



**Invisible Labor, Visible Struggles: The Intersections of Race, Gender, and Workplace  
Equity for Black Women in California  
By Dr. Sharon Uche & Kellie Todd Griffin**

**Executive Summary**

For far too long, Black women have been caught in the crosshairs of race and gender-based discrimination—not just in society, but in the very institutions that shape our economic futures. The workforce has been a site of intersecting oppressions, where systemic barriers limit opportunities, stifle advancement, and undermine the dignity of Black women in California and beyond.

To confront these challenges, the California Black Women’s Collective Empowerment Institute (CABWCEI) contracted EVITARUS, a leading public opinion research and strategic consulting firm, to document the lived realities of Black women in the workplace. In December 2024, EVITARUS surveyed 452 employed Black women in California, gathering critical insights into workplace experiences and job satisfaction.

The findings point to five key areas where transformation is both urgent and necessary.

1. Workplace discrimination is not just an inconvenience—it is a structural barrier that actively impedes Black women’s career advancement and access to job opportunities. Whether through biased hiring practices, unequal pay, or the lack of mentorship and sponsorship, these systemic barriers are designed to exclude and marginalize Black women, even as they work twice as hard to advance.
2. Stereotypes and microaggressions are not just everyday slights—they are forms of racialized and gendered violence that take a toll on Black women’s mental and physical health. The expectation to constantly navigate and counteract these biases creates a workplace culture that is exhausting, dehumanizing, and unsustainable for Black women striving for success.
3. The dynamics between Black women and white and Latino leadership in the workplace are complex—shaped by power, privilege, and historical patterns of exclusion. Too often, Black women find themselves in environments where leadership does not reflect their lived experiences, making it even harder to find the advocacy and support needed to thrive.
4. Building an equitable workplace is not a theoretical exercise—it is an urgent necessity. This means eliminating race and gender-based discrimination, ensuring that Black women have access to leadership roles, and dismantling the structures that have long worked to suppress their voices and ambitions. Equity cannot be a buzzword—it must be a deliberate and sustained commitment to justice.
5. Societal beauty standards impose unrealistic and exclusionary norms that force Black women to conform to definitions of professionalism rooted in anti-blackness. This not only

erodes their mental and social well-being but also enacts economic violence by demanding assimilation at the cost of their authenticity and career advancement.

The findings of this study underscore an undeniable truth: Black women in California are navigating a workforce that was never designed with them in mind. The intersecting forces of racism and sexism shape their experiences in ways that demand urgent and targeted interventions.

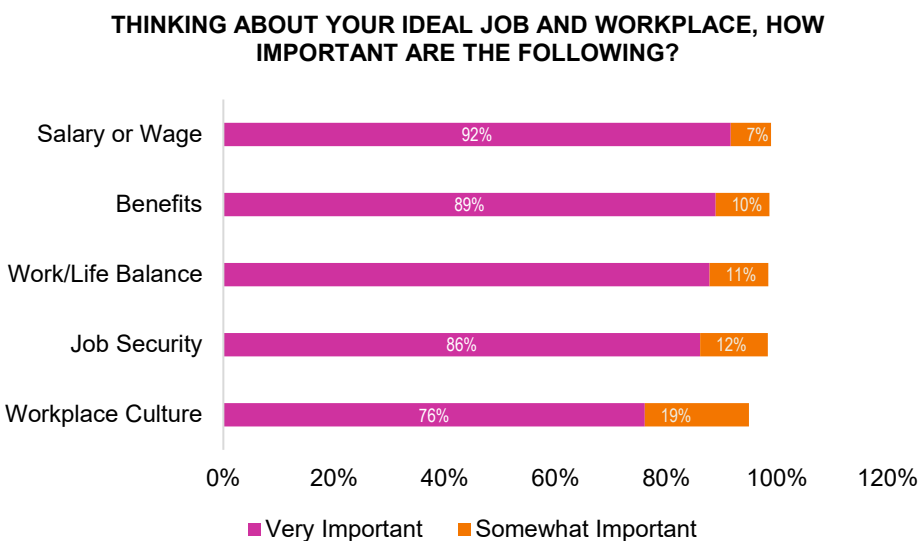
This research is not just about data—it is a blueprint for action. The policy recommendations presented here provide policymakers, community leaders, and key stakeholders with a strategic framework to dismantle workplace inequities and improve the quality of Black women’s work experiences. But let’s be clear: policies alone are not enough. Without an intersectional approach—one that recognizes the layered realities of Black women—efforts to address workplace discrimination will continue to fall short.

This moment calls for more than just acknowledgment; it demands strategic, systemic action. The challenge before us is not simply to create opportunities but to deconstruct the barriers that have long excluded Black women from economic security and career advancement. If we are truly committed to justice, we must move beyond performative gestures and commit to real, transformative change—where Black women are not only seen but centered in the fight for workplace equity.

### State of the Workplace

The current state of the workplace for Black women in California is informed by several factors that deal with systematic racism, the economy, and psychological wellbeing. The aspects of the workplace that emerge as most important among Black women in California include salary and benefits, being able to maintain work-life balance, and job security (**FIGURE 1**).

Figure 1. Workplace Priorities for Black Women in California

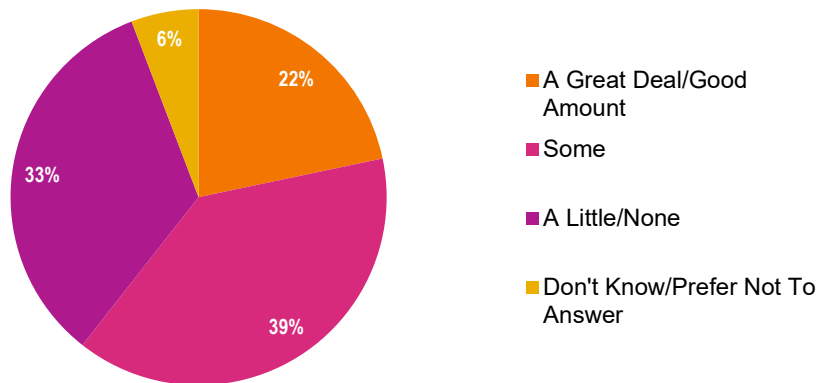


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Although this is the case, few Black women believe that achieving this is a reality in California. Our research showed that only few Black women (21%) believe that there is a good or great opportunity for Black women to get ahead in the workplace in California (**FIGURE 2**). Some socioeconomic barriers that play a role in negatively impacting opportunities in California overall include the impacts of structural racism like housing segregation, educational attainment, the underfunding of public schools, and mass incarceration<sup>1</sup>. These factors also contribute to low job security, increased wage gaps, and limited opportunities to enter the workforce.

Figure 2. Career Advancement Opportunities for Black Women in California

**IN YOUR OPINION, HOW MUCH OPPORTUNITY IS THERE IN CALIFORNIA TODAY FOR BLACK WOMEN TO GET AHEAD?**



**Racism and Discrimination**

Black women face several challenges in achieving an equitable workplace due to the impact of racism and discrimination. According to the government, workplace discrimination happens when an employer treats an applicant or current employee unfairly due to their race, sex, color, ethnicity, religion, ability, or age<sup>2</sup>. Overall, three-fifths of the Black women in California surveyed experienced racism or discrimination in the past 12 months (**FIGURE 3**). The surveyed audience identified that they experienced racial discrimination related to being at work (57%) and the job search and hiring process (38%), making work-related discrimination a common occurrence for the surveyed audience. Black women face the most racial discrimination in the workplace at the hands of someone who is white (46%), followed by someone with a Latino background (33%) at work (**FIGURE 4**).

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Figure 3. Experienced Workplace Racism and Discrimination for Black Women in California

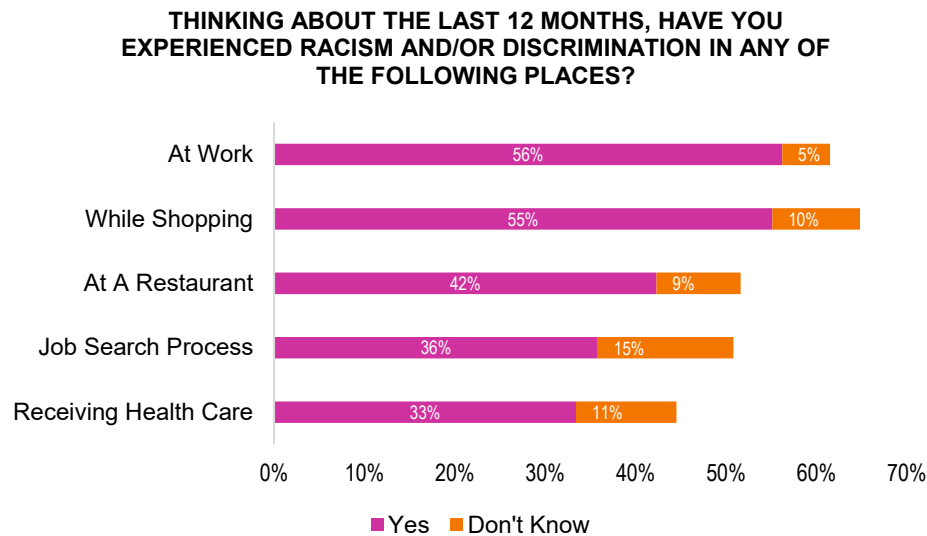
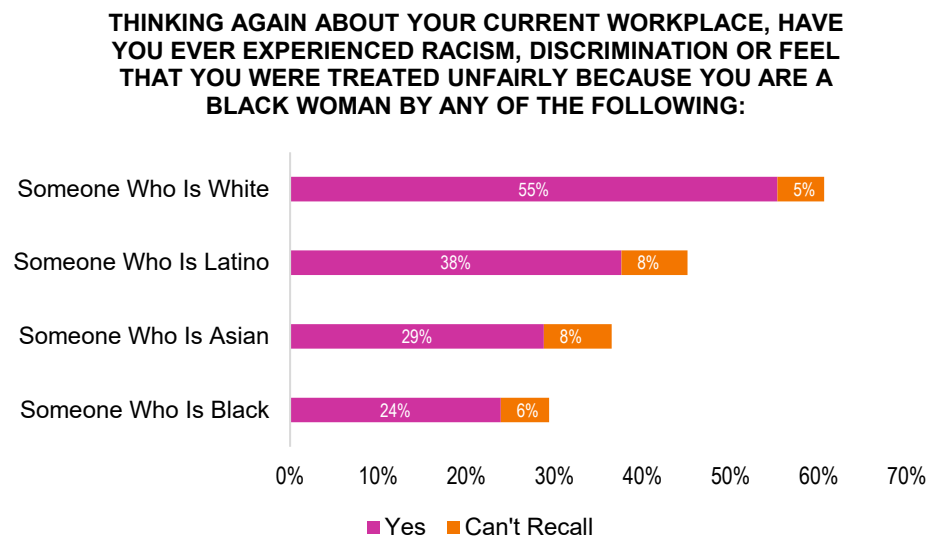


Figure 4. Experienced Workplace Racism and Discrimination by Race

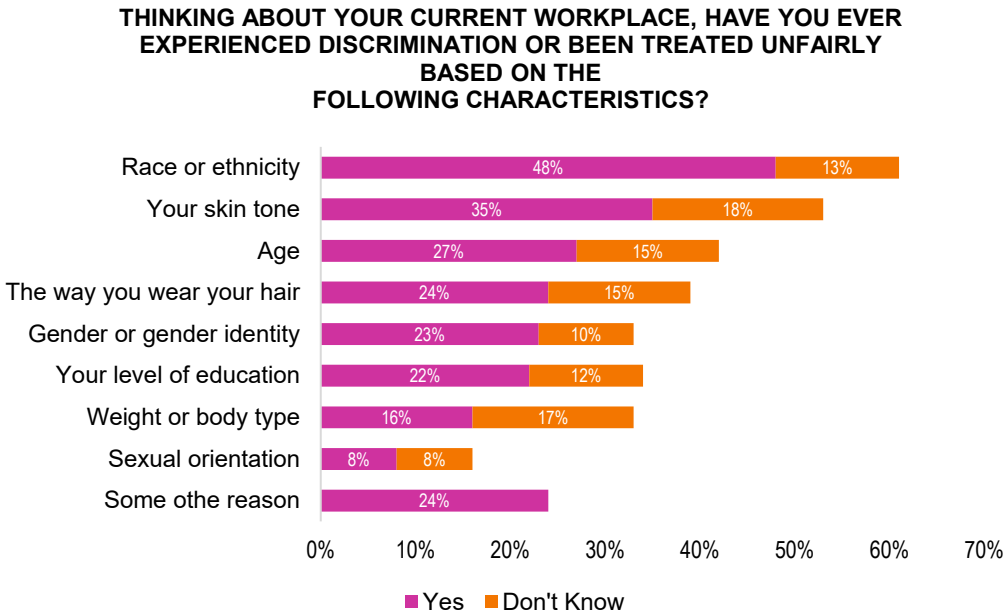


Almost half of the audience also shared that they’ve experienced discrimination or have been treated unfairly due to their race, ethnicity or skin color (**FIGURE 5**). Respondents shared feedback that speaks to discrimination that they have faced in the workplace.

For example, a frontline staff in the non-profit/philanthropic sector in Los Angeles County shared, “I’m the only African American in my department. I’m held to a different standard than may coworkers who share the same ethnicity as my supervisor.”

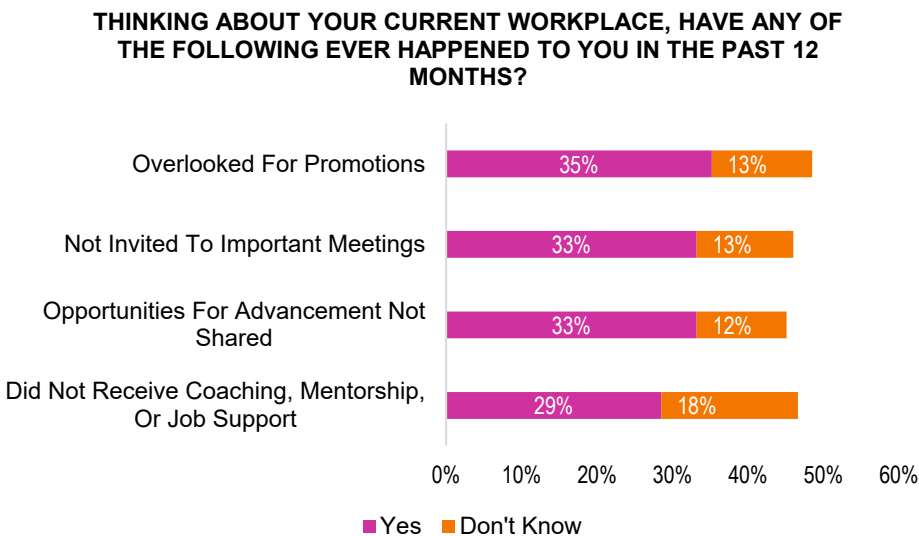
Another frontline staff in the public sector in the San Francisco-Bay Area shared, “As a dark skin woman, I noticed women that are lighter are given passes and darker women are treated harsher in similar situations.”

Figure 5. Discrimination Based on Characteristics



Race based mistreatment also has shown up in the form of being looked over for job promotions or advancement (35%), opportunities for advancement not being shared (33%), and not being invited to meetings (32%). (FIGURE 6). Workplace discrimination has been seen to hinder career growth, be harmful to mental health, and lower job/life satisfaction.

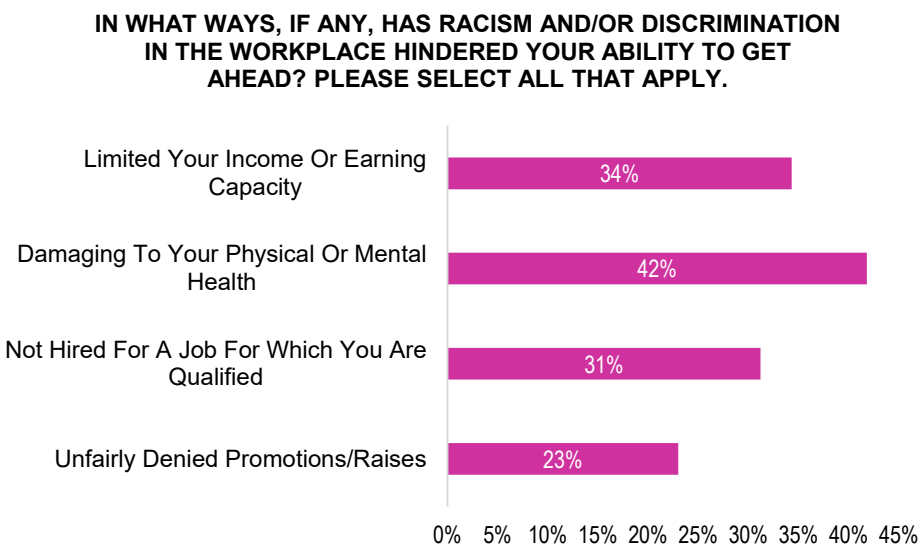
Figure 6. Discrimination in the Workplace (Past 12 Months)



Discrimination in the workplace also shows up in the form of microaggressions, with 67% of the Black women surveyed having a personal experience or witnessing it happen in the workplace. Microaggressions refer to indirect, discreet or subtle everyday occurrences of racism or marginalization regardless of intention. The top ways that this has been seen to have an adverse

impact is through damages to physical and mental health (42%) and unfairly denied raises and limiting earning potential (34%). (**FIGURE 7**).

Figure 7. Workplace Racism/Discrimination Faced to Advance

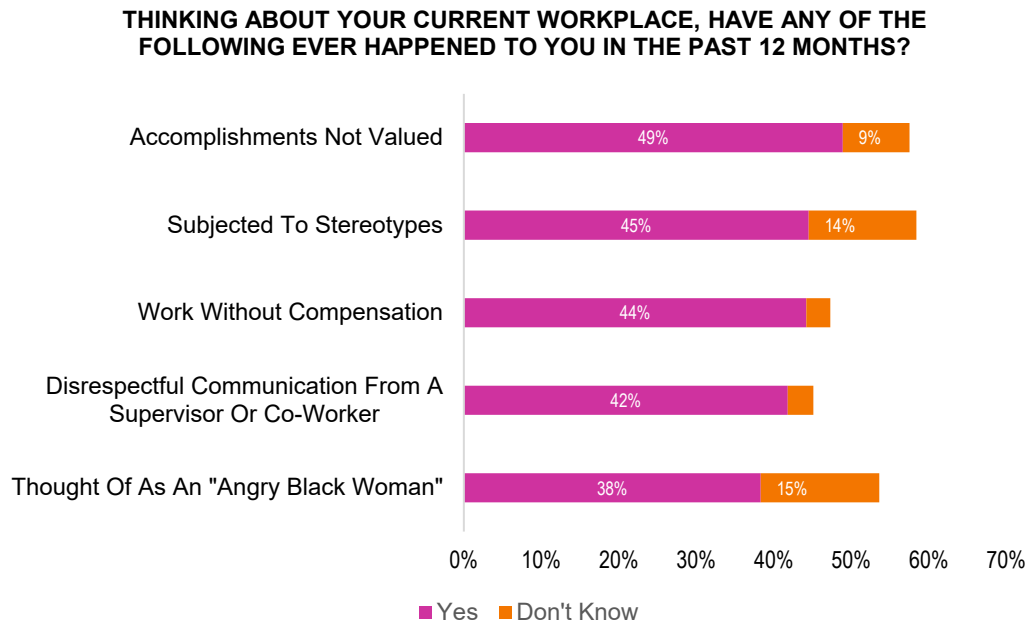


### **Mental and Physical Impact**

Workplace discrimination leaves a harmful mental and physical impact on Black women in California. Nearly half of the Black women surveyed (48%) feel their accomplishments are undervalued in the workplace. They also report being subjected to stereotypes (44%) and not being fairly compensated for additional responsibilities (44%) (**FIGURE 8**). Actions like these can have negative repercussions on self-worth, self-efficacy and overall mental wellness. Some stigmas mentioned speak to the “angry Black woman” trope. This is harmful to Black women due to the impact that it has on self-esteem, expression, and self-worth. These factors all contribute to the sentiment that Black women must tiptoe around the C-suite to avoid bias in the workplace and better their chance for career advancement and growth.

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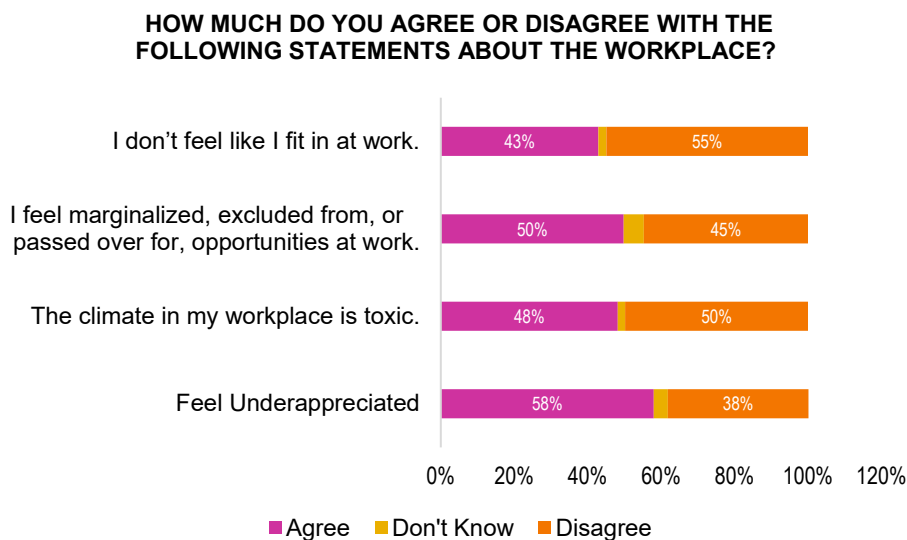
Figure 8. Discrimination in the Workplace (Past 12 Months) Continued



\*Figures under 5% are not displayed

Further speaking to the mental health impact that this has on Black women, 57% feel underappreciated at work and 49% feel marginalized, excluded from, or passed over for, opportunities (**FIGURE 9**). These sentiments play a factor in contributing to a workplace that is unsafe and not equitable for Black women in California. For example, survey data reveals that 40% of Black women do not feel a sense of belonging at work, with 39% disagreeing with feeling empowered in the workplace.

Figure 9. Psychological Impacts of Discrimination in the Workplace

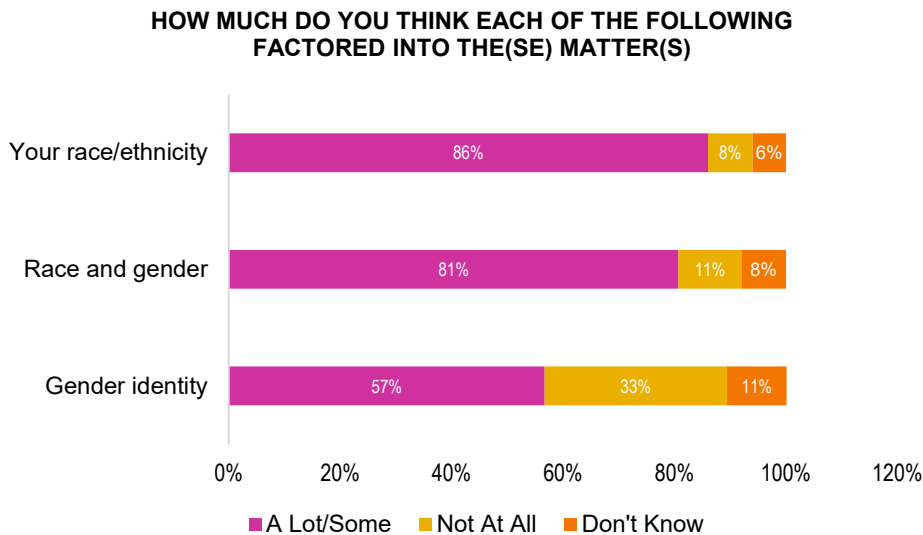


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### Relationships with Leadership and Colleagues

The data from the surveyed Black women in California speaks to the complexity of the relationship between leadership and their colleagues. Our data revealed that one third of Black women have been asked to meet with management regarding negative comments made about them by a co-worker - with 78% of the comments proving to be unjustified. Sixty-four percent of the comments were concerning race, with more than half of the comments being about both gender and race. **(FIGURE 10)**. Relatedly, research from Harvard University shows that Black women in the workplace were the only group that their racial identity had a significant impact on turnover and promotions <sup>3</sup>.

Figure 10. Race-Based Comments in the Workplace



Close to one third of those surveyed (32%) have had a negative comment by management - with 81% of the comments being found unjustified. This trend was most pronounced among Black women working in the healthcare and medical space and Black women who have a Latino supervisor. This speaks to data that revealed nearly half of Black women have been unfairly judged by their boss or supervisor, with nearly half of the surveyed audience expressing they've been judged unfairly **(FIGURE 11)**. This is also more common in Sacramento and lower Southern Californian regions and Black women in the government and healthcare sectors **(FIGURE 12)**. Federal data from 2020 shows that nearly 12% of Black women worked for the federal government, with 3% resigning - higher civilian governmentwide average <sup>4</sup>.

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Figure 11. Sentiments of Fair Judgement from Supervisors or Bosses

**THINKING ABOUT YOUR CURRENT WORKPLACE, HAVE YOU EVER BEEN JUDGED UNFAIRLY BY YOUR SUPERVISOR OR BOSS?**

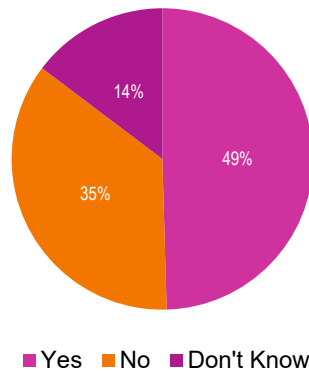
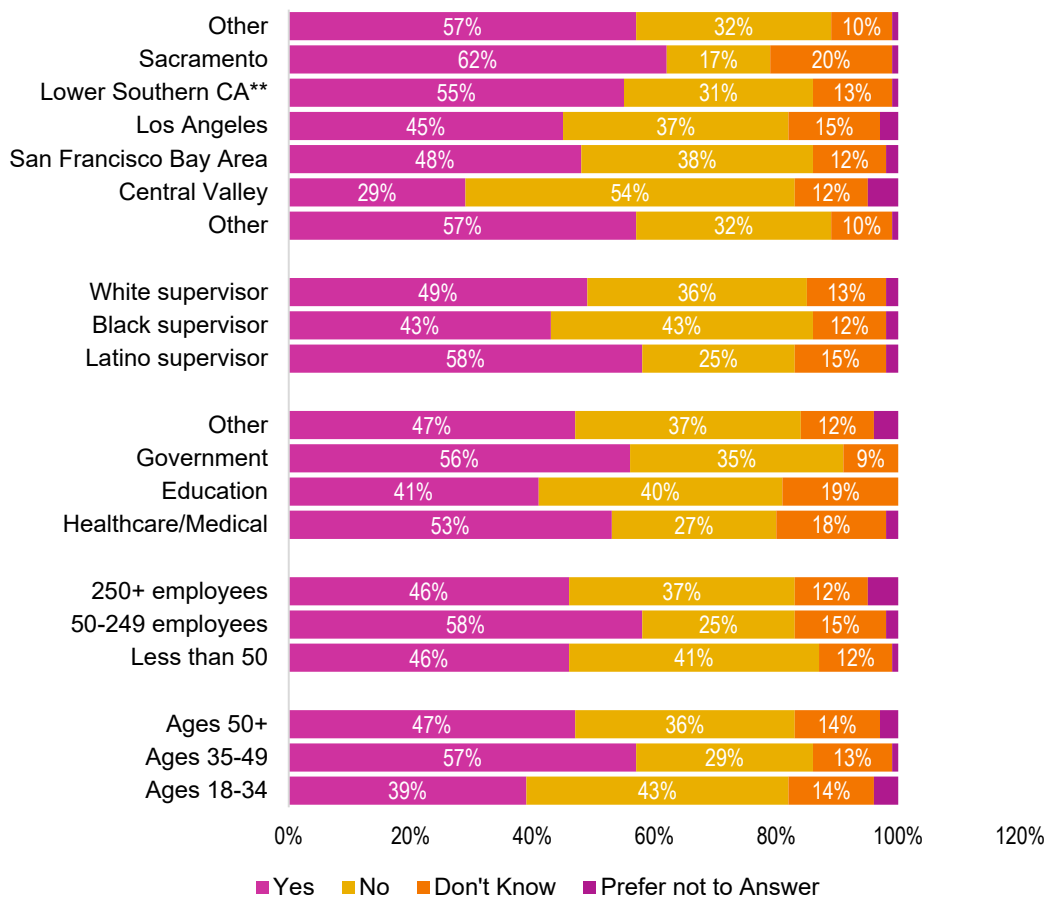


Figure 12. Unfair Judgement from Supervisors by Company Size, Region, Age Industry, and Race

**THINKING ABOUT YOUR CURRENT WORKPLACE, HAVE YOU EVER BEEN JUDGED UNFAIRLY BY YOUR SUPERVISOR OR BOSS?**

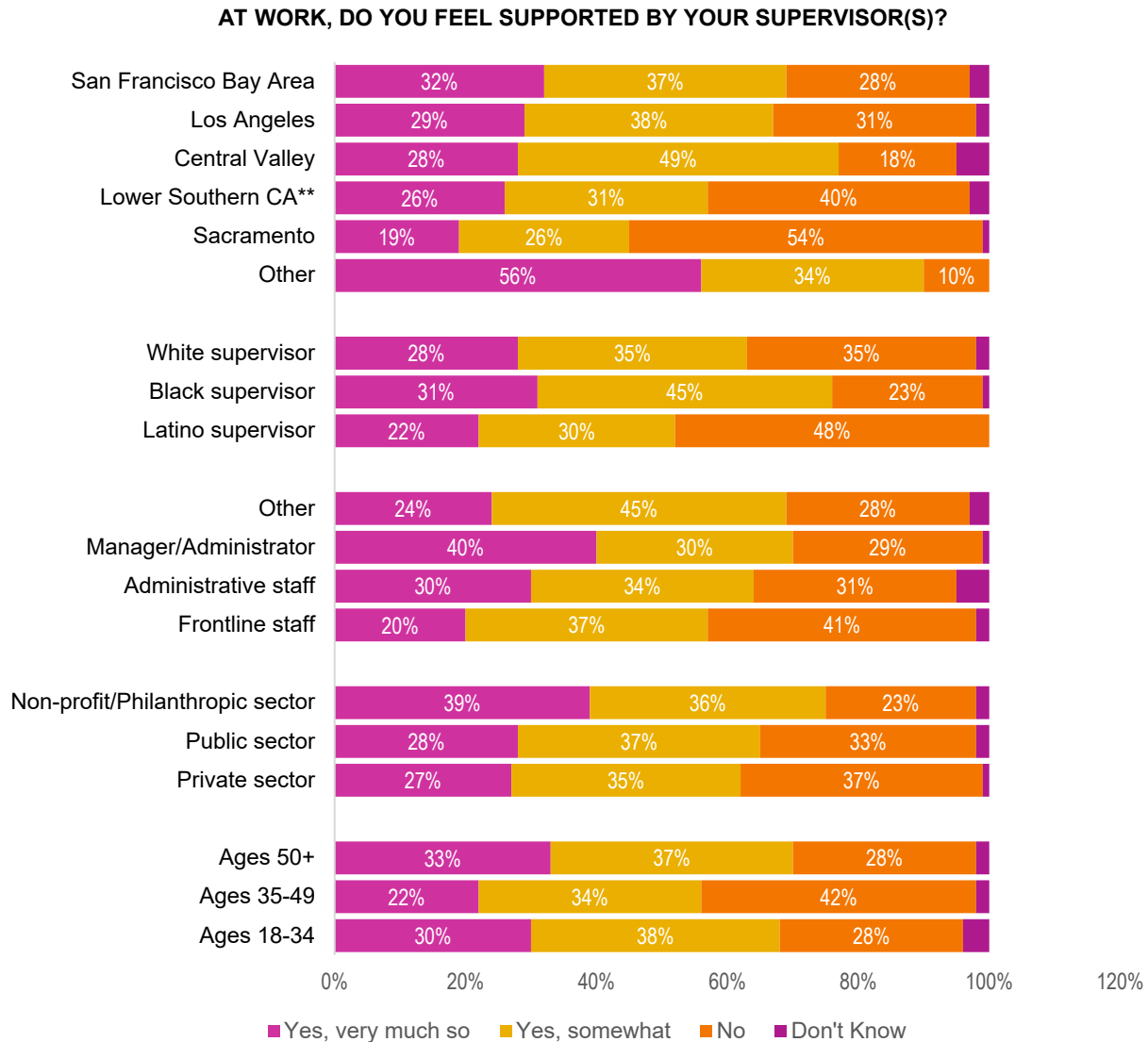


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### Connecting with Marginalized Leaders

The relationship between Black women and leadership proves to be a bit more complex when breaking down this statistic looking at different age groups and ethnicity of the supervisor. Of all participants, women ages 35-49 feel the least supported by their supervisor (**FIGURE 13**). Additionally, Black women with supervisors with a Latino background also show to feel the least supported by their manager. This trend is also mirrored among frontline workers in California that identify as Black women (**FIGURE 13**).

Figure 13. Support from Supervisors by Age, Region, Industry, Role, and Race



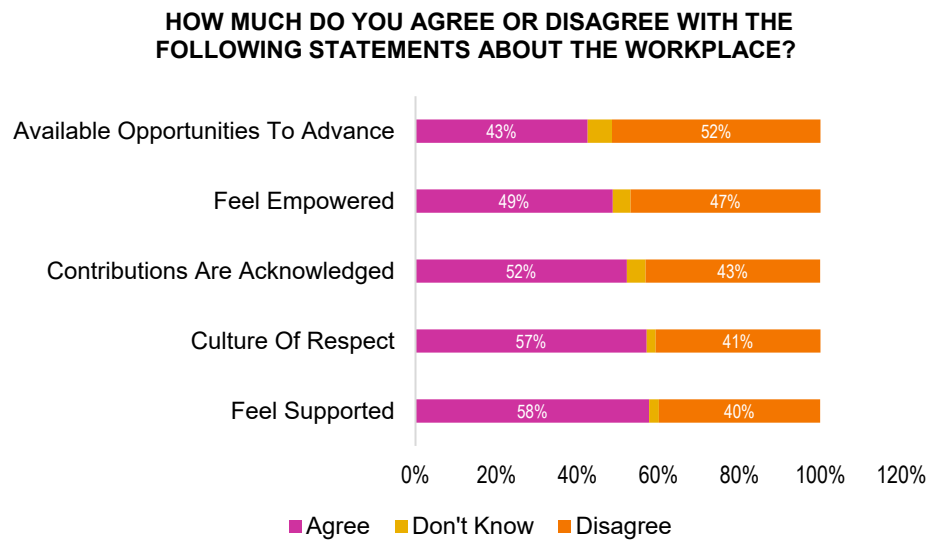
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### Room for Advancement Opportunities

Half of the Black women surveyed in California do not feel like opportunities for leadership and advancement are not accessible to them at the workplace, standing in conjunction with previously shared data revealing that Black women also feel like there is limited opportunities in the state

**(FIGURE 14).** Nearly half of the audience (42%) also do not feel like their contributions are acknowledged more than others.

Figure 14. Barriers to Leadership and Advancement



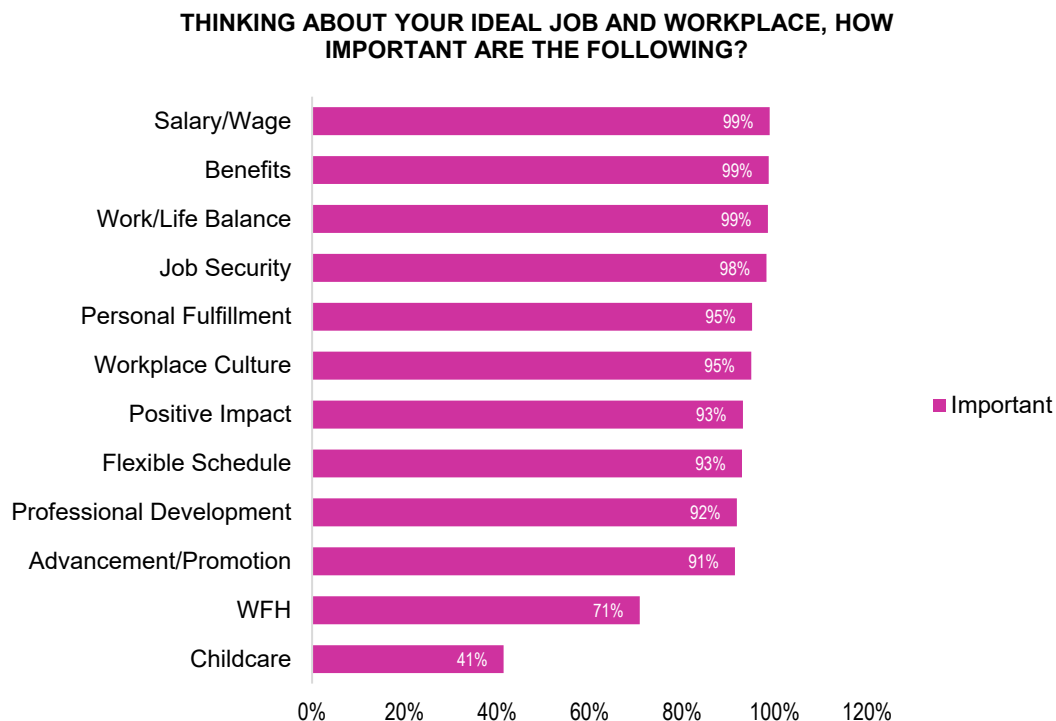
These numbers speak to a larger issue that highlights a barrier for Black women reaching positions at the senior level and C-suite, also impacting their upward mobility and socioeconomic standing. Research has shown that there are negative outcomes associated with lack of upward mobility, including toxic stress <sup>5</sup> and increased mortality rates <sup>6</sup>.

### Creating the Ideal Workplace

Cultivating a workplace that is both just and equal for Black women in California is necessary to address the harmful and negative impacts that result from workplace discrimination. Top priorities when considering how to build a just and equitable workspace for Black women includes salary and benefits (92%), being able to maintain work-life balance (87%), and job security (85%) **(FIGURE 15)**. Other priorities that much of the surveyed audience prioritizes range from childcare (41%) and the ability to have a positive impact on the community (93%).

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Figure 15. Priorities for Black Women in the Workplace



Recent data reveals that Black women wages on average are lower than white and Asian men and women, this is exacerbated for Black single mothers <sup>7</sup>. Considering 67% of Black households are led by Black single mothers, this creates a much larger financial burden that ultimately hinders economic stability for Black women and their families <sup>8</sup>.

Notably, our research also pointed to Black women expressing the desire to make a positive impact on their community overall. This speaks to two key motivators for Black women in the workplace: providing for their families and personal fulfillment. Responses from Black women in California discuss the enrichment that comes from working with sensitive populations and the lives they could change through their work.

### **Legislative Policy Recommendations for Advancing Workplace Equity for Black Women**

As we continue the fight for economic justice and workplace equity, we must take bold legislative action to dismantle systemic barriers that have historically excluded Black women from fair wages, career advancement, and safe, inclusive work environments. The following legislative policies are designed to expand protections, enforce accountability, and create new opportunities for Black women in the workforce.

#### **1. Strengthening Wage Equity & Economic Security**

- **Black Women’s Pay Equity Act** – Require annual pay audits disaggregated by race, gender, and job classification for companies with 50 or more employees, with penalties for wage disparities not addressed within two years.

- **Salary Transparency Expansion** – Lower the pay range disclosure threshold to companies with five or more employees and mandate internal salary bands to prevent discriminatory pay practices.
  - **Black Women’s Economic Mobility Fund** – Establish a state-funded grant program to support Black women entrepreneurs, business owners, and cooperative enterprises, prioritizing industries where Black women face the greatest barriers.
2. **Eliminating Workplace Discrimination & Harassment**
- **CROWN Act Expansion & Enforcement** – Extend the CROWN Act by requiring all California-based companies with over 25 employees to incorporate anti-hair discrimination policies into their legally mandated gender and racial discrimination training.
  - **Zero-Tolerance Workplace Harassment Act** – Strengthen protections against race and gender-based harassment, including third-party accountability mechanisms, automatic civil penalties for repeat offenders, and whistleblower protections for Black women reporting discrimination.
  - **Restorative Workplace Justice Initiative** – Mandate state-funded workplace mediation programs that offer Black women access to legal support, career recovery resources, and trauma-informed dispute resolution when workplace discrimination occurs.
3. **Expanding Leadership & Career Advancement Opportunities**
- **Black Women’s Leadership Pipeline Act** – Require all state-funded and state-contracted companies to report on the representation of Black women in executive and senior leadership roles, with incentives for companies that implement mentorship and leadership development programs for Black women.
  - **State-Funded Childcare for Black Women** – Establish childcare stipends for Black women professionals, entrepreneurs, and leaders to reduce barriers to executive advancement.
4. **Workplace Protections & Benefits**
- **Reproductive & Family Health Workplace Equity Act** – Strengthen workplace protections for Black mothers by mandating paid family leave expansion, workplace accommodations for lactation and reproductive health needs, and protections against pregnancy-related discrimination.
  - **Mental Health & Wellness in the Workplace Act** – Require all employers with 25+ employees to provide free and culturally competent mental health services as part of employee benefits packages, ensuring access to Black therapists and wellness resources.
  - **Workplace Safety for Black Women Act** – Expand OSHA protections to specifically address gendered racial violence in the workplace, including workplace retaliation protections for Black women reporting harassment and discrimination.
5. **Government Oversight & Accountability**
- **Statewide Office for Black Women’s Workplace Equity** – Establish a dedicated office within the Department of Fair Employment and Housing to monitor workplace disparities, enforce pay transparency laws, and oversee diversity and inclusion compliance for California employers.
  - **Workplace Equity Scorecard** – Mandate annual public reporting of workplace hiring, promotion, retention, and salary data for all publicly traded and state-funded companies, ranking them on their commitment to racial and gender equity.

- **Economic Justice for Black Women Task Force** – Create a state-led task force to study long-term economic disparities Black women face and recommend policy actions on pay equity, employment discrimination, and wealth-building initiatives.

## 6. **Anti-discrimination and Accountability**

- **The Workplace Anti-Discrimination Accountability Act** –strengthen enforcement mechanisms for workplace discrimination claims by establishing independent third-party review panels for racial and gender discrimination complaints, rather than allowing internal HR departments to handle cases. The policy would also increase penalties for repeated offenses, require mandatory racial bias audits, and implement anti-retaliation protections to ensure Black women can report discrimination without fear of professional repercussions.

Black women should not have to work twice as hard to get half as far—the time for bold, intersectional policies that center their economic security, workplace dignity, and leadership opportunities is long overdue. These legislative measures go beyond symbolic gestures and performative DEI efforts—they demand real enforcement, transparency, and systemic change. If we are truly committed to justice, then we must be just as relentless in passing policies that empower Black women as we are in calling out the inequities they face. California has led the nation before, and we must do it again—because when Black women thrive, we all thrive.

## **Non-Legislative Policy Recommendations for Advancing Workplace Equity for Black Women**

Addressing the structural barriers that Black women face in the workforce requires more than legislative action—it demands institutional accountability, cultural transformation, and targeted interventions that directly confront the intersection of race and gender in professional spaces. Below are key non-legislative policy recommendations that organizations, community leaders, and advocates can implement to create a more equitable and inclusive workplace for Black women.

### **1. Institutional Accountability & Workplace Standards**

- **Mandate Pay Transparency Audits** – Employers should publicly report wage data disaggregated by race and gender to identify and close wage gaps affecting Black women.
- **Strengthen Bias Training Beyond Performative DEI** – Move beyond surface-level diversity training by integrating anti-racism and intersectional gender analysis into corporate leadership development.
- **Hold Leadership Accountable for Inclusion Metrics** – Performance evaluations for executives and managers should include measurable progress on racial and gender equity in hiring, retention, and promotions.
- **Develop Black Women-Centered Leadership Pipelines** – Organizations should invest in mentorship and sponsorship programs that intentionally prepare Black women for executive roles.

## **2. Workplace Culture & Structural Change**

- Invest in Black Women’s Workforce Development and Training Programs - Investing in workforce development and training programs, like CABWCEI’s Black Women’s Leadership Development Certificate Program and Black Women’s Workers Initiative, is essential to creating equitable opportunities for career advancement by providing the skills and resources needed to break down existing barriers in industries and leadership roles.
- Redefine Professionalism to End Hair and Beauty Biases – Employers must challenge outdated norms that discriminate against natural hair, protective styles, and cultural expression, ensuring compliance with CROWN Act principles beyond legal mandates.
- Implement Restorative Justice Approaches to Workplace Harassment – Establish third-party accountability mechanisms to address workplace discrimination and microaggressions, ensuring Black women are not penalized for speaking out.
- Normalize Flexible & Culturally Competent Work Environments – Employers should accommodate family care responsibilities, community engagement, and mental health needs that disproportionately impact Black women.

## **3. Economic Empowerment & Community Investment**

- Prioritize Procurement & Contracts with Black Women-Owned Businesses – Corporations and government entities should commit a percentage of supplier diversity contracts to Black women entrepreneurs.
- Support Worker Cooperatives & Alternative Economic Models – Investing in Black women-led cooperatives and community-driven business models can help shift economic power.
- Fund Black Women’s Professional Networks & Affinity Groups – Organizations should financially support Black women’s collectives that foster career advancement, mental well-being, and advocacy.

## **4. Data, Research & Public Accountability**

- Require Intersectional Workforce Data Collection – Employers, research institutions, and government agencies should collect and analyze employment data that captures the unique challenges Black women face at the intersection of race, gender, and industry.
- Create Public Scorecards on Workplace Equity – Develop public-facing accountability tools that assess and rank employers on their commitment to racial and gender equity in hiring, wages, promotions, and workplace culture.
- Amplify Black Women’s Voices in Policy & Decision-Making Spaces – Organizations should actively seek input from Black women employees, scholars, and community leaders to shape workplace policies that reflect their lived experiences.

## 7. Anti-discrimination and Accountability

- **Black Women’s Workplace Equity Certification** – A voluntary employer certification program that evaluates companies on their hiring, pay equity, promotion, workplace culture, and leadership representation of Black women.

Workplace equity cannot be achieved through compliance alone—it requires a radical shift in how organizations define leadership, professionalism, and economic inclusion. Non-legislative policies offer immediate and impactful ways to address the barriers that Black women face, ensuring that they are not only included but centered in the fight for workplace justice. The time for incremental change has passed; what’s needed now is bold, intersectional action that transforms workplaces into spaces where Black women thrive, lead, and redefine success on their own terms.

### Conclusion

Black women in California are facing a workplace crisis shaped by the intersecting forces of race and gender-based discrimination—a crisis that is not just about lost opportunities but about the deep, systemic violence inflicted on their mental, physical, and economic well-being. These conditions are not incidental; they are the result of structural barriers designed to uphold exclusion and inequity, reinforcing the very patterns of systemic racism that have long marginalized Black women in the labor market.

If we are serious about re-imagining a workplace that prioritizes equity and justice, we must do more than tweak policies at the margins—we must interrogate the systems that sustain these disparities and take bold, strategic action to dismantle them. Equity is not an abstract ideal; it is a commitment to structural transformation, one that requires us to rethink who is centered in workplace policies, who is included in leadership, and who is truly empowered to thrive.

### About California Black Women’s Collective Empowerment Institute (CABWCEI)

*[California Black Women’s Collective Empowerment Institute](https://www.cablackwomenscollective.org) is dedicated to uplifting Black women and girls by fostering strategic partnerships, amplifying voices, and driving systemic change to eliminate barriers and advance social and economic equity across California. As the anchor organization for the California Black Women’s Think Tank at CSU Dominguez Hills, CABWCEI work is centered on data, policy change and practice transformation that advocate to secure the social and economic safety nets for Black women and girls throughout the state. For more information about CABWEI or to review all the data, go to [www.cablackwomenscollective.org](https://www.cablackwomenscollective.org).*