The Backbone Theory

Organizational Dependence and the Structural Production of Economic Inequality for Black Women

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the Backbone Theory, a design-based model explaining how organizations systematically depend on Black women's backbone labor, the stabilizing, translational, and risk mitigating work that sustains organizational functioning, while simultaneously constraining their mobility, authority, and long-term economic outcomes. Situated at the intersection of industrial organizational psychology and strategic management, the theory extends resource-based perspectives to advance a systemic account of persistent racialized gendered inequality that moves beyond explanations centered on bias, pipeline failure, or individual deficiency.

Drawing on organizational theory, inequality regimes as articulated by Joan Acker, and life course perspectives, Backbone Theory reconceptualizes inequality as an outcome of organizational dependence rather than exclusion. It argues that Black women are disproportionately concentrated in stabilizing roles such as coordination, translation across authority gradients, emotional regulation, crisis containment, and institutional memory preservation, while structural inhibitors restrict the conversion of this labor into strategic authority, advancement, compensation, and durable economic security. These inhibitors operate through recurring mechanisms including stabilization traps, evaluation taxes, and authority compression, producing stalled returns despite sustained performance and credential attainment. By reframing Black women's labor as organizational infrastructure rather than individual contribution, Backbone Theory shifts the unit of analysis from individual outcomes to organizational architecture. The theory provides a rigorous explanatory lens for examining how systemic reliance on stabilizing labor generates cumulative economic constraint across the life

course, with implications for research on work, leadership, inequality, and the evaluation of inclusion based organizational reforms.

Context of Study

Decades of organizational and economic research document that Black women continue experiencing persistent disparities in pay, promotion, leadership representation, and long-term economic security across sectors (Wingfield, 2019; LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company). These disparities endure despite a 25% increase in post-secondary credential attainment among Black women over the past decade and the widespread adoption of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Dominant explanations rooted in pipeline attrition, individual skill gaps, or differential aspiration fail to account for why disadvantage compounds among Black women with high performance, long tenure, and sustained organizational contribution (Acker, 2006; Thomas & Eaton, 2025).

At the same time, contemporary organizations face heightened reliance on what this study terms backbone labor, the stabilizing labor required to maintain continuity amid technological disruption, workforce volatility, and institutional risk. This labor includes crisis containment, emotional regulation, coordination across fragmented teams, translation between leadership and frontline workers, and institutional memory preservation (Beier et al., 2025). Black women disproportionately perform these functions. Yet within prevailing evaluation architectures, this labor is categorized as an operational maintenance cost rather than a strategic asset, limiting its conversion into authority, compensation, and long-term economic security. This misalignment produces a measurable delta between contribution and return. Post-COVID labor market analyses show that while entry-level wages in some sectors increased by approximately 12%, wages for mid-level stabilizing roles rose by only 4%, effectively imposing

a double tax on reliability and continuity (Carroll & Walker, 2025). Although Black women's labor force participation remains high at approximately 60.5%, their representation in senior leadership persists below 5%, indicating a ceiling generated by functional indispensability rather than exclusion alone (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company). By mid-career, the resulting wealth delta between Black women and white men approaches $120,000, driven in part by the exclusion of stabilizing roles from equity-based compensation and performance-linked reward systems (Urban Institute, 2025).

Recent labor market trends further intensify the urgency of this pattern. Accelerating exit rates among Black women professionals amid what commentators describe as the "exit economy" reflect a rational response to sustained misalignment between organizational dependence and individual return (Roy, 2025). Life course analyses show that early career concentration in stabilizing roles produces mid-career authority compression and late-career wealth disparities, even among continuously employed workers (Hogan & Perrucci, 2007). The convergence of these trends, rising educational attainment, high labor force attachment, and persistently stagnant representation in senior leadership, suggests that the primary barrier facing Black women is no longer a glass ceiling of exclusion, but a stabilization anchor produced by inclusion itself. Backbone Theory reframes inequality as a design problem rather than an individual navigation failure. It shows how organizational systems increasingly rely on Black women's stabilizing labor to absorb risk, preserve continuity, and sustain performance, while simultaneously restricting the conversion of that labor into strategic authority, mobility, and long-term economic return.

This shift in perspective moves analysis away from the unsustainable expectation that individuals adapt to misaligned systems. Instead, it exposes how evaluation architectures are

structured to extract reliability at the cost of advancement. As the exit economy demonstrates, the failure to convert stabilizing labor into strategic authority is not merely an individual economic loss. It represents a structural vulnerability that threatens organizational resilience, continuity of leadership, and long-term sustainability.

Theoretical Foundations

Backbone Theory draws on and extends multiple strands of organizational and sociological scholarship to explain the persistence of racialized-gendered inequality in work despite formal inclusion, rising educational attainment, and sustained individual performance. Rather than locating inequality primarily in biased evaluation, pipeline failure, or differential aspiration, the theory integrates insights from inequality regimes, resource dependence theory, and research on firm-specific value to reconceptualize inequality as an outcome of organizational design and reliance. This integration shifts analytic attention from who is excluded to how organizations depend on forms of backbone labor and how that dependence reshapes mobility, authority, and long-term economic outcomes.

Inequality Regimes and the Structured Allocation of Work

Acker's theory of inequality regimes (Acker, 2006) provides a foundational framework for understanding how organizations systematically reproduce inequality through routine structures, practices, and power relations. Inequality regimes emphasize that disparities are embedded within everyday organizational processes such as job design, task allocation, evaluation criteria, compensation systems, and authority hierarchies. Crucially, these regimes operate even in the absence of overt discrimination, allowing inequality to persist under conditions of formal inclusion.

Within inequality regimes, work is not distributed randomly. Certain roles are designed to absorb uncertainty, manage interpersonal friction, and stabilize organizational functioning. These roles often require relational labor, emotional regulation, and informal coordination, forms of work that are essential but weakly formalized. Inequality regimes, therefore, provide the map of who does what work within organizations.

Backbone Theory builds on this insight by specifying how stabilizing labor functions within inequality regimes. Rather than treating inequality solely because of exclusion or devaluation, the theory explains how inequality is sustained through organizational reliance. When stabilizing labor is disproportionately assigned and normalized, organizations come to depend on workers to preserve continuity and absorb risk. In this context, inequality persists not because workers are peripheral, but because they are central.

Resource Dependence and Internal Organizational Reliance

Resource dependence theory explains how organizations structure relationships to secure critical resources and reduces uncertainty (Coşkun & Öztürk, 2023). While traditionally applied to interorganizational dependencies, the underlying logic also applies to internal organizational dynamics.

Backbone Theory extends this logic inward by arguing that organizations can become internally dependent on stabilizing labor that absorbs volatility, manages breakdowns, and sustains operations. When such labor becomes strategically indispensable, organizations face a structural incentive to retain that labor in place. Promotion or reassignment introduces risk and disruption, even when workers demonstrate readiness for advancement. Resource dependence, therefore, explains why organizations will not readily allow stabilizing workers to move, even absent discriminatory intent.

Asset Specificity and the Limits of Expertise as Leverage

Research on asset specificity demonstrates how firm-specific knowledge increases internal value while limiting transferability across contexts (Kermani & Ma, 2022). Workers who accumulate institutional memory, tacit knowledge, and context-specific expertise become increasingly valuable to their organizations. At the same time, this specialization reduces both external leverage and internal flexibility.

Backbone Theory incorporates asset specificity to explain why stabilizing expertise does not translate into bargaining power. As workers become embedded within organizational systems, their knowledge becomes difficult to replace but also difficult to monetize externally. Asset specificity, therefore, explains why expertise deepens dependence without expanding authority.

Intersectional and Black Feminist Foundations

Backbone Theory is epistemologically grounded in Black feminist thought, which has long treated Black women lived experiences as sites of knowledge production rather than individual adaptation to inequality. Black feminist scholars have shown that race, gender, and class do not merely shape exposure to disadvantage but structure how labor is extracted, valued, and constrained within institutions. Backbone Theory extends this tradition by mapping how intersectional oppression becomes an organizational mechanism.

Patricia Hill Collins (2022) argues that Black women's knowledge emerges from navigating systems that simultaneously depend on and marginalize them. This standpoint produces forms of anticipatory labor, emotional regulation, translation, and institutional stewardship that are not incidental but structurally necessary. Backbone Theory advances this

insight by showing how such survival-based competencies are absorbed into organizational design as stabilizing infrastructure.

Intersectionality, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides the diagnostic architecture for understanding why Black women are disproportionately positioned where stabilizing labor is required. Intersectionality explains where risk concentrates. Backbone Theory explains what organizations do with that concentration. Specifically, it theorizes how intersectional exposure becomes productive capacity that organizations rely upon while withholding authority and long-term return.

In this way, Backbone Theory preserves intersectionality as diagnostic rather than mechanistic and extends Black feminist theory from epistemology into organizational design. The theory does not psychologize resilience or frame survival as individual strength. Instead, it demonstrates how system engineers' reliance on Black women's stabilizing labor while structurally inhibiting its conversion into strategic authority.

Empirical Signals Supporting the Theoretical Drivers

Recent labor market data from 2025 to 2026 provide empirical signals consistent with the core mechanisms proposed by Backbone Theory.

First, patterns of promotion align with resource dependence. Black women are promoted at rates approximately 21 percent slower than their white peers within comparable high-performing categories, even when controlling for tenure and evaluation scores (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2025; Yarberry, 2025). This promotion delta reflects organizational incentives to retain stabilizing labor rather than redistribute it upward.

Second, asset specificity is reflected in external wage penalties. Black women employed in stabilizing roles who change firms experience average salary increases of approximately 6

percent, compared to 14 percent for workers exiting growth-oriented roles (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025; Fiorini & Maldonado, 2025). Firm-specific stabilizing expertise increases internal dependence without generating equivalent market leverage.

Third, authority allocation patterns reflect inequality regimes. Despite holding approximately 18 percent of mid-level management roles, Black women occupy fewer than 5 percent of positions with direct profit and loss authority (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2020; Pogrebna et al., 2024; Wingfield, 2019). This authority compression demonstrates how essential labor is systematically separated from decision rights tied to strategic power and wealth accumulation.

Taken together, these patterns show how inequality regimes determine work allocation, resource dependence constrains mobility, and asset specificity limits leverage. Backbone Theory integrates these dynamics to explain why indispensability functions as immobilization.

The Model's Architecture

Backbone Theory operates as a closed loop organizational system in which the conditions required for organizational stability inadvertently generate constraints on individual mobility. Rather than arising from exclusion or performance deficits, inequality emerges through a recursive process in which organizational reliance on stabilizing labor produces structural mechanisms that immobilize the very workers on whom continuity depends.

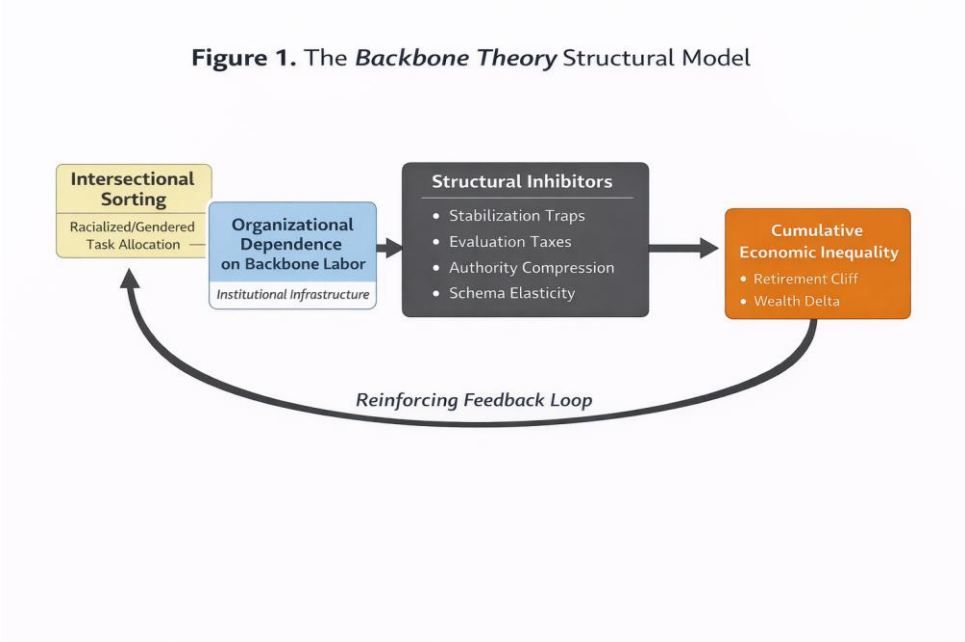

Figure 1. The Backbone Theory Structural Model. This figure illustrates the recursive cycle where organizational dependence on stabilizing labor triggers structural inhibitors (stabilization traps, authority compression, evaluation taxes), resulting in cumulative economic inequality . This inequality, in turn, rationalizes further reliance on the same labor pool, creating a self-reinforcing feedback loop.

At the core of the model is a causal sequence linking organizational dependence to cumulative inequality outcomes.

First, **organizational dependence** develops through sustained reliance on Black women for crisis containment, institutional memory preservation, and translation across authority gradients. As stabilizing labor becomes essential to maintaining equilibrium, organizations increasingly structure continuity around specific individuals rather than distributable systems.

Second, this dependence gives rise to **structural inhibitors** that raise the perceived cost of mobility. Mechanisms such as stabilization traps, authority compression, and evaluation and

compensation taxes function to retain indispensable workers in place by rendering advancement or reassignment organizationally risky.

Third, these inhibitors generate **inequality outcomes** that include stalled advancement, wage compression, and cumulative economic disadvantage across the career life course. Over time, these outcomes materialize as long term wealth and retirement insecurity, often described as a retirement cliff.

This sequence is self-reinforcing. Organizational dependence increases the cost of mobility. Structural inhibitors preserve short term stability. The resulting inequality outcomes are then used to rationalize continued reliance on the same stabilizing workers, reproducing inequality through organizational design rather than individual failure.

Definitional Boundaries

Stabilizing labor is defined as non-discretionary, systemic work required to maintain organizational equilibrium, continuity, and risk mitigation. This labor typically includes coordination across authority gradients, emotional regulation, crisis containment, and the preservation of institutional knowledge. Within prevailing organizational evaluation systems, stabilizing labor is treated as fixed operational infrastructure rather than as strategic value creation, limiting its conversion into authority, advancement, and long-term economic return.

Differentiating Adjacent Constructs

Although Backbone Theory draws insights from adjacent literature, its analytic focus is architectural rather than interpersonal. The theory explains how organizations structurally rely on stabilizing labor, not how individuals subjectively experience that labor.

Emotional labor

Emotional labor focuses on the internal management of emotion in exchange for a wage. Backbone Theory instead examines how organizations depend on emotional regulation and continuity preserving work to sustain stability and prevent system failure.

Invisible labor

Invisible labor emphasizes work that is unseen or unacknowledged. Backbone Theory argues that stabilizing labor is often highly visible but systematically misclassified as a personality trait or maintenance function rather than recognized as skilled organizational infrastructure.

Cultural taxation

Cultural taxation centers on the additional service burdens are placed on marginalized workers. Backbone Theory shifts attention to the functional necessity of stabilizing labor for core organizational operations and ongoing viability, independent of whether those burdens are formally recognized or compensated.

Illustrative Empirical Model Evaluating the Promotion Delta

Backbone Theory is empirically testable through longitudinal research designs that examine how organizational dependence on stabilizing labor shapes mobility, authority, and compensation trajectories over time. Rather than treating promotion outcomes as solely a function of individual performance or aspiration, the theory predicts that promotion velocity is conditioned by the degree to which organizations rely on specific workers for continuity preserving functions. To illustrate one empirically tractable pathway, this section presents an example model linking stabilizing labor concentration to promotion outcomes under conditions of organizational dependence. This specification is offered as an illustrative analytic approach rather than a prescriptive or exhaustive model.

Hypothesis Promotion Delta

Higher levels of stabilizing labor will be associated with slower promotion velocity, with this relationship most pronounced for Black women relative to other demographic groups.

Illustrative Specification

Promotion velocity may be modeled as a function of stabilizing labor, intersectional identity, and their interaction, as follows:

$$PV_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SL_i + \beta_2 BW_i + \beta_3 (SL_i \times BW_i) + \gamma X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

In this specification, BW_i is an indicator variable equal to one if the individual is a Black woman and zero otherwise. SL_i represents stabilizing labor. X_i denotes a vector of control variables including tenure, performance evaluations, job level, functional role, education, organizational unit, and cohort.

In substantive terms, this model tests whether individuals performing higher levels of stabilizing labor experience slower promotion velocity and whether this constraining effect is amplified for Black women due to organizational dependence on their continuity preserving labor.

Operationalization of Key Constructs

Stabilizing labor may be operationalized using multiple complementary measures, including 360-degree dependency assessments, task reliance indices capturing crisis containment and coordination responsibilities, and network-based metrics such as betweenness centrality that identify individuals functioning as critical nodes within organizational communication and workflow systems.

Promotion velocity may be operationalized as time to promotion, movement into roles with formal profit and loss authority, or acquisition of formal decision rights and resource control within the organization.

Analytic Implications

Consistent with Backbone Theory, a negative and statistically significant interaction between stabilizing labor and Black woman status would indicate the presence of a stabilization trap. Such a finding would demonstrate that organizational reliance on stabilizing labor operates as a structural constraint on advancement rather than as a reflection of individual performance, aspiration, or evaluation bias.

Theory Boundary Conditions

Backbone Theory is not proposed as a universal explanation for all forms of workplace inequality. Its explanatory power is strongest in organizational contexts characterized by high operational interdependence, volatility, and reliance on continuity preserving labor, such as large bureaucratic organizations, professional service firms, healthcare systems, and technology driven enterprises. The theory does not claim that all Black women experience stabilizing labor concentration, nor that stabilizing labor is uniquely performed by Black women. Rather, it explains how intersectional positioning increases the probability that Black women are disproportionately sorted into and retained within stabilizing roles, and how organizational dependence on that labor produces predictable inequality outcomes.

Empirical Agenda and Measurement

Backbone Theory advances a structural account of inequality that requires corresponding shifts in how organizational research conceptualizes, measures, and evaluates labor, mobility, and long-term economic outcomes. Rather than prioritizing individual traits, attitudes, or

intentions, research informed by Backbone Theory must examine how organizational dependence on stabilizing labor is structured, distributed, and rewarded over time. This section outlines an empirical agenda that treats stabilizing labor as a measurable organizational function, specifies strategies for observing dependence and constraint, and emphasizes longitudinal designs capable of capturing cumulative economic effects.

Operationalizing Stabilizing Labor

A central empirical task posed by Backbone Theory is the operationalization of stabilizing labor as a distinct category of organizational work. Although stabilizing labor has rarely been named as such, its component functions have been examined across multiple literatures under adjacent constructs, including emotional labor, invisible labor, crisis response work, informal leadership, and continuity maintenance.

Research on emotional labor provides a foundational precedent. Hochschild (2019) established that emotional regulation constitutes labor even when it is informal, undervalued, or excluded from formal compensation systems. This work legitimizes emotional containment, affect management, and relational regulation as forms of labor rather than personality traits or dispositional strengths. Backbone Theory extends this insight by situating emotional regulation within a broader organizational reliance on continuity preservation and crisis absorption.

Research on racialized task allocation further supports the measurability of stabilizing labor. Wingfield (2019) demonstrates that Black women are disproportionately assigned invisible and relational labor in professional roles, including conflict mediation, mentoring, and organizational caretaking. These tasks sustain organizational functioning while remaining weakly formalized and underrecognized. This literature provides empirical grounding for

Backbone Theory's claim that stabilizing labor is not randomly distributed but systematically concentrated.

Future-of-work scholarship offers additional support. Beier et al. (2025) document the growing importance of informal learning, coordination, and adaptability under conditions of technological change and organizational volatility. These findings reinforce the argument that stabilizing labor is increasingly central to organizational performance, even as it remains peripheral within evaluation and reward architectures.

Sector-specific research further legitimizes stabilizing labor as observable work. Sandoval (2020) documents emotional containment, de-escalation, and continuity management as patterned and measurable labor processes in crisis-response settings. Iheduru-Anderson et al. (2025) show how expectations of strength and resilience among Black women in nursing lead to expanded stabilizing responsibilities without commensurate authority or institutional support. Erskine et al. (2021) provide qualitative evidence of informal leadership and relational navigation strategies that sustain organizational functioning outside formal role boundaries.

Methodologically, stabilizing labor may be operationalized using mixed-method approaches. Qualitative role mapping can document how stabilizing responsibilities accumulate within roles over time. Time-use analysis can assess the proportion of effort devoted to crisis management, coordination, and continuity maintenance. Survey instruments can capture expectations of availability, emotional regulation, and reliability. Longitudinal designs are essential, as stabilizing labor often increases without corresponding changes in job titles or authority.

Network-Based and Dependency Measures

A second empirical challenge is determining whether organizational dependence on stabilizing labor is observable. Resource dependence theory provides the conceptual basis for this inquiry (Coşkun & Öztürk, 2023), but empirical testing requires attention to internal rather than interorganizational dependence.

Strategic management research offers tools for modeling internal reliance. D'Oria et al. (2021) demonstrate how strategic resources can be identified through action–performance pathways, providing a framework for examining stabilizing labor as an internal resource. Network-based measures, specifically betweenness centrality and informal dependency ratios, can identify individuals who function as single points of failure—nodes whose removal would disproportionately disrupt coordination across fragmented hierarchies.

Asset specificity research further supports dependency measurement. Kermani and Ma (2022) show that institutional memory and firm-specific value increase replacement costs and reduce mobility. These insights justify using proxies such as perceived replacement difficulty, disruption cost, and reliance frequency to operationalize indispensability. Yarberry (2025) provides an important bridge between dependency and authority outcomes, showing how Black women leaders can occupy central organizational positions while remaining formally invisible within leadership hierarchies.

Measuring Structural Inhibitors

Backbone Theory identifies structural inhibitors as the mechanisms through which organizational dependence on stabilizing labor constrains mobility and authority. Each inhibitor is empirically tractable.

The stabilization trap may be examined by modeling promotion probability conditional on role indispensability. Promotion disparities documented by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey &

Company (2020, 2025) provide baseline evidence of stalled advancement among Black women, even in high-performing categories. Pogrebna et al. (2024) offer longitudinal evidence of leadership bias persistence, supporting the logic of negative selection for promotion among indispensable workers. Thomas and Eaton (2025) further demonstrate how schema-driven expectations shape evaluation processes, explaining why performance fails to translate into advancement.

The evaluation and compensation tax can be measured through wage growth trajectories, bonus allocation, and access to equity-based compensation. Carroll and Walker (2025) document post-COVID wage compression patterns, while Fiorini and Maldonado (2025) show how compensation containment affects labor supply and earnings growth. Bao et al. (2025) provides methodological guidance for modeling compensation dispersion, allowing researchers to evaluate whether stabilizing labor is systematically undervalued relative to growth-oriented roles.

Schema elasticity refers to the expansion of workload without corresponding increases in authority or reward. Iheduru-Anderson et al. (2025) document how resilience expectations increase labor extraction among Black women professionals. Hanek and Garcia (2022) provide social psychological evidence that expectations shape evaluation criteria, while Gündemir et al. (2014) link leadership schemas to racialized authority denial. Together, these studies allow researchers to empirically connect cultural narratives to structural outcomes.

Life-Course and Longitudinal Designs

Because Backbone Theory emphasizes cumulative extraction, longitudinal and life-course methodologies are essential. Hogan and Perrucci (2007) document employment-to-retirement disadvantage among Black women, while Fasang and Aisenbrey (2021) provide

intersectional frameworks for modeling inequality across work and family life courses. Wingfield (2019) complements this work by showing how racialized labor sorting persists across career stages.

Wealth accumulation and retirement outcomes represent critical endpoints for organizational research. Data from the Urban Institute (2025) document persistent wealth gaps driven by differential access to assets and compensation structures. The Institute for Women's Policy Research (2023) provides evidence of disparities in pension access and retirement security. Linking organizational role histories to these outcomes allows researchers to trace how dependence on stabilizing labor translates into long-term economic inequality.

Testable Propositions

Backbone Theory generates empirically grounded propositions anchored in observed 2025–2026 labor market patterns:

Proposition 1: Controlling for performance and tenure, individuals performing higher levels of stabilizing labor will exhibit a promotion delta, projected at approximately **21 percent**, relative to growth-track peers (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2025; Yarberry, 2025).

Proposition 2: Organizational reliance on stabilizing labor will be associated with wage compression and reduced access to performance-linked compensation mechanisms (Carroll & Walker, 2025; Bao et al., 2025).

Proposition 3: Schema-driven expectations of resilience will moderate the relationship between stabilizing labor and workload expansion, increasing labor extraction while negatively correlating with commensurate increases in formal authority or resource allocation (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2025).

Proposition 4: Prolonged exposure to stabilizing roles will predict cumulative economic disadvantage across the career life course, including reduced wealth accumulation and retirement security (Hogan & Perrucci, 2007; Fasang & Aisenbrey, 2021).

Applied Bridge: From Theory to Organizational Design

Translating Backbone Theory into Organizational Design

Because Backbone Theory locates inequality in organizational dependence rather than individual deficiency, effective interventions must target the mechanisms that produce immobilization. The following table maps common organizational design interventions to the specific Backbone Theory mechanisms they disrupt.

Organizational Design Intervention	Backbone Theory Mechanism Addressed	Structural Effect
Succession redundancy and cross-training	Stabilization traps	Reduces reliance on single individuals and lowers the cost of mobility
Role rotation or time-bound tours of duty	Authority compression	Prevents long-term immobilization in stabilizing roles
Risk absorption or continuity premiums	Evaluation and compensation taxes	Reclassifies stabilizing labor as strategic value
Workload-to-authority audits	Schema elasticity	Aligns expanding responsibility with formal authority and resources
Access to equity and long-term incentives	Cumulative extraction	Protects long-term economic outcomes tied to sustained contribution

Implications for Practice and Policy

If Backbone Theory identifies inequality as a byproduct of organizational dependence on stabilizing labor, then effective responses must move beyond individual-level interventions toward redesigning the conditions that produce dependence itself. Decades of organizational research demonstrate that inequality persists even in formally inclusive environments when underlying role structures and evaluation systems remain unchanged (Acker, 2006; Wingfield, 2019). Traditional responses, such as bias training, mentorship, and leadership development

programs, leave intact the organizational architectures that extract stabilizing labor while constraining mobility (Erskine et al., 2021; LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2020).

Backbone Theory, therefore, shifts the locus of responsibility from individual navigation to organizational design. Addressing cumulative extraction requires reconfiguring how organizations manage stability, assign value to maintenance work, and protect the long-term economic outcomes of workers whose labor sustains institutional functioning over time (Hogan & Perrucci, 2007; Fasang & Aisenbrey, 2021).

Decoupling Stability from Immobilization

The most immediate implication for organizational practice is dismantling the stabilization trap. Research on resource dependence shows that when organizations rely heavily on specific internal resources, they resist redistributing those resources even when doing so would support long-term capability development (Coşkun & Öztürk, 2023). In organizational contexts, stabilizing labor often becomes such a resource, rendering mobility costly and advancement risky.

Empirical evidence indicates that Black women are promoted at significantly slower rates than similarly performing peers, even in high-performing categories, suggesting that indispensability constrains movement rather than enabling it (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2025; Yarberry, 2025). Treating functional indispensability as a managerial convenience rather than a structural risk reproduces inequality by design.

Organizations can address this risk by institutionalizing succession redundancy. Cross-training, shared ownership of critical processes, and formal documentation of institutional knowledge reduce dependence on any single individual and lower the perceived cost of mobility

(Kermani & Ma, 2022). When bench strength is built around organizational infrastructure rather than individuals, promotion no longer threatens continuity.

Mobility-linked rotation and time-bound tour-of-duty models offer an additional corrective. Research on informal leadership and role fixation shows that prolonged concentration in stabilizing roles limits advancement even among high performers (Erskine et al., 2021). Rotation models distribute institutional memory, prevent role entrenchment, and convert stability into a collective organizational asset rather than an individual burden (Beier et al., 2025).

Reclassifying the Value of Maintenance

A second implication concerns how organizations define and reward strategic contributions. Compensation research consistently shows that labor associated with maintenance and continuity is undervalued relative to labor associated with growth and expansion (Bao et al., 2025; Carroll & Walker, 2025). This imbalance produces the evaluation and compensation tax identified by Backbone Theory.

Organizations can counteract this distortion by reclassifying stabilizing labor as high-stakes organizational work. Compensation systems that include risk absorption premiums explicitly reward crisis management, continuity preservation, and volatility mitigation, activities shown to be central to organizational survival during periods of disruption (Beier et al., 2025; Fiorini & Maldonado, 2025).

Performance evaluation systems must also grant parity between value creation and loss prevention. Studies of compensation dispersion demonstrate that systems rewarding innovation while ignoring stabilization systematically disadvantage workers concentrated in continuity roles (Bao et al., 2025). Explicitly recognizing the prevention of failure, reputational harm, and

operational disruption as strategic contributions ensures that stabilizing labor can convert into bonuses, equity participation, and advancement opportunities.

Institutionalizing Reciprocity and Economic Protection

Backbone Theory also highlights the need to address schema elasticity, the process through which expanding responsibility is decoupled from expanding authority or resources. Research on the Strong Black Woman schema demonstrates that expectations of resilience and availability increase workload without commensurate institutional support or authority (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2025; Thomas & Eaton, 2025). Over time, this elasticity becomes extraction.

Organizations can counter this dynamic through formal workload-to-authority audits. When roles expand due to crisis, environmental uncertainty, or staffing shortages, those expansions should automatically trigger review of compensation, authority, and promotion eligibility. Without such mechanisms, elasticity remains invisible within evaluation systems and inequality compounds (Hanek & Garcia, 2022).

Economic protection must also extend beyond immediate compensation. Longitudinal research shows that sustained contribution without access to equity, pensions, or wealth-building mechanisms leads to cumulative disadvantage across the career life course (Hogan & Perrucci, 2007; Fasang & Aisenbrey, 2021). Yet stabilizing roles are frequently excluded from long-term incentive structures, producing the retirement cliff observed among Black women professionals (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2023; Urban Institute, 2025).

Implications for Policy Design

At the policy level, Backbone Theory suggests that addressing long-term inequality requires decoupling economic security from narrow definitions of leadership and growth. Policies that expand access to portable retirement mechanisms, employer-sponsored equity

participation, and long-term savings programs recognize that stabilizing labor sustains organizations over decades and deserves corresponding protection (Urban Institute, 2025; Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2023).

Labor market data documenting occupational segregation further indicate that stabilizing labor is structurally concentrated, making individual mobility an insufficient solution (National Employment Law Project, 2024). Policy interventions that support mid-career transitions, retraining, and portable benefits reduce the organizational incentive to rely on immobilization as a stability strategy.

Redesigning Dependence Rather Than Managing Inequality

Taken together, these organizational and policy implications converge on a single conclusion. Inequality produced by dependence cannot be resolved through inclusion alone. It requires redesigning how dependence is structured, distributed, and rewarded.

Succession redundancy reduces immobilization (Kermani & Ma, 2022). Risk absorption premiums recalibrate value (Bao et al., 2025). Workload-to-authority audits enforce reciprocity (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2025). Expanded retirement and wealth-building mechanisms protect long-term outcomes (Urban Institute, 2025). These interventions do not merely mitigate inequality. They alter the organizational conditions that produce it.

Backbone Theory demonstrates that allowing stabilizing labor to convert into authority and long-term economic security is not only an equity imperative but a resilience strategy. Organizations that rely on extractive stability are fragile by design. Organizations that redesign dependence enhance continuity, legitimacy, and long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

This paper advances Backbone Theory as a meso structural explanation for persistent racialized and gendered inequality under conditions of formal inclusion. By shifting the unit of analysis from individual outcomes to organizational systems, the theory explains why Black women experience stalled mobility, compensation compression, and cumulative economic disadvantage despite sustained performance, tenure, and institutional commitments to diversity. In this account, inequality is not the result of exclusion, bias, or individual deficit, but a predictable byproduct of organizational architectures that rely on stabilizing labor while restricting its conversion into authority, advancement, and long-term economic return.

Backbone Theory reframes Black women's labor as organizational infrastructure rather than individual contribution. Drawing on inequality regimes, resource dependence, asset specificity, and Black feminist theory, it identifies the mechanisms through which stabilizing labor becomes both indispensable and immobilizing. Stabilization traps preserve continuity by increasing the perceived cost of mobility. Evaluation and compensation taxes systematically undervalue continuity preserving work relative to growth-oriented contributions. Authority compression decouples responsibility from decision rights, while schema elasticity expands workload without commensurate increases in authority or resources. Together, these mechanisms produce cumulative extraction across the career life course, culminating in stalled leadership access, wage compression, and long-term economic insecurity.

The theoretical contribution of Backbone Theory lies in its reorientation of inequality from a problem of access to a problem of dependence. Whereas dominant frameworks emphasize pipeline failure, aspiration gaps, or biased evaluation, Backbone Theory demonstrates how indispensability itself can function as a constraint. Under conditions of organizational volatility, technological change, and workforce instability, stabilizing labor becomes increasingly central to

organizational survival. Yet when this labor is treated as operational maintenance rather than strategic value, organizations reproduce inequality by design even in environments committed to inclusion.

Backbone Theory also generates a clear agenda for future research. Longitudinal organizational studies can empirically model how concentrations of stabilizing labor predict promotion velocity, authority allocation, compensation growth, and wealth outcomes over time, testing whether organizational dependence operates as a mobility constraint independent of performance and tenure. Comparative analyses of organizational design interventions such as succession redundancy, role rotation, continuity premiums, and workload to authority audits can examine whether redesigning dependence alters inequality trajectories without undermining organizational stability. These research pathways allow Backbone Theory to function not only as an explanatory framework, but also as a diagnostic tool for assessing the equity consequences of organizational design choices.

The implications of Backbone Theory extend beyond explanation to organizational resilience. Organizations that rely on extractive stability, preserving continuity by immobilizing those who sustain it, are fragile by design. In contrast, organizations that redistribute stabilizing labor, formalize its strategic value, and protect its long-term economic returns strengthen both equity and institutional durability. By making visible the structural conditions under which stabilizing labor becomes a source of inequality, Backbone Theory provides a foundation for rethinking how organizations allocate value, authority, and risk in the contemporary workplace.

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