

CONCRETE CEILINGS AND FOLDING CHAIRS

Workplace Barriers and Agency
Among Black Women Professionals
in Erie County, NY



ILR School

JULY 2026

*“If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a **folding chair**.” - Shirley Chisholm*

*“The "**concrete ceiling**," an evolution of the symbolic "glass ceiling," epitomizes the distinct and formidable hurdles Black women encounter in workplaces historically rife with racial and gender biases. While the glass ceiling embodies unseen barriers to women's career progression, the concrete ceiling magnifies the intricate challenges Black women face at the intersection of their identities, demanding our attention and resolve.”*

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ABOUT THE STUDY

In 2025, the Erie County Commission on the Status of Women reached out to Cornell University ILR School in Buffalo to conduct a study to determine the extent of a gender wage gap in Erie County and to make recommendations on how such wage inequities can be addressed and eradicated. Findings from the 2025 study revealed that despite progress in women's labor force participation, deeply-rooted inequalities continue to limit women's earning potential, career mobility, and power in the workplace. Focus groups of mixed-race women revealed different workplace experiences that varied, primarily, based on race, that warranted further investigation into the experiences of women of color, particularly Black women. Thus, in October 2025 through January 2026, the Erie County Commission on the Status of Women, partnering with the Economic Development & Upward Mobility Coalition, charged the Cornell research team to dig deeper into the historical data and experiences of Black women in workplaces throughout Erie County.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In addition to quantitative analysis done with local and national data, five focus groups were conducted with 25 working women of color, specifically Black women, from key industries in Erie County, including healthcare, education, banking, and public administration. Discussions covered workplace satisfaction, discrimination, pay inequities, and recent changes in the nature and atmosphere of their work or workplace.

Key Data

- Black women in Erie County are 2.6x more likely than white women to live in poverty, and over 3x as likely as white men to be impoverished.
- the unemployment rate for women of color in NYS (5.4%) is more than twice the rate experienced by white women (2.5%).
- Black women are concentrated in front line work; while making up just 5.8% of the Erie County workforce, Black women account for 28.3% of the County's healthcare support workers.

Key Findings

- Structural Inequality and Lack of Representation including isolation and lack of diverse leadership
- Stereotyping based on race and gender
- Workplace Microaggressions and Hostile Environments
- Self-policing such as codeswitching, self-silencing and emotional regulation
- Invisible labor and more specifically, emotional labor
- Unequal Career Advancement
- Bias Policies that Address Workplace Conflict
- Resilience, Solidarity, and Structural Change

Key Recommendations

Organizational

Organizations must implement policies and procedures that foster an inclusive environment where employees are supported and empowered to thrive.

- Treat diversity—by race and gender as a high organizational priority.
- Clear messaging and modeling from leadership
- Increase Transparency and Pay Equity
- Consistently use clear criteria for evaluation, hiring and promotions
- Strengthen Safe Reporting and Protections
- Move Beyond Performative Diversity Equity and Inclusion to Offer Anti-Racist Training and Resources
- Consider Flexible Work Arrangements
- Adopt union-friendly policies
- Invest in Retention, Not Just Recruitment

Broader Policy Change

- Restore and protect public-sector roles in education, healthcare, and care work — fields where Black women disproportionately contribute and lead.
- Reinstate and strengthen Diversity Equity and Inclusion programs across federal agencies and corporations.
- Support data and data transparency.

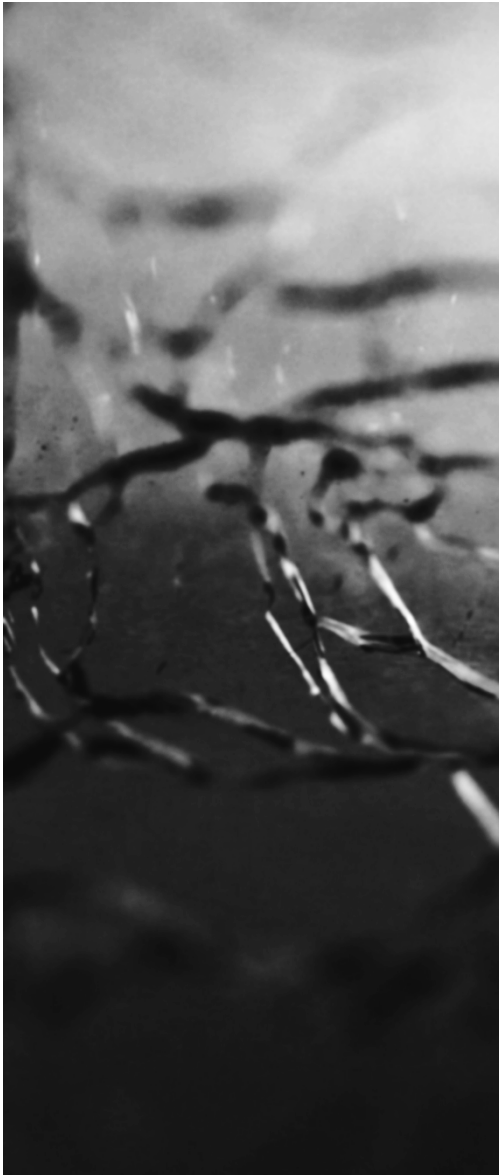
INTRODUCTION

Despite major strides made by women in the United States economy in recent decades, growing research and evidence suggests that many remain unable to reach their full potential in the workplace.² Advancements in policies and evolving cultural norms surrounding women's education, voting rights, and increased presence in the labor market have not been enough to close gender gaps in pay and leadership opportunities, nor have they ended occupational gender segregation or the systematic devaluation of gendered work (e.g., especially in direct care and other "front line" occupations, which are predominantly held by women).³

Even though there exists widespread recognition that structural inequality is the baseline reality for women in the U.S. economy, the magnitude and cumulative impacts of that reality differ markedly *within* the population of women.⁴ For instance, intersectionality scholars assert that:

"to fully understand experiences of marginalization and inequality, it is necessary to consider the convergence of different forms of discrimination, such as gender, racial, and class discrimination...In other words, Black women do not experience discrimination merely as women or as Black individuals, but at the intersection of these two identities, resulting in a unique experience of oppression that cannot be adequately understood through a singular analysis of race or gender alone".⁵

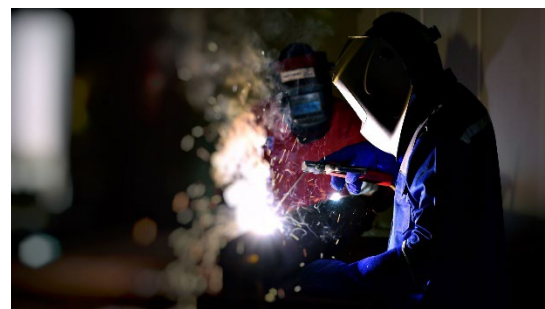
Grounded in this observation, the concept of a *glass ceiling*, which popularly symbolizes the barriers to women's advancement in the workplace, has been extended to the notion of a *concrete ceiling*, which embodies the distinct and formidable hurdles Black women and other women of color encounter in the economy. The concrete ceiling's impenetrability and opacity represents the double discrimination—based on race and gender—that women of color experience at work. Not only is it a more difficult barrier to break through, but it stifles the ability to see what is possible.



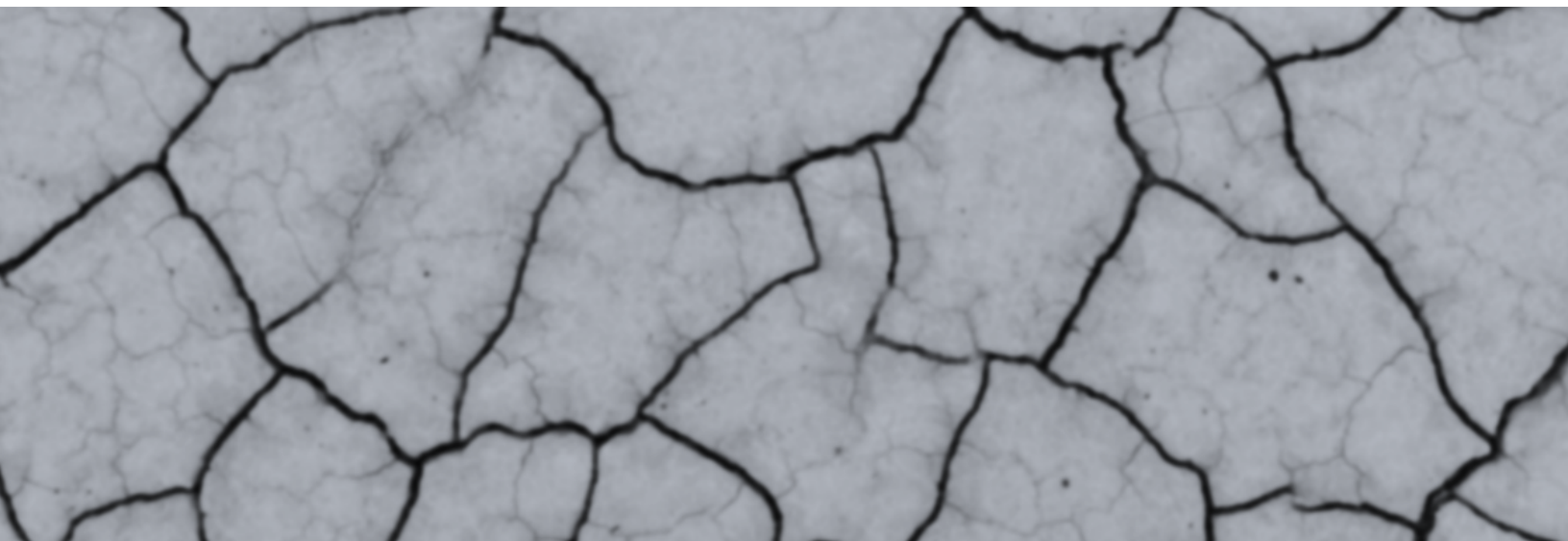
Black women do not experience discrimination merely as women or as Black individuals, but at the intersection of these two identities.

The current study aims to better understand and illuminate properties of this *concrete ceiling* for women of color in Erie County, New York. In 2025, during the Phase 1 of a broader “women at work” project conducted by the Cornell University ILR Buffalo Co-Lab and Erie County Commission on the Status of Women, researchers found that women in Erie County continue to be underrepresented in leadership and policymaking, and they face systemic barriers to economic and political power, earning less than their male counterparts even when qualifications, work hours, and household situations are held constant.⁶

Consistent with the concept of a concrete ceiling, qualitative data that emerged from Phase 1 focus groups pointed out hardships and experiences for women of color that were not applicable to white women. Consequently, this second phase (Phase 2) of the Cornell-Erie County research project grows directly from the first and is designed to generate a comparatively intersectional and more complete picture of the empirical and experiential realities of women of color in the Erie County labor market. With such a picture fleshed out in greater detail, it arguably becomes possible to identify leverage points where the pickaxes and jackhammers of organizational and public policy can be applied to begin breaking apart the concrete.



[Women] earn less than their male counterparts even when qualifications, work hours, and household situations are held constant.





CONTEXT

The observation that the existing economic order generates systemic gender inequalities that take on new and more severe forms for women of color is well established in social science literature.⁷ As recent scholarship from the rapid response economics program at the Center for Economic Policy Research (“CPER”) suggests, however, this “existing economic order” has been undergoing drastic shifts since January of 2025, causing backslides in gains that have been made in earlier eras. The second Trump administration’s “sweeping tariffs, sharp breaks in global alliances, assertions of presidential supremacy, government downsizing, deregulation, and risks to the rule of law” are reshaping the US economy and “sending ripples across the global [economic system]”.⁸ To date, the consequences of these transformations are increasing the precarity of many of the nation’s most vulnerable groups and individuals, especially women of color.⁹

In practice, much of the administration’s domestic policy agenda might be described as a “war on ‘woke’”,¹⁰ as executive actions, the federal budget, and the federal workforce have been weaponized against Diversity Equity and Inclusion (“DEI”) initiatives, especially in hiring policies and higher education. The unsurprising result of cutting institutions, programs, and funding dedicated to the advancement of gender and racial equality in the economy has been upward pressure on gender- and race-based *inequality* in the United States.

Since January 2025...the unemployment rate for Black women [has] “skyrocketed”

Black women have suffered disproportionately from these changes, experiencing larger employment losses than any other group since the administration returned to power in 2025.¹¹ Indeed, the unemployment rate for Black women “skyrocketed” in the first year of the second Trump presidency.¹² One factor contributing to this outcome is that the administration’s aggressive downsizing of the federal workforce through the Department of Government Efficiency (“DOGE”) was neither race- nor gender-neutral. Employment among Black women was “tanked by large public-sector losses in 2025”.¹³ According to the U.S. Census American Community Survey (“ACS”), prior to DOGE, the NYS-based federal workforce had a higher than expected proportion of Black or African American workers relative to the composition of the labor force (such persons are roughly 19% of federal workers, but just 12.7% of all

workers living in NYS).¹⁴ However, based on the trends observed so far, it is reasonable to assume that this disproportionately will contract or perhaps even disappear in releases of the ACS that contain data from 2025 and beyond.¹⁵

The standard set by the federal government through its layoff decisions, new policies, and executive orders to terminate Diversity Equity and Inclusion programming arguably almost certainly ripple into the private sector, acting as a signal for companies and organizations to scale back, discontinue, or reimagine their DEI offerings. Likewise, cuts to federal agency staff and social spending have further destabilized key industries related to health, care, education, and community support¹⁶—fields that disproportionately employ women, especially women of color.¹⁷

What is more, high-profile leaders of color, specifically Black female leaders, have been aggressively targeted and removed from their positions¹⁸--Lisa Cook, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve; Carla Hayden, the first Black and female librarian of Congress; and Gwynne Wilcox, the first Black woman to serve as a member of the National Labor Relations Board.¹⁹

High-profile leaders of color,
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Whereas administration officials point to DEI and related policies as too “divisive” and “race-centered”,²⁰ they exist to *remediate* the divisiveness and racism already baked into American society and its core social, economic, and political institutions. The notion that the U.S. is a post-racial society where Diversity Equity and Inclusion programming is irrelevant is completely at odds with the empirical reality. In the workplace alone, for instance, Black professionals express having experienced racial discrimination at four times that rate of their white peers (58% vs. 15%) and notably more than their Latinx (41%) and Asian (38%) peers.²¹

For women, as the Aspen Institute’s Jasmine Babers explains, the situation is even worse. Removing protections against discrimination reinforces the “concrete ceiling” currently blocking women of color from reaching the same heights as more privileged demographic groups in the United States.²² Indeed, the intersecting effects of racial and gender inequality have made Black women among the least likely groups in the United States to build generational wealth. Such patterns are not random. Historical barriers such as redlining, employment discrimination, and unequal access to homeownership limited Black families’ ability to accumulate assets across generations. Current data show how these disparities persist: only 49% of Black women own homes, compared to 65% of U.S. adults, and only 49% report having retirement savings.²³ Additionally, 28% of Black women carry more than \$50,000 in student loan debt, and 58% financially support extended family members, limiting

opportunities to save and invest for future generations.²⁴ Research also shows that White households possess nearly six times the wealth of Black households, reflecting the enduring racial wealth gap in the United States.²⁵

Insofar as the initial phase of this project has already documented the extent to which “women working in Erie County, relative to men, simultaneously experience lower pay (after controlling for relevant factors) and greater barriers to success,”²⁶ the current report extends the analysis through a targeted inquiry into how these outcomes differ for Black women and women of color relative to their white counterparts. Namely, drawing on qualitative data obtained through six semi-structured focus groups with women of color working in Erie County, this report seeks to describe and understand the nature of the *concrete ceiling* blocking multiply marginalized women from advancing through to all the heights that the WNY economy has to offer. Prior to turning to that question, the next section provides a brief empirical sketch of gender and racial inequality in key Erie County employment and economic indicators.



SOME EMPIRICAL GROUNDING

Regardless of the level of analysis – national, state, or local – current poverty rates for men and women are comparable when broken out by gender alone. When disaggregated by race, however, a different picture emerges. Black women in Erie County are 2.6x more likely than white women to live in poverty, and over 3x as likely as white men to be impoverished (NB: the figures are even worse for Black men). More than one of every four Black women working in the County lives below the federal poverty rate, compared to just one out of ten white women and fewer than one out of ten white men.

Poverty Rate

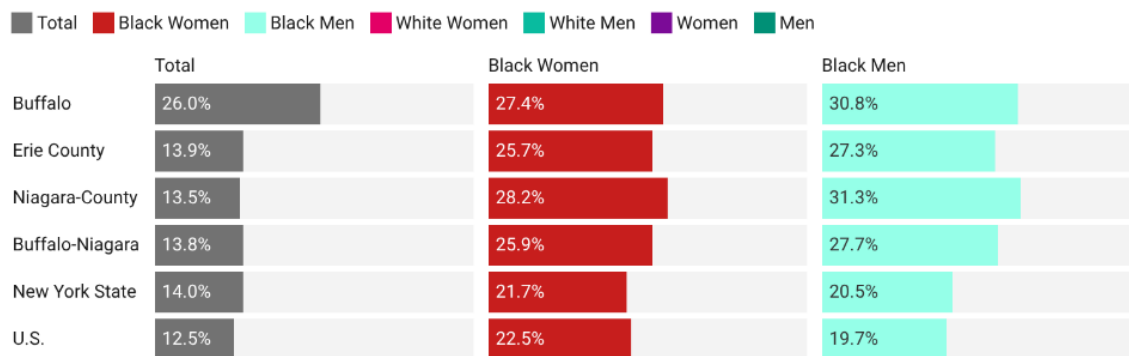


Chart: Russell Weaver, PhD • Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS), 5-Year Estimates, 2020-24 • Created with Datawrapper

Poverty Rate

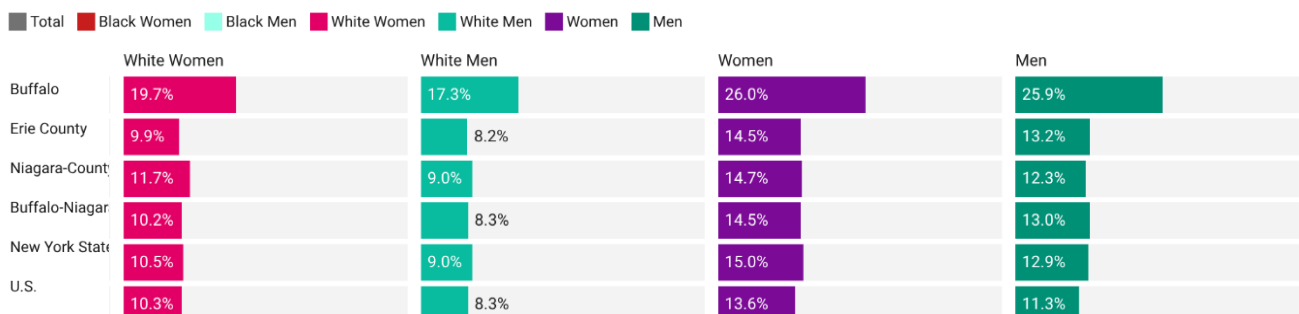


Chart: Russell Weaver, PhD • Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS), 5-Year Estimates, 2020-24 • Created with Datawrapper

With respect to unemployment, the 2020-24 U.S. Census American Community Survey (“ACS”) reports that women in Erie County and New York State were experiencing lower unemployment rates, on average, compared to men before the second Trump administration took office. At the same time, Black workers were consistently around twice as likely to be unemployed relative to white workers, regardless of geographic scale (local, regional, state, national). Thus, even without the administration’s policy changes and layoffs, Black women were likely struggling in ways that their white counterparts were not experiencing in comparatively less turbulent economic times.

Unemployment Rate (5-Year Average)

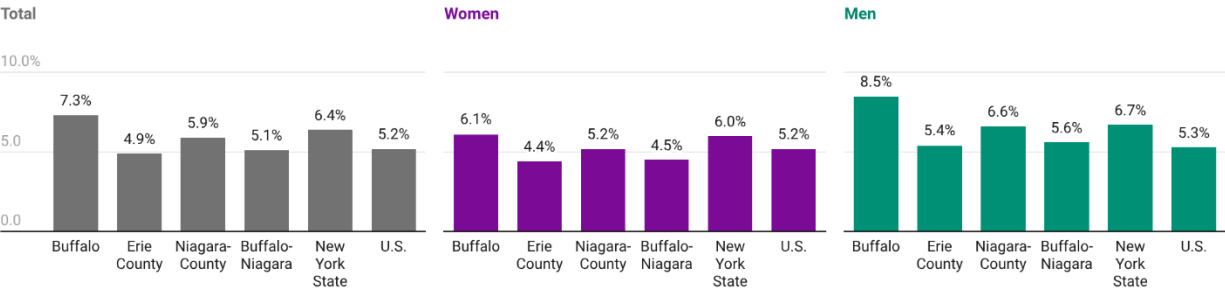
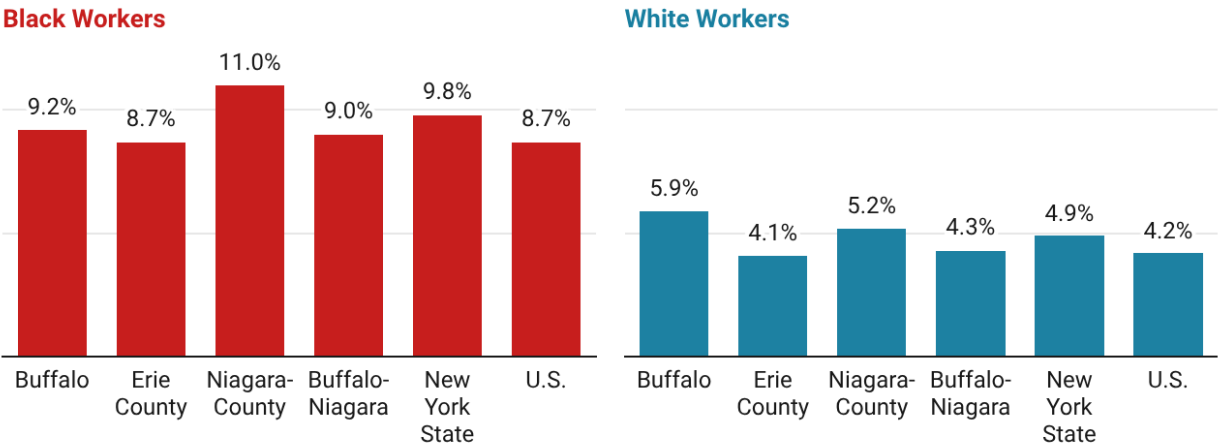


Chart: Russell Weaver, PhD • Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS), 5-Year Estimates, 2020-24 • Created with Datawrapper



At the national level, while unemployment rates for white workers have shown little change in recent years, analogous rates for Black workers underwent a steep climb for several months starting in January 2025. During the first half of last year, when executive actions were coming in bunches and DOGE was knee-deep into its cuts to the federal budget and workforce, the unemployment rate for Black women effectively doubled – from 4.9% in December 2024 to around 9% in August 2025 (not seasonally adjusted). Although that figure

has begun to come back down (5.2% in May 2026), it remains significantly (1.7x) higher than the comparable figure for white women (3%).¹

Unemployment Rate by Race and Gender, U.S.

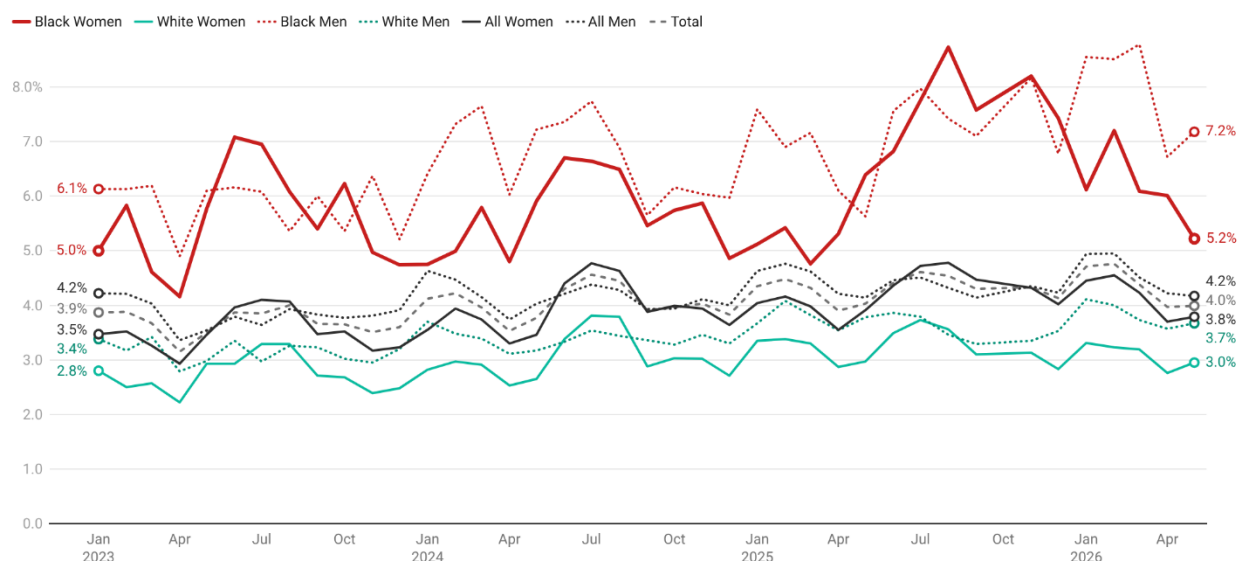


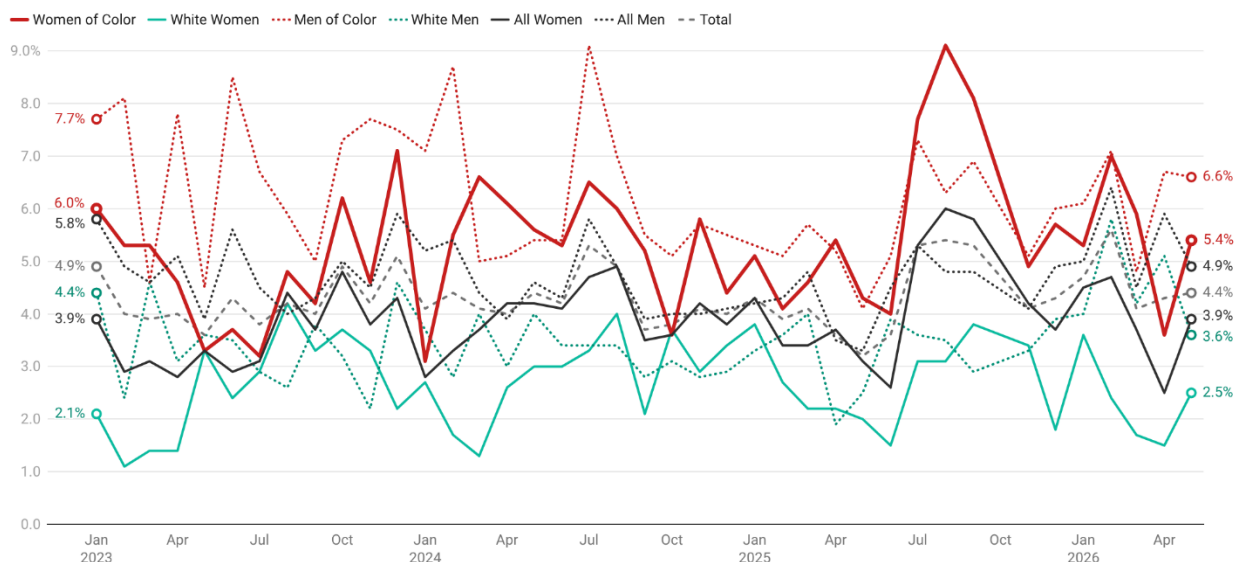
Chart: Russell Weaver, PhD • Source: U.S. Census Current Population Survey (CPS) Basic Monthly; Author's Calculations • Created with Datawrapper

Because of small sample size limitations that affect CPS data at sub-national level of analysis, the corresponding trend for NYS requires slightly different treatment. Specifically, the chart below combines all workers who identify with a racial-ethnic group other than “white, Not Hispanic or Latinx” into aggregated category “persons of color”. Inasmuch as some non-white demographic groups (e.g., persons who identify as Asian) are associated with economic outcomes that are on par with or better than their white counterparts, aggregating non-white persons into a composite group “persons of color” likely understates the true size of gaps between white and Black workers.

That being said, mirroring the structural case made with ACS data above, the unemployment rate for women of color in NYS (5.4%) is more than twice the rate experienced by white women (2.5%). Concerningly, after two consecutive months of downticks (from February through April), unemployment for NYS’s women of color is again trending up in defiance of the national conditions illustrated above.

¹ To investigate the extent to which the above patterns have changed – presumably, exacerbated – in response to current and emerging economic conditions, the next set of figures summarizes more recent data from the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (“CPS”). Whereas the previous charts come from the latest Census five-year ACS and might therefore be thought of as “structural” or longer-term averages, the CPS collects monthly data to show short-term fluctuations in employment conditions in near real-time. In exchange for the currency of the data, however, precision is necessarily sacrificed. Monthly CPS data are generated from relatively small samples and are thus available only at regional, state, and national levels of analysis. In practice, however, regional estimates from the CPS carry large margins of error, especially if data are to be subsetting by race, gender, or both. Even in large states like NYS, breaking out data by multiple categorical variables like race and gender is hampered by low observed frequencies in desired sub-samples. On that backdrop, unlike with the ACS, it is not possible to disaggregate CPS data to the county-level, nor will all intersections of gender and race-ethnicity yield usable data. For these reasons, the monthly CPS is perhaps most useful here for monitoring bigger picture temporal trends and tracking how (un)employment at state and national levels moves in response to shocks and structural economic changes.

Unemployment Rate by Race and Gender, New York State



Breakdowns by state, gender, and race-ethnicity can result in unstable sample estimates due to low observed frequencies in selected categories
 Chart: Russell Weaver, PhD • Source: U.S. Census Current Population Survey (CPS) Basic Monthly; Author's Calculations • Created with Datawrapper

Before turning to the centerpiece of this investigation – information acquired directly from women of color working in Erie County – it is worth quickly speculating on why unemployment rates might be ticking down for Black women and women of color, even as the federal government’s “war on ‘woke’” continues to remove protections and generate economic uncertainty.^{27,28}

Black women are heavily concentrated in healthcare and social assistance support occupations, which tend to be low-wage and precarious jobs.

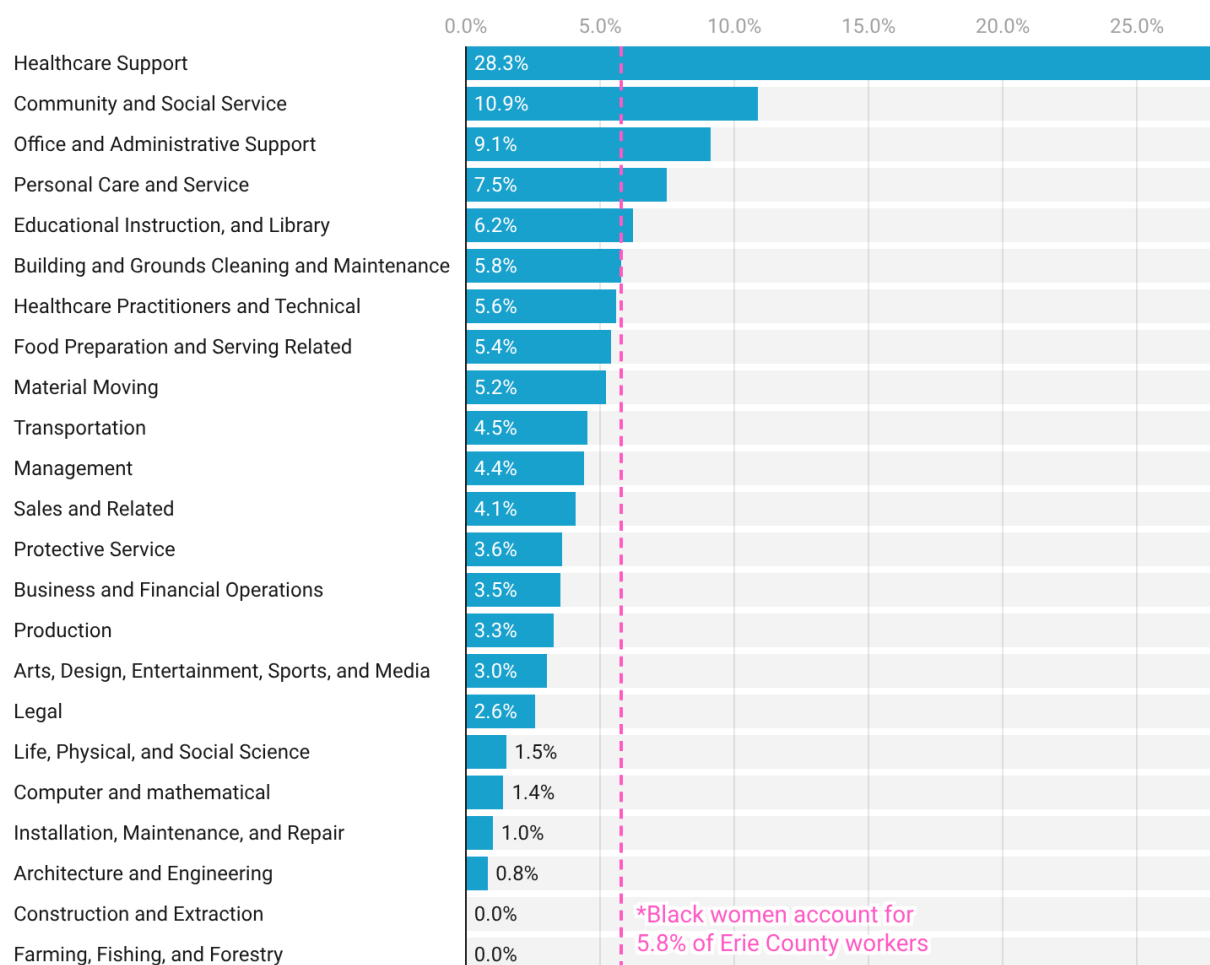
In NYS, especially in Erie County, net job change since December 2024 has been characterized by losses in most industries offset by gains in Healthcare and Social Assistance.²⁹ Importantly, women account for more than three out of every four Healthcare and Social Assistance workers in Erie County.³⁰ Within this industry, white women account for the bulk higher-wage positions as healthcare practitioners and technical workers: despite accounting for just 37.4% of all Erie County workers, white women are

61.2% of the County’s technical and practicing healthcare professionals. For comparison, Black women are 5.8% of the County workforce and 5.6% of healthcare practitioners, a rough proportionality.

By contrast, Black women are heavily concentrated in healthcare and social assistance *support* occupations, which tend to be low-wage and precarious jobs such as home health aides, personal care assistants, orderlies, and aides. It is these low-pay, high-effort direct service positions where many Healthcare and Social Assistance jobs are being created – nearly all healthcare support occupations are “bright outlook” jobs that are in high demand as the U.S. population ages and caregiving needs swell.³¹

As shown in the graph below, while making up just 5.8% of the Erie County workforce, Black women account for 28.3% of the County’s healthcare support workers – a massive disproportionately of roughly five-to-one. Although much lower in magnitude, Black women are also highly concentrated in Community and Social Service, Office and Administrative Support, and Personal Care and Service work.

Black Women as a Share of Workers in Erie County, by Occupation Type



Dashed line indicates Black women's overall share of workers in Erie County

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Five-Year American Community Survey, 2020-24 • Created with Datawrapper

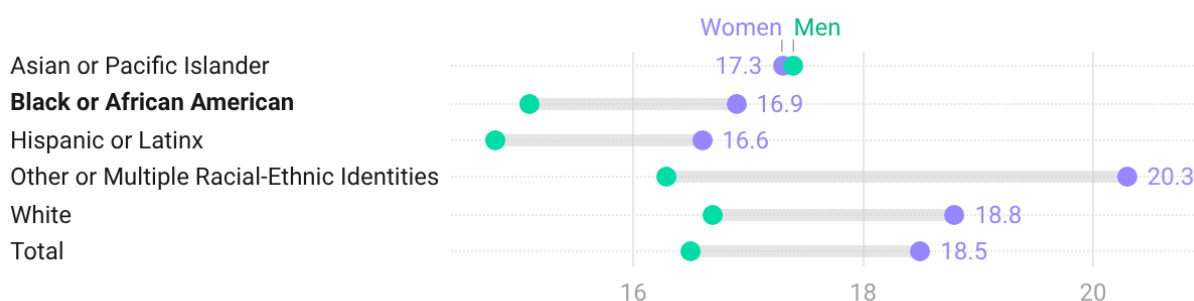
Not coincidentally, Black women appear to be concentrated in so-called front-line and essential work: caregiving roles and other positions that are “considered vital to maintain critical functions and infrastructure” in the national economy.³² As artificial intelligence (“AI”) continues to reshape the economy and the world of work, it is reasonable to expect that unemployment rates might trend down for groups that are disproportionately and inequitably concentrated in the high-touch, high-demand, essential occupations that provide the human-centered services AI is so far not capable of delivering at scale. Importantly, though, any compression in unemployment rates by gender and race-ethnicity due to a rising demand for

stressful low-wage work should not be interpreted as a successful closing of preexisting employment gaps; but as further indications that a “concrete ceiling” is keeping women of color from equitably participating in more self- and family-sustaining economic opportunities.

Grounded in these observations, the following graph summarizes average “AI applicability” scores for workers by race-ethnicity and gender. In a 2025 scholarly investigation, Kiran Tomlinson and colleagues drew on more than 200,000 AI conversations to measure the extent to which AI was applicable to a given task and able to perform it.³³ From these data, the authors developed a normalized index on a scale from 0 (AI is not applicable and cannot perform the task) to 100 (AI can perfectly perform the task). In Erie County, occupations held by women are marginally more exposed to AI (18.5) than men (16.5). However, Black (16.9) and Latina (16.6) women are significantly less exposed, on average, than white women (18.5).

AI Job Applicability Score by Race-Ethnicity and Gender

Range 0-100; Higher scores indicate higher AI exposure



AI exposure scores from: Tomlinson, K., Jaffe, S., Wang, W., Counts, S., & Suri, S. (2025). Working with AI: measuring the applicability of generative AI to occupations. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2507.07935*.

Source: U.S. Census ACS PUMS, Five-Year 2020-24 • Created with Datawrapper

Notwithstanding the relatively small magnitude of the various AI applicability scores shown above, the data offer emerging evidence that Black and Brown women in Erie County are more likely to be in essential, AI-resistant roles compared to white women. Coupled with the observation that Black women in Erie County are the most likely demographic group to earn sub-living wages (58.6% of Black women earn below their living wage, compared to 39.5% of white women and just 33.3% of white men),³⁴ one might say that women of color in the WNY labor market “exemplify *the essential–expendable paradox* in which [they] are designated as essential and simultaneously treated as insignificant and dispensable”.³⁵

To evaluate how well this description, and that of the concrete ceiling, might explain the actual lived experience of women of color in WNY, the next session turns to the heart of the current investigation: lessons learned from focus groups with 25 Black and Brown women who live and work in Erie County.



EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCES

While much of the quantitative analysis from the Women in Work in Erie County 2024-2025 study revealed the economic landscape and status of women wage earners, additional focus groups were conducted with targeted outreach to women of color—specifically Black women, in Health Care and Social Assistance; Educational Services (both higher education and child care through 12th grade); and Public Administration. Five focus groups were held virtually and in-person with varying timeslots offered to participants and ranging from 60 to 90 minutes, between October and December 2025. The sessions included 25 total participants who self-identified as women of color, and specifically Black women, working in a variety of industries across Erie County.

Intersectional differences arose within the nuanced identities of the Black women participating in the focus groups—not everyone had *exactly* the same experiences. However, patterns emerged across all three focus groups, where Black women described their workplaces as benefitting from their labor, expertise, and resilience without fully valuing or protecting them. Participants consistently reported being overqualified yet underpaid, closely scrutinized, and expected to work harder to prove legitimacy, while navigating racism, sexism, colorism, accent bias, and retaliation.

Note on Methodology

Focus groups permitted an ability to capture the authentic experiences of Black women professionals. This study employed a qualitative focus group methodology. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit Black women from diverse professional sectors, including healthcare, education, corporate administration, public service, and nonprofit organizations. Participants were recruited through professional networks, community organizations, and online outreach platforms to ensure variation in age, career stage, and occupational background. Discussions were facilitated using open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to reflect on workplace culture, identity negotiation, experiences of discrimination or bias, mentorship opportunities, and strategies for resilience and professional navigation. All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Findings

Findings reveal a workplace landscape for Black women that is characterized by intersectional inequality including pay differentials, identity management, emotional strain, and structural barriers to advancement. Stereotypes, underrepresentation in leadership, and inconsistent organizational policies and practices, resulting from decades of inequity, combine to produce persistent inequities for women of color in professional environments. At the same time, participants articulate strategies for navigating these environments including affinity group dialogues, assuming leadership for the purpose of mentoring, creating opportunities for other Black women, and emphasizing the need for both organizational and systemic change to foster truly inclusive workplaces.

1. Structural Inequality and Lack of Representation

Focus group participants' experiences with representation at work fell into two broad types—(a) organizational homogeneity, with participants saying they were one of the few Black women in their workplace or; (b) slow integration, whereby during their tenure in an organization, participants claimed to start as one of the only Black women in their workplace but have, over time, seen the demographics shift to be more diverse.



Isolation

- “I keep encountering other isolated Black women.” (a)
- “Banking is predominantly white males.” (a)
- “250+ employees, majority white.” (a)
- “I am the only Latina in the department.” (a)
- “I have always worked in technology and almost always been the only person of color.” (a)
- “It was over 20 years of no diversity...until I started.” (b)
- “I was so used to always being the only.” (b)

While a couple of participants currently hold senior leadership roles, most described their organizational leaders as lacking in diversity. Research across corporate sectors demonstrates that executive leadership remains disproportionately white and male despite broader workforce diversity initiatives³⁶. This lack of representation can perpetuate inequality

through homophily—the tendency of leaders to hire and promote individuals like themselves.³⁷

Lack of Diverse Leadership

- “The majority of C-suites in corporate America are white.”
- “I cannot say there is someone who looks like me in leadership positions.”
- “It was very rare to see a Hispanic or Black underwriter.”

But the lack of diversity does not just impact the experience of workers. Participants also suggested that the absence of diversity affected the substance of their work such as lending approval in banking, reinforcing structural disparities in economic opportunity³⁸.

2. Stereotyping based on race and gender

Racial and gender stereotypes shape workers experiences, but Black women experience unique stereotypes distinct from those directed at women or racial minorities alone³⁹. Studies frequently identify stereotypes such as the “angry Black woman” or assumptions of intellectual inferiority as common barriers to advancement in professional environments⁴⁰. Participants described that common behaviors that would be seen as “confident” or “direct” in white colleagues was labeled “aggressive,” “angry,” or “unprofessional” in women of color.



- “Every time a black woman says something, we are looked at as the aggressor.”
- “Navigating me being firm as me being aggressive.”
- “Even my body language...is perceived as aggressive.”
- “I believe African American women come under different scrutiny.”

3. Workplace Microaggressions and Hostile Environments

Microaggressions—subtle everyday slights tied to identity—also emerged as a theme in the focus group data, including comments about hair, speech, and competence.

Participants describe hostile workplace climates and microaggressions based on race. Often framed as minor or unintentional, microaggressions include subtle insults, racialized assumptions, and dismissive comments that reinforce racial hierarchy⁴¹.

- “Why don’t you tell ‘your customers’ [Black customers] not to get high before applying?”
- “I’ve heard the n-word dropped...at company events.”
- “Comments and humiliation in my team.”
- “People asking to touch [my hair].”
- “My treatment...was based on my accent, the color of my skin.”
- “They think because I have an accent, I’m stupid.”
- “Do you really have a masters or bachelors?”
- “Manager referred to me as ‘the help.’”
- “Even things as basic as hair...not comfortable wearing natural hair, getting funny, looks, people asking to touch it.
- “Looked at as unprofessional for how your hair grows out of your head.”
- “Confederate flags in the employee parking lot.”
- “Belittled, yelled at, told to shut up in a room full of directors.”



While these are often framed as minor, the accumulative effects of these interactions produce significant psychological stress and job dissatisfaction.

4. Self-Policing

With stereotyping leading to microaggressions, participants describe extensive identity management strategies, including code-switching and emotional self-regulation. Marginalized employees often modify language, tone, dress, and behavior to align with dominant workplace norms.⁴² For many Black professionals, code-switching is used to mitigate negative perceptions and the common stereotypes mentioned above but it can also have significant costs like loss of identity, burnout, and stress.⁴³

The result is an environment in which workers must constantly manage impressions and anticipate biased interpretations of their behavior. Participants describe the additional emotional and cognitive labor that requires them to continuously and strategically monitor their speech, emotions, demeanor, and reactions. Over time, this can produce fatigue and psychological strain because employees must suppress authentic expression while navigating racialized expectations.⁴⁴

Codeswitching

Self-identifying older participants emphasized survival through code-switching; younger participants articulated a rejection of it—but said they face backlash as a result.

Participants expressed that the conditions under which they felt they could bring their full, authentic selves included: working remotely, being protected by a union, when they were in leadership roles or if they became self-employed or in newly created positions.

- “I’m part of the last of the old guard—with code switching. It isn’t even always linguistics; some cultures are more naturally loud or excited”
- “I ‘read the room’ and did what I had to do to preserve my job.”
- “I have to bring my A-game to every employer.”

Self-Silencing and Emotional Regulation

Focus group participants reported engaging in self-policing and self-silencing practices, including breathing techniques, choosing to disengage, and changing tone of voice in anticipation of potential power or policing struggles. *Self-silencing* is the tendency to limit self-expression or speech, often to avoid conflict, preserve harmony, and maintain relationships.⁴⁵ At work, Black women constantly are hyperaware of how they present themselves to ensure their safety and job protection.⁴⁶ Participants shared that while white colleagues could express a range of emotions, Black women are perceived as either happy or angry.⁴⁷ Trying to cope with these types of gendered racism impacts Black women’s mental, emotional, and physical health.⁴⁸



- “You learn...you just smile because if you say something you’re too sensitive. Or they say something condescending like, ‘are you OK?’”
- “Growing up, it was ‘watch what you say around those [white] people. Don’t give them anything to work with to come against you.’”
- “I was told, ‘you need to make yourself softer, vulnerable to build relationships.’”
- “The problem is you have to not be emotional, you have to be strategic.”

5. Invisible Labor

Participants described both feeling invisible and performing additional behind-the-scenes duties or labor that added to the overall productivity of the workplace but often without receiving acknowledgement or credit.⁴⁹

- “I felt so invisible”
- “I suggested a training. I created a management training that is used now and I don’t get any accolades for. I want my manager to recognize that it exists because I saw the need for it and created it.”

Emotional Labor

- “The goal post is moving...[it’s] extractive”
- “It is exhausting.”
- “I have to be on pins and needles to protect my job.”



Participants noted and other research confirms there is a psychological cost of constantly managing emotions to meet organizational expectations and when employees must continuously prove competence or represent their entire demographic group and is exacerbated when their work goes unrecognized.⁵⁰

6. Unequal Career Advancement and Pay Inequities

Almost every participant, even those in upper management roles, noted promotion and compensation gaps. Numerous studies confirm that women—and particularly women of color—experience slower promotion trajectories and lower compensation than comparable male colleagues.⁵¹

Black women face the concrete ceiling—encountering both gender bias similar to other women and racial bias that further limits their ability to advance. Even when credentials and performance are high, participants noted that that informal networks, nepotism and lack of recognition constrained upward mobility and pay increases.

- “I feel like I would definitely be further up the ladder if my race was different.”
- “The company paid for my certification...then didn’t give me the work or promotion.”
- “Now that I got my doctorate...I asked for an increase in pay and they said no.”
- “I walked in with more than enough experience...and never got the money I’m worth.”
- “Then to be low-balled...is disparaging.”
- “Pay me. I need equitable pay.”

7. Bias Policies that Address Workplace Conflict

Almost all participants described encountering racism in some way—subtly or overtly. Experiences ranged from microaggressions to humiliation, verbal abuse, physical boundary violations, and racially charged comments. Participants also described enablers—peers and leaders who stayed silent when a racist comment was made. Participants expressed significant distrust toward institutional mechanisms designed to address workplace conflict, particularly human resources departments. Most of the Black women noted that the primary role of Human Resources' (HR) is to protect the organization, not employees, unless legal risk is clear; something that organization research affirms.⁵² As such, participants described documentation, journaling, witnesses, and legal language were necessary for protection of their jobs and survival.



- “HR is not the employee’s ally—it is the company’s ally.”
- “Can brush it off...but if you use the right term—‘create hostile environment’ that can get the company in trouble”



The distrust of senior leaders and organizational mechanisms can discourage employees from reporting discrimination because complaints may lead to retaliation or reputational harm. So, participants shared that as a result of either their direct experiences or those of other colleagues, they developed protective strategies such as documenting interactions or avoiding formal complaints altogether.

- “If you say something you’re too sensitive.”
- “I had outstanding reviews...then someone tried to say there was an issue.”
- “You’re just doing your job and then you also have to go the extra mile and document everything.”
- “Without documents...your voice is nothing. It falls on the color of your skin.”
- “There was retaliation after I mentioned an issue.”

8. Resistance, Solidarity, and Calls for Structural Change

Despite challenges, participants also describe formidable agency, strategies of resistance and aspirations for organizational change. Participants' recommendations for ways to improve their workplace experiences—greater diversity in leadership, equitable pay, and recognition of skills—align with scholarly findings that structural interventions like transparent promotion criteria, bias and anti-racist training, and inclusive leadership practices are needed.



Diversity in Leadership Roles

Participants who identified as being in senior or leadership roles described using their position and power to “lift others up.” Despite exhaustion from navigating the aforementioned challenges, participants continued to mentor, advocate, build systems, and “bring others in.” For many, having women of color in leadership improved conditions, but did not automatically eliminate harm.

- “I was so used to being the “only,” so I learned how to navigate the system. Once I get in, I want to bring somebody else in. I’ve always had the comparison, ‘you’re not like the rest of them,’ and I’m like ‘oh, yes, I am.’”
- “More diversity...diversity in management.”
- “Feeling valued; knowing that your skill set is appreciated.”
- “Allow me to do my job and bring out my skill set.”
- “I’ve become more of the mindset, that Shirley Chisholm quote, ‘If there isn’t a seat at the table, then make your own.’”

Anti-Racist and Bias Training

- “Get people to address their own implicit bias.”
- “When a white person steps up to intervene during a microaggression or racist comment, I love nothing more.”
- “I’ve been doing this for about 20 years and the number one beneficiary in DEI, in the form our current administration likes to launch, is white females.”

Participants are correct, for every 100 men who are promoted, 93 women are promoted and only 74 women of color are promoted. While women remain underrepresented “at every stage of the corporate pipeline” the 2024, 10th annual Women in the Workplace Study estimated that it would take 48 years for women of color to achieve gender parity, whereas it would only 22 years for white women to reach it.⁵³

Shared Spaces / Affinity Groups

Participants expressed gratitude to the research team for bringing them together and allowing them to speak, noting that they appreciated hearing others with similar experiences—that they were not alone, and for brainstorming solutions together.

- “I just want to thank you for this”
- “This has been hard, but great”
- “Thank you for having this space for us. I didn’t know what to expect, but this has been refreshing to feel heard.”





RECOMMENDATIONS AND BEST PRACTICES

The ongoing, multi-phase collaboration between Erie County, Partners In Community Development (“PICD”), and the Cornell ILR Buffalo Co-Lab has revealed several uncomfortable truths about the status of women working in Erie County. Namely, relative to men, women in the regional labor force “simultaneously experience lower pay (after controlling for relevant factors) and greater barriers to success.”⁵⁴ And, as this report clearly documents, there exists a *concrete ceiling* that exacerbates this situation for Black and Brown women. Women of color are systematically more likely than their white counterparts to experience discriminatory and hostile work environments, but they lack adequate representation and institutional support to seek appropriate remedies.

Insofar as racial and gender inequalities are mainstay features of the American political economy,⁵⁵ it is indisputable that large-scale systems change is needed to produce more equitable outcomes. Big picture actions like restoring and protecting public-sector roles in education, healthcare, and care work — fields where Black women disproportionately contribute and lead — are critical, as are opportunities to strengthen labor law. Moreover, reinstating and strengthening newly abandoned Diversity Equity and Inclusion programs across federal agencies and corporations are important stopgaps for undoing the disparately impactful changes made through patterns of federal layoffs and program defunding.

That being said, systems level changes at the national or global scales of political organization are long-term collective projects that must extend well beyond the jurisdictional boundaries of a single county in New York State. As such, to pursue more immediate and near-term progress, this section focuses on organization-level reforms and recommendations that ought to have some utility for making initial cracks in Erie County’s concrete ceiling.

Organizations

Organizations must implement policies and procedures that foster an inclusive environment where all employees, but especially those who are often marginalized or subjected to inequitable treatment, are supported and empowered to thrive.

1. Treat diversity—by race and gender as a high organizational priority.

Organizations can increase transparency by tracking and publishing disaggregated data by race and gender for pay, promotions, leadership roles, and access to professional development. Using these resources, they can explicitly encourage Black women leadership. Compensate multilingual skills, cultural expertise, and community trust as core business assets, not “extra.”

2. Clear messaging and modeling from leadership.

Organizational leaders can explicitly name and foster diversity and inclusion, be held accountable for holding the standard and communicate that bias behaviors are not tolerated. Decades of organizational research show how pivotal a role that senior leaders play in operational and cultural change.⁵⁶



3. Increase Transparency and Pay Equity.

Clearly define job scopes, promotion criteria, and compensation bands. Regularly audit pay scales based on tenure and qualifications and couple them with corrective action. Organizations that implement pay transparency policies brought to light the gaps that existed in their compensation and were able to both adjust the inequities and make more equitable, unbiased decisions going forward.

4. Consistently use clear criteria for evaluation, hiring and promotions.

Assess current language and eliminate potentially vague criteria like “fit,” “tone,” or “professionalism” without clear standards where bias may play a role in evaluation. Organizations can institute protections for employees from retaliation if they raise concerns. Determine ways for employees to submit and be given credit for (potentially via evaluations) idea generation, systems-building, or other invisible labor like inclusivity efforts. Train all employees on intervention in bullying, intimidation, or abusive behavior. Provide training and opportunities for reflection on potential biases, particularly for employees engaged in hiring and promotion decisions. An additional note: Like people, AI models learn from historical information (which is wrought with bias), so they can also reproduce and exacerbate unfair patterns from the past.⁵⁷

5. *Strengthen Safe Reporting and Protections.*

Organizations must be held accountable to educating employees on their rights, policies, and escalation options. These reporting pathways must be made transparent and confidential to ensure retaliation does not happen.

Documentation of interactions should be normalized as a system responsibility and not just an individual survival tactic.

6. *Move Beyond Performative Diversity Equity and Inclusion to Offer Anti-Racist Training and Resources.*

Like the use of clear criteria, employees must be trained on Bias in feedback and discipline, working (and managing, for leaders) across differences. Trainings should acknowledge a long-term view for learning about racism acknowledging the residual effect of persistent racism in society.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, Diversity Equity and Inclusivity programs often promote the comfort of all persons as a desired goal, which prioritizes friendliness over engaging in crucial work around dismantling systemic racism.⁵⁹



6. *Offer Flexible Work Arrangements.*

Consider opportunities for flexible work which reduces both the need for “code switching” among Black workers and the instances of microaggressions and discrimination. Importantly, flexibility and remote work have been crucial for Black women who are disproportionately likely to be single parents,⁶⁰ meaning that their households tend to be more reliant on single wage earnings compared to white-headed households with children. Current research affirms participants’ claims that remote work can reduce Black women’s exposure to workplace microaggressions, identity shifting, and code-switching pressures, leading to improved psychological safety and well-being.^{61,62}

7. *Adopt union-friendly policies.*

Union membership yields a union premium yielding comparably higher wages, benefits and better retirement. Black women union members earn, on average, 12.6% more than their nonunion counterparts.⁶³

8. *Invest in Retention, not Just Recruitment.*

It is not just enough to “check the box,” of achieving a “diversity quota.” Pair recruitment with structured onboarding, mentorship and sponsorship, affinity spaces, and leadership pathways. Instead of utilizing historical or traditional pipelines, go where talent already exists or where people with diverse expertise gather including community organizations, HBCUs, HSIs, and professional networks.



CONCLUSION

While the findings and recommendations of this study are specific to Erie County, they are not singularly unique to the area. In fact, recent studies indicated that Black professionals reported the lowest cases of racial discrimination in the northeast (44%) compared to the south (56%), the west (56%), and the Midwest (79%)⁶⁴—suggesting that the concrete ceiling in other labor market regions could be even thicker than what we are observing in Western New York.

Absent structural or systems-level change, this report found that the burden of a collective social issue will continue to fall on individual women. For instance, many women spoke of having to be strategic rather than safe at work—documenting everything, moderating tone, code-switching, choosing when to speak up, and sometimes absorbing harm to preserve their jobs and thereby, their families’ stability. Some women could show up as themselves only after reaching seniority, union protection, entrepreneurship, or leaving traditional workplaces entirely, but the majority of participants described self-silencing or self-policing strategies leading to emotional stress.

Participants overwhelmingly felt that Diversity Equity and Inclusion efforts often failed to benefit Black women, particularly in leadership, recognition, or pay equity. Where women of color thrived, it was typically due to supportive individual leaders, unions, or self-created roles, not because systems were equitable by design.

Across all the focus groups, women of color were not asking for special treatment—they were asking for fairness, respect, and recognition. They are already leading, innovating, and holding systems together despite the concrete ceiling they regularly encounter. Thus, rather than using the current federal attack on DEI and related initiatives as a rallying cry to restore prior programs and funding stream that were never successful at bringing about racial and gender economic equality, the findings from this study suggest it is time to prefigure *new* policies and institutional arrangements that can leverage and scale up the adaptive strategies women of color have had to invent on their own to keep the concrete ceiling from crashing down on them.

NOTES

¹ The researchers acknowledge that their own racial identities may have, in some ways, impacted the responses of participants. All three authors as white or white-presenting middle-class researchers, acknowledge that our positionality affords us societal privileges and thus, we regularly engaged in checking any unintended potential biases. We are committed to responsibly and ethically centering the lived experiences of participants who shared their stories and perceptions.

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