper self-exploration about what they believe, how they act, and what they can change. Every person and organization must grapple with the realities of race, power, and interpersonal and institutional inequities. Leaders must hold the vision of a thriving workplace for all and fight for it.

This report has provided you with the data, analysis, and recommendations you need to take steps to feed that imagination, provoke self-exploration, and begin to take action.

Are you committed to helping Black women thrive?

We can't wait to see you put your commitment into action.

From Womxn to Women

When we initially conceptualized this project in 2020, we named it Black Womxn Thriving. We chose the word "womxn" to reflect the fluidity of gender identity. Our goal was to use language that was inclusive of individuals who identify along the female and femme areas of the gender spectrum and those who resist binary gender labels. However, as this work developed and we were exposed to more perspectives, we revisited our use of the word women and made the decision to remove the x. While some find the term "womxn" useful, many trans and non-binary people have pointed out that it is exclusionary, inaccurate, and hurtful. Transwomen are women, no x needed. Non-binary folks should not be placed within the very binary they reject. It's critical that, as practitioners and organizational leaders, we keep learning, centering those most impacted, and adapting our language accordingly.
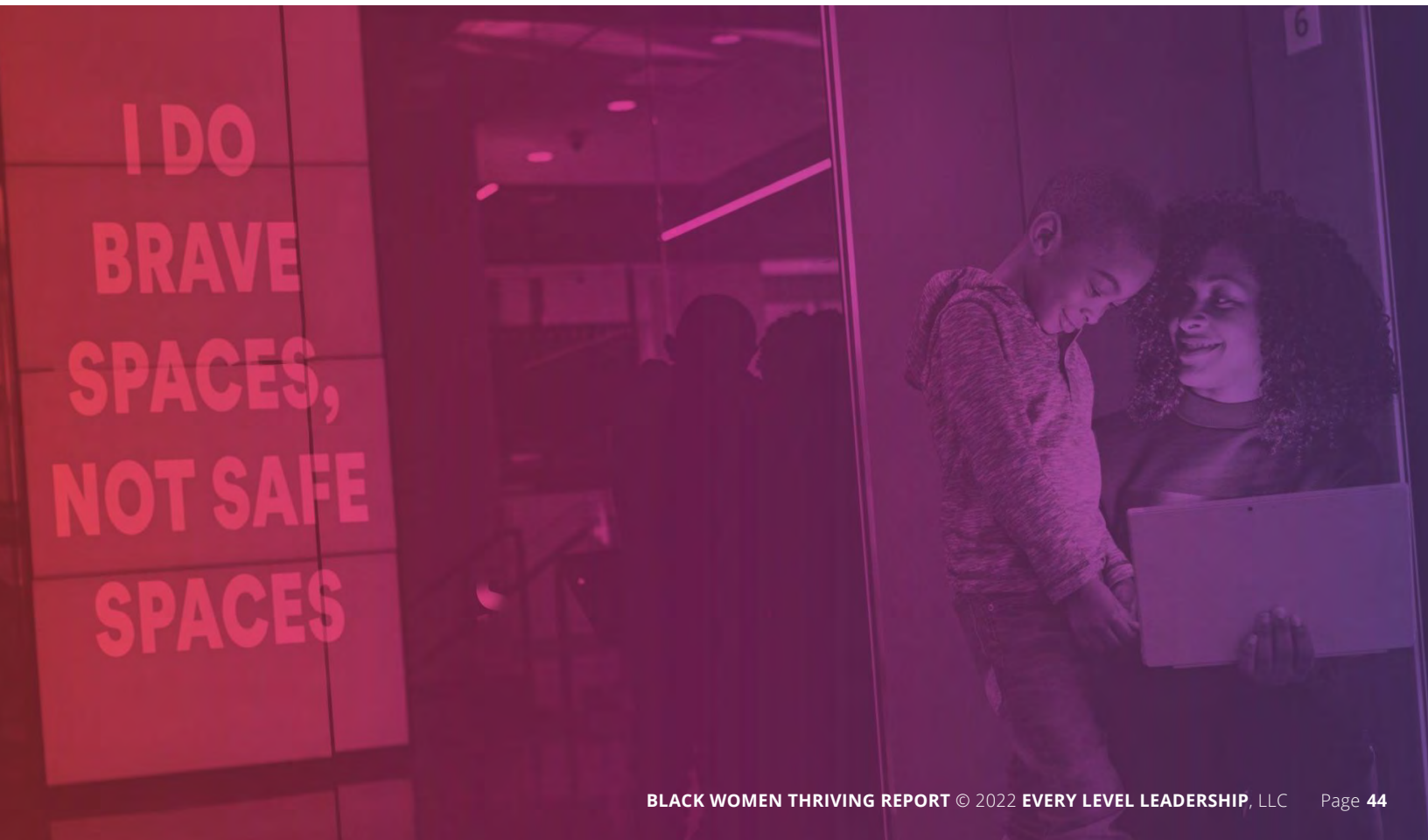
Background

Research on Black women in the workplace across job categories and income levels reveals similar pressures and constraints. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that Black women have the highest labor force participation rate among all women in the U.S. and are more likely to work full time than all employed people. According to the Department of Labor, In 2019, Black women's participation rate was 60.5% compared to 56.8% of all women. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, it only dropped to 58.8% compared to 56.2% of all women. These rates are even higher for Black mothers (76% in 2020), of which two-thirds are equal, primary, or sole earners in their households.

These high participation rates extend over their lifetimes. However, this continued employment does not yield increases in earnings. Black women earn 63% of white, non-Hispanic men's earnings behind Asian women (87%) and white women (78.7%) and slightly ahead of Indigenous women (60%) and Latinas (55.4%). In recent years, the median annual earnings for Black women have seen some of the highest percent increases compared to women across groups (up to $43,209 in 2020), yet the Institute for Women's Policy Research suggests that this still leaves a family of three at near-poverty levels.

According to economist Nina Banks, historical stereotypes and representations of Black womanhood have bolstered discriminatory employer and government practices that "disadvantaged Black women relative to white women and men." While white women's labor participation tends to drop off after marriage, married Black women are more often equal or primary income contributors to their households. Dominant racial and gender stereotypes, coupled with the precarity of Black men's earning potential, have not afforded Black women the ability to be stay-at-home caregivers to children and family and, as Banks notes, "have reinforced the view of Black women as workers rather than as mothers."

The larger societal dynamics of racial discrimination expose Black women to increased stress. Research on intergenerational stress and coping mechanisms among Black women identified work as one of four primary dimensions of stress. J. Camille Hall (2018) names "Black women's labor market victimization" as the root of the stress, compounded by the stressors of racism, colorism, and sexism.

When linked to socioeconomic status, the combined effects of these have lasting impacts on the well-being of Black women (Brown and Keith, 2003; Hall, Everett, and Hamilton-Mason, 2012).
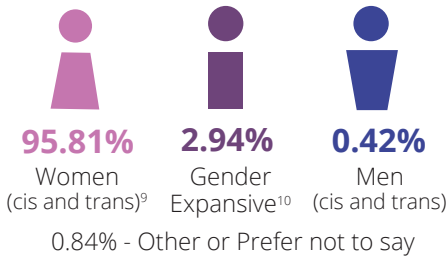
Research on racial and ethnic differences in the workplace across job categories shows that Black women are less likely to feel they are treated with respect in the workplace than men and women of other racial and ethnic groups. The Gallup Center on Black Voices research found that Black women are also less likely to feel like a valued member of their team and feel that they are treated fairly by coworkers. The annual "Women in the Workplace" study by McKinsey & Company found that Black women experience more microaggressions across groups, are less likely to receive the support and access they need to advance and sustain work-life balance and have less access to senior leaders through organizational sponsorship programs that serve as a pathway to leadership. These structural constraints result in Black women being promoted at a lower rate than white women at the first promotion rung. This blocks Black women from leadership pathways and reinforces the reality that, without proper institutional support, organizations will continue to lack representational diversity at their highest levels.

To reimagine a more equitable climate for all of your employees, your organization has to start by understanding the experiences of those who have historically been the least advantaged in society. To understand how larger social forces influence your organizational culture, you have to talk to individuals whose experiences offer them a unique and privileged understanding and point of view of how inequality works. This is why Black women matter and why we focused on them in this research. This study is grounded in a user-inspired, intersectional, social justice framework. Researchers developed questions derived from research on Black women's experiences. The research process was designed and executed by Black women researchers and DEI strategists who bring years of subject matter expertise to the implementation of this study. Based on the findings, we developed recommendations on strategies for thriving to inspire organizations to take bold actions that bend toward revolutionizing policies, procedures, and interpersonal dynamics. We believe these have the potential to transform workplace cultures and upend institutional practices that disadvantage Black women.
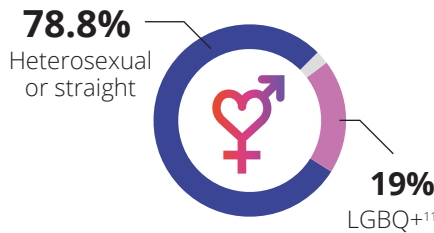
About the Study

The findings are based on a survey of 1,431 Black women (cis and transgender) and gender-expansive professionals working in public sector, private sector and non-profit organizations across the United States.
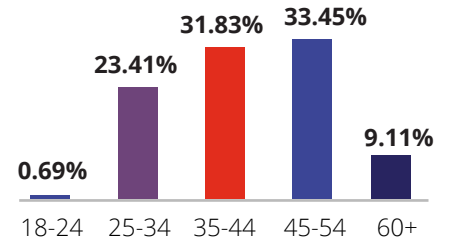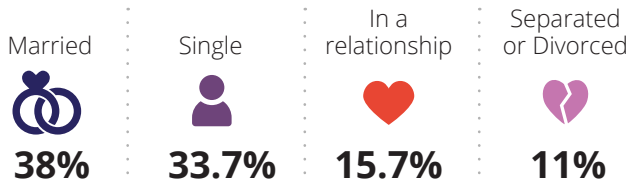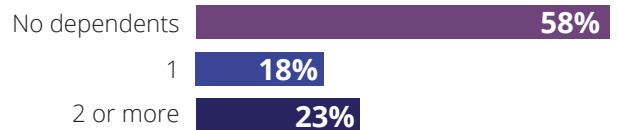
GENDER [8]

95.81% Women (cis and trans)[9]

2.94% Gender Expansive[10]

0.42% Men (cis and trans)

0.84% - Other or Prefer not to say

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

78.8% Heterosexual or straight

19% LGBQ+[11]

AGE

- 18-24: **0.69%**
- 25-34: **23.41%**
- 35-44: **31.83%**
- 45-54: **33.45%**
- 60+: **9.11%**

MARITAL STATUS

Married	Single	In a relationship	Separated or Divorced
38%	**33.7%**	**15.7%**	**11%**

CHILDREN OR DEPENDENTS

- No dependents: **58%**
- 1: **18%**
- 2 or more: **23%**

HIGHEST EDUCATION

- Master's **42.24%**
- Bachelor's **28.94%**
- Doctorate **11.67%**
- Some College/ No Degree **8.4%**
- Professional Degree **3.97%**
- Associate's **3.5%**

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

- Full-time **83.1%**
- Contract/Temp **5.39%**
- Part-time **4.28%**
- Retired **3.03%**
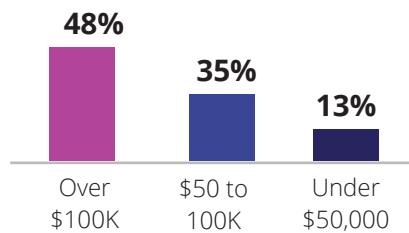- Unemployed **2.07%**
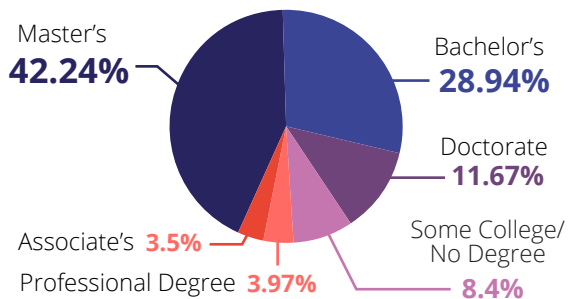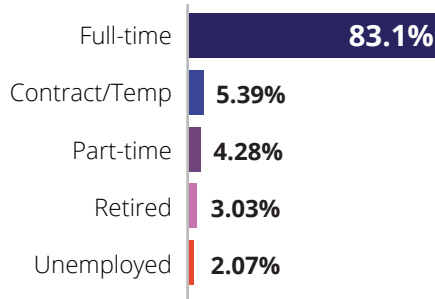
TOP INDUSTRIES

1. Other
2. Education
3. Government (including military)
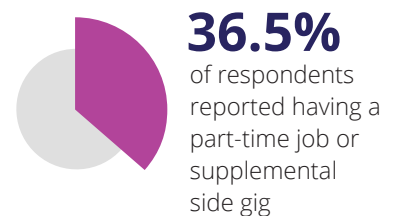4. Medical/Dental/Healthcare
5. Tech
6. Business Services/Consultant

PRIMARY ROLES

> Mid-level operations/support............**34.60%**
> Managerial..**23.22%**
> Owner/Director/Executive..................**18.25%**
> Supervisory...**9.24%**
> Entry-level operations/support..........**7.35%**
> Assistant...**4.62%**
> Self-Employed..**2.73%**

TOP EARNING BRACKETS

- Over $100K: **48%**
- $50 to 100K: **35%**
- Under $50,000: **13%**

ADDITIONAL INCOME

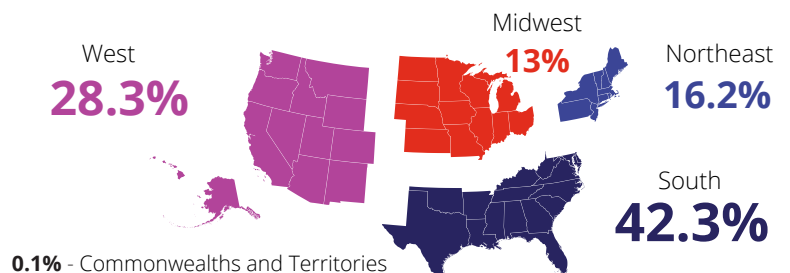**36.5%** of respondents reported having a part-time job or supplemental side gig

TOP LOCATIONS BY STATE

1. California
2. New York
3. Maryland
4. North Carolina
5. District of Columbia (DC)
6. Georgia
7. Illinois
8. Florida
9. Virginia
10. Oregon

TOP LOCATIONS BY REGION [12]

- West **28.3%**
- Midwest **13%**
- Northeast **16.2%**
- South **42.3%**

0.1% - Commonwealths and Territories

Glossary

Anti-Blackness: Behaviors, attitudes and practices of people and institutions that work to systematically dehumanize and marginalize Black people to maintain white supremacy. It can be expressed through policies, institutions and ideologies as overt racism as well as covert strucutral and systemic racism. Anti-blackness can also be internalized and can emerge in Black people or Black communities in the form of colorism, an elevation of white culture, or attempts to separate oneself from black cultural norms.[13]

Belonging: An individual's sense of acceptance and comfort within a particular space as a valued member of that organization or community. Includes trust in others within the organization or community. Engenders feelings of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group or place.

BIPOC: Acronym that stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

Burnout: According to the World Health Association, burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy.[14]

Code Switching: The process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another, depending on the social context or conversational setting. Sociolinguists, social psychologists, and identity researchers are interested in the ways in which code-switching, particularly by members of minority ethnic groups, is used to shape and maintain a sense of identity and a sense of belonging to a larger community.[15]

Connectedness: A feeling of belonging to or having affinity with co-workers and colleagues within an organization. Experiencing a sense of support and inclusion among colleagues, managers, and organizational leaders. It may include feeling connected to one's immediate team and/or to the mission and vision of the organization. However, these connections may not exist together (e.g., one may be connected to their team but not the organization's mission and vice-versa).

Diversity: Includes all the ways in which individuals and groups of individuals differ. The term simply describes the presence of individuals from various identities, backgrounds, perspectives, and values.

Equity: The fair and just treatment of all people, demonstrated through the acknowledgment that, systemically, individuals have vastly different access to opportunity and thus need different resources to be successful. It also includes the intentional design and execution of fair policies, processes, trainings, systems, and structures.

Gaslighting: A form of manipulation that often occurs in abusive relationships. It is a covert type of emotional abuse where the bully or abuser misleads the target, creating a false narrative and making them question their judgments and reality.[16]

Inclusion: Enables people who carry different social identities to lead and succeed in different, self-determined, and authentic ways. It involves creating environments where any individual or group is welcomed, respected, and supported and where people can participate in a way that results in shared leadership.

Racial equity: The condition where one's race identity has no influence on how one fares in society. Race equity is one part of race justice and must be addressed at the root causes and not just the manifestations. This includes the elimination of policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race.

Surviving: The act of merely existing and enduring within a workplace, oftentimes while experiencing multiple inequities.

Thriving: The psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning at work.[17]

Tone Policing: A conversational tactic that dismisses the ideas being communicated when they are perceived to be delivered in an angry, frustrated, sad, fearful, or otherwise emotionally charged manner.

White Dominant Culture and Norms: The National Museum of African American History and Culture describes "how white people and their practices, beliefs, and culture have been normalized over time and are now considered standard in the United States. As a result, all Americans have all adopted various aspects of white culture, including People of Color." This definition is predicated on an understanding of whiteness and white racial identity as the way that white people, their customs, culture, and beliefs operate as the standard by which all other groups are compared. White dominant culture is broadly enacted across society and within the context of social entities such as organizations.

White supremacy: Frances Lee Ansley defines this as "a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.

Acknowledgements

We are dedicating this report to Jaz Adams and Karen Harper who served as inspiration for pushing us to help Black Women thrive at work.

Over the course of the last 1.5 years, the team for this project has become its own community. We are a group of Black women committed to using our skills to bring this work to life. Our values demanded that we invest in and uplift Black women in every way possible within the project. The research team, led by my colleague and co-author, Dr. Mako Fitts Ward, honored Black women's experiences at every stage, and it shows in the richness of the data. Thank you to our research team working with Dr. Mako Fitts Ward: Amber Green and Cassondra Jackson, who did all of the qualitative and quantitative research for this report.

We have a lot of people to thank for their time, talent, and belief in this work. This project gave voice to many, and I'm humbled and grateful for that. It was not uncommon during the two weeks the survey was open for me to receive emails or DM's from Black women telling me what a meaningful experience taking the survey was—that they felt seen and supported just by the questions we asked. Participants in multiple focus groups reached out afterwards asking if they could stay in touch with each other.

I am grateful to every one of the 1,500+ Black women who took the time to participate in our survey and focus groups. Additionally, we need to thank our Black women led facilitation team, specifically, Desiree Adaway, Tamiko Ambrose, Sheri Brady, Marsha Davis, Key Jackson, Nicole Lee, Angela Powell, Alicia Robinson, and Kerrien Suarez, who helped us collect moving stories from Black women of what their experiences have been like moving from surviving to thriving.

This type of effort doesn't happen without resources. I would like to thank all of our donors who invested their personal and organizational dollars in this effort with a special thank you to the Global Sport Institute at ASU. From the philanthropic donors to the individual donors who supported through PayPal and our Indiegogo campaign, thank you for every dollar that went to this groundbreaking effort.

We extend much gratitude to the creative professionals who partnered with us to build up an online home and presence, including Wayward Kind for their website and branding, Ron Carranza for outstanding graphic and report design, Katie Umans for copy editing, Copy Haus for their writing support, Releve and Jessica Sorentino for social media, and Human Impact Solutions for their marketing and media planning.

And finally, thank you to our personal and professional support systems who helped us along the way: Greg Reagle, Desiree Adaway, Jessica Fish, Pam Slim, and Karen Harper. A giant thank you, as well, to Rose Pillmore, who provided steadfast logistical support around the many moving parts of this project and kept us moving forward.

Endnotes

1. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, The Economics Daily, Black women made up 53 percent of the Black labor force in 2018 at https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2019/black-women-made-up-53-percent-of-the-black-labor-force-in-2018.htm.

2. Combs, G., "The Duality of Race and Gender for Managerial African American Women: Implications of Informal Social Networks on Career Advancement" (2003). Management Department Faculty Publications. 31. https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/managementfacpub/31.

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4. Spreitzer, G. M., Sutcliffe, K., Dutton, J., Sonenshein, S., & Grant, A. M. (2005). A socially embedded model of thriving at work. Organization Science, 16, p. 538.

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6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, April 8). Impact of racism on our nation's health | Health Equity. CDC. https://www.cdc.gov/healthequity/racism-disparities/impact-of-racism.html.

7. Dove. (2019). The Crown Act. The official CROWN Act. https://www.thecrownact.com/

8. It was important that we captured gender identity across the spectrum. Based on the recommendation of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), we included transgender individuals alongside their cisgender counterparts. The gender expansive category is comprised of respondents who identified as non-binary, agender, genderqueer, or other write-in categories such as gender fluid. To remain inclusive while also acknowledging the specificity of transgender experiences, we will include a section on transgender and gender expansive Black women.

9. Cisgender is a term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. Transgender is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation; therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. For more information on terminology related to gender and sexual orientation, see the HRC's glossary of terms.

10. Gender expansive refers to individuals who do not identify with conventional or binary gender categories (woman/man, cisgender or transgender). Identifiers include non-binary, agender, genderqueer and gender fluid.

11. LGBQ+ refers to members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and other sexual minority communities. Since transgender is a gender identity and not a sexual orientation, the "T" is left out of the acronym here.

12. Regions are organized based on the regions and divisions outlined by the U.S. Census Bureau.

13. Multicultural Resource Center (nd). Race and ethnicity terms and definitions. Amherst, MA: Amherst College. Retrieved from https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/our-community/multicultural-resource-center/terms-and-definitions; The Movement for Black Lives. Glossary. http://web.archive.org/web/20200109004008/https:/policy.m4bl.org/glossary/.

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>>EVERY LEVEL LEADERSHIP

Every Level Leadership's work happens at the intersection of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) and workplace culture change. Every Level Leadership breaks down structural barriers that BIPOC—particularly Black women—continue to face at work.

They work closely with organizations to help embed the principles of DEI and anti-racism throughout the organization and believe success is achieved when the organization's DEI commitments align with its actions. ELL helps make that alignment happen.

In 2020, Every Level Leadership began an initiative called Black Women Thriving, which deepens its work in DEI and provides an intersectional look at the processes and structures that need to change to support Black women's satisfaction and well-being in their careers.