



Annual
Report

20
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**THE
BACKBONE
BRIEF:
BLACK
WOMEN AT
WORK**

The Backbone Brief • 2026

TISHAYLA J. WILLIAMS

The TW Collective



ABOUT US

The Backbone Brief is produced by The TW Collective and led by Tishayla Jasmine Williams, a compliance and workforce strategy practitioner with experience in organizational risk and policy analysis.

This annual brief examines how pay, job security, workload, and leadership systems shape workforce conditions for Black women, with an emphasis on identifying structural patterns rather than isolated outcomes.

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Black women have long been expected to sustain systems that underpay them.

This brief serves as an annual assessment of workforce conditions affecting Black women and is intended to aid efforts related to job advancement, pay equity, and leadership representation. It is designed to inform organizational practice and policy by documenting structural patterns that influence opportunity and economic outcomes.

TISHAYLA J. WILLIAMS
Founder



SCOPE AND FOCUS

SCOPE

The Backbone Brief examines the workforce conditions affecting Black women, including pay, job security, workload, and leadership systems. It draws on labor data, workforce research, and structural analysis to identify patterns that persist across industries and economic cycles. The scope is national and designed to be updated annually to track change over time.

FOCUS

The Backbone Brief focuses on how organizational structures shape economic outcomes for Black women at work. Particular attention is given to pay equity, career progression, and access to leadership roles. The analysis prioritizes structural patterns over individual experiences.

TOP WORKFORCE TRENDS FOR BLACK WOMEN IN 2025

This section highlights four workforce trends shaping Black women's experiences in 2025, drawing on national labor data and firsthand accounts. Together, these trends reflect persistent gaps in pay, job security, workload expectations, and access to leadership. While often discussed separately, these patterns operate simultaneously and compound over time.



Pay



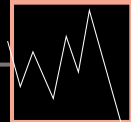
Black women continue to earn significantly less than their peers, with median earnings hovering around sixty-five cents for every dollar earned by white men. Wage gaps widen most sharply at mid-career despite higher education and tenure.



Overload

Black women consistently report carrying additional workload through informal leadership, emotional labor, and DEI responsibilities without added pay or authority. These contributions remain largely unmeasured in performance and compensation systems.

Instability



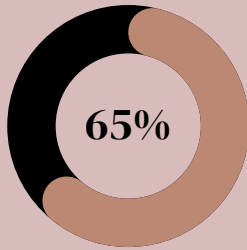
Black women remain overrepresented in layoffs, contract roles, and role eliminations during organizational restructuring. Workforce data shows they are more likely to experience job disruption even when performance ratings are strong.



Stagnation

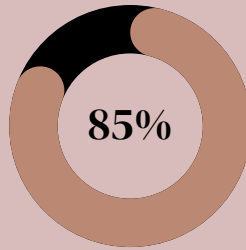
Representation of Black women declines sharply beyond manager and director levels, with limited movement into executive roles. Leadership pipelines continue to narrow rather than expand at senior decision-making tiers.

THE COST OF INEQUITY



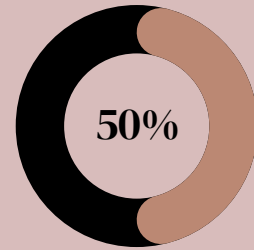
Pay Equity

65% of Black women report being underpaid relative to peers in similar roles.



Unrecognized Work

85% of Black women report carrying additional or unrecognized workplace responsibilities.



Advancement Access

50% of Black women report limited access to advancement or leadership opportunities.

+75%

Unpaid Labor Load

Black women report taking on significantly more informal labor, including mentoring, DEI work, and crisis support, without corresponding increases in pay, title, or authority.

\$964,000

Lifetime Earnings Loss

Over a 40-year career, Black women lose nearly one million dollars in earnings compared to white men due to persistent pay gaps.



Sources:

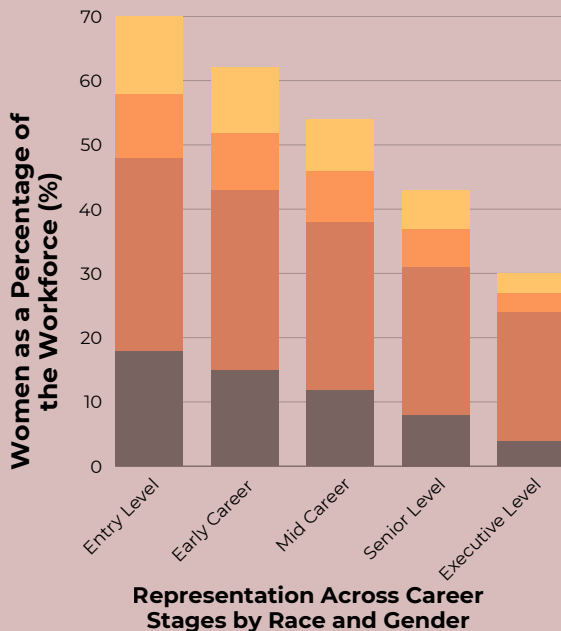
Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024–2025; National Partnership for Women and Families 2023; McKinsey Women in the Workplace 2024–2025.

REPRESENTATION ACROSS CAREER STAGES

Observed Trend

Representation for Black women declines sharply at mid-career and senior leadership levels, despite a strong presence at entry and early career stages. These drop-offs coincide with promotion, performance evaluation, and leadership selection thresholds. The pattern suggests that advancement decisions, rather than talent availability or engagement, are driving persistent leadership gaps.

Source: Author analysis based on U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), EEOC EEO-1 workforce data, U.S. Census Current Population Survey (CPS), and McKinsey & Company Women in the Workplace reports (2018–2024)



Key Insight

From the early 2000s through 2024, women of color, particularly Black women, are well represented at entry and early career levels, with representation declining sharply at mid-career and senior leadership stages. This pattern reflects structural barriers in promotion and leadership selection rather than differences in performance or participation

Note :

Percentages reflect women's share of the workforce at each career stage. The y-axis is scaled from 0 to 70 percent to reflect the observed range of women's representation.

Data Key

- Purple: Black Women
- Brown: White women
- Orange: Asian women
- Yellow Latina women

EVIDENCE FOR EVALUATION, ADVANCEMENT, AND ACCOUNTABILITY



For Black Women

This brief is designed to give Black women language and context for experiences that are often dismissed, individualized, or reframed as personal shortcomings at work. It can be used to recognize patterns across pay, advancement, workload, and leadership access, and to situate individual experiences within documented workforce trends rather than isolated incidents. Whether preparing for performance reviews, promotion discussions, compensation conversations, or broader career decisions, this brief offers a grounded reference point to support clarity, confidence, and strategic positioning.

Why This Matters to Organizations

For organizations, this brief serves as a diagnostic tool to identify where workforce systems create unequal outcomes for Black women. It highlights risk exposure points in evaluation, promotion, and restructuring processes that require proactive intervention to ensure fairness, compliance, and workforce stability.



Why This Matters to Organizations

Black women face 1.5x higher job disruption despite strong performance, due to gaps in evaluation transparency and restructuring protections. Unaddressed inequities drive talent loss, compliance risks, and eroded trust.

Pathways to Accountability

Implement annual pay audits to correct disparities, tie leadership KPIs to bias reduction in evaluations and promotions, and set clear criteria benchmarked against Backbone Brief trends in pay, overload, instability, and stagnation.

WHAT THE DATA REQUIRES

Black women continue to deliver high performance while operating within systems that expose them to disproportionate risk, slower advancement, and inconsistent protection when concerns of unfairness arise. These outcomes are not the result of individual behavior or skill gaps, but of organizational practices that lack accountability, transparency, and effective safeguards

- **Pay Accountability**

Persistent pay inequities reflect structural decisions, not individual choices. Organizations must conduct regular pay equity reviews and correct disparities with transparency and urgency.

- **Bias Reduction**

Stereotyping continues to shape performance evaluations, leadership perception, and disciplinary outcomes. Organizations must directly address bias in assessment and decision-making processes rather than treating it as interpersonal conflict.

- **Leadership Representation**

Equity outcomes cannot rest solely on DEI functions. Senior leaders must be held accountable for workforce equity metrics tied to performance and compensation.

This brief calls for structural action. Organizations that fail to address risk exposure, inequitable decision-making, and insufficient HR support for Black women undermine both workforce stability and organizational performance. The following actions represent the minimum standards necessary to transition from a stated commitment to a measurable change.

- **Advancement Clarity**

Opaque promotion and leadership selection processes reinforce bias and stagnation. Clear criteria, documented decisions, and measurable advancement pathways are required.

- **Risk Protection**

Black women face disproportionate exposure during layoffs, restructures, and performance management processes. Organizations must proactively assess and mitigate risk concentration rather than reacting after harm occurs.

- **HR Safeguards**

Black women reporting unfair treatment or discrimination often encounter inadequate or inconsistent HR support. Organizations must strengthen reporting mechanisms, ensure impartial review, and eliminate retaliatory practices

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Black women are not failing at work. Workplace systems are failing to value and protect them.

-Tishayla J. Williams



A LETTER TO BLACK WOMEN AT WORK

Dear Black woman,

If work has felt heavier lately, you are not imagining it. If the rules seem to change the moment you approach the next level, that is not a coincidence. And if your effort has continued to outpace your protection, your pay, or your advancement, that is not a personal failure.

In March of 2025 alone, more than 300,000 Black women were forced out of the workforce, many of them quietly and without public acknowledgment. Black women were disproportionately affected this year in mass layoffs, once again absorbing the shock of economic contraction while being told to remain adaptable, resilient, and grateful. At the same time, unemployment indicators for Black women hovered near 6.7 percent, consistently higher than for other groups, even as participation and performance remained strong.

This is not about effort.
It has never been.

What this moment requires is clarity. The ability to see patterns where institutions insist there are only isolated incidents. The confidence to name inequity when it is disguised as restructuring, fit, timing, or budget constraints. And the resolve to protect yourself in systems that often benefit from your silence.

This brief exists for you.

Not to motivate you. Not to fix you. But to give language and evidence to what you already know. To help you walk into performance reviews, compensation conversations, promotion discussions, and HR processes grounded in documented trends rather than dismissed feelings. To remind you that your experience is shared, patterned, and structural.

As we look toward 2026, what must change is not Black women's adaptability, ambition, or endurance. What must change are the systems that continue to extract value without accountability. Policymakers must move beyond symbolic thresholds and address the real workforce losses Black women continue to shoulder. Organizations must stop treating equity as a sentiment and start treating it as a performance requirement.

And you must continue to choose yourself with precision.
You are not failing work.
Work must answer for how it treats you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Tishayla J. Williams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping "T" and "W".

Founder and Author, The Backbone Brief

CONTACT INFORMATION



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The Backbone Brief is an annual workforce assessment documenting the structural conditions shaping Black women's experiences at work. Produced by The TW Collective, it is intended to support accountability, inform decision-making, and ensure that patterns of inequity are named, measured, and no longer dismissed



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Note. Derived statistics (e.g., 65% underpaid, \$964,000 lifetime earnings loss) from author synthesis; Lean In report reinforces Black women's promotion gaps and under-support.

