How Racism Shows Up at Work and the Antiracist Actions Your Organization Can Take

Joy Ohm, Sheila Brassel, PhD, Britney Jacobs, MSFPsy, Emily Shaffer, PhD

CATALYST
WORKPLACES THAT WORK FOR WOMEN

"

I was working in a call centre and I got called a terrorist because of my scarf.

—British Bangladeshi woman, UK

"

I was up for promotion and they chose an inexperienced White male.

—Mexican and African-American man, US

"

A customer kept pushing to ask where I am REALLY from saying Canada is not my home.

—Chinese woman, Canada

"

Every time I call in sick, people assume I've been drinking because I'm Black.

—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander man, Australia

"

Other employees did not want to team up with me.

—Black woman, South Africa

"

The bullies boss me around and talk to me as if I am stupid and don't understand English.

—Filipino woman, New Zealand

Catalyst surveyed over 5,000 employees from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Two-thirds of these employees reported experiencing racism during their career, and half have experienced racism in their current job. These employees told us about all the insidious ways they experience racism at work, which can come from any and every direction—from superiors, colleagues, and customers; from women and men; from White people and people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups. It can take the form of being passed over for a promotion, being paid less, and being excluded from advancement opportunities. Racism at work also means being targeted with slurs and stereotypes, as well as derisive comments about physical features, dress, and food.

To understand racism at work, it is crucial to recognize that it is deeply embedded into organizational systems and structures. Therefore, combatting it means focusing on both the behavior of individuals who do and say racist things and the systems and structures that enable and even encourage the behavior in the first place.

In this report, we shine a spotlight on a key overarching structure that drives racism at work: White defaults[1]—or the underlying assumption that what employees should look and sound like, how people should carry themselves and interact with others, and whose skills are worthy and whose are not should follow historical White standards and habits. When people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups don't conform to these defaults—and often they literally, physically, can't—some people respond by carrying out racist acts to reinforce White cultural ideals.

Antiracist organizations and leaders must examine how White defaults—with racism as their cudgel—manifest in their organizations. With White defaults systemically embedded in policies, practices, and norms, leaders must take action to make a meaningful difference.
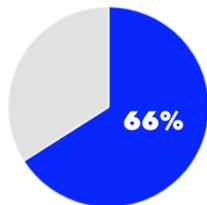
The Racist Roots of White Defaults

White defaults are derived from White supremacy. White supremacy is the belief that White people are inherently superior to people of other races, and thus, characteristics associated with Whiteness are not only revered and accepted as the norm, but also held as the defaults or standards for human appearance and behavior.

White supremacy is originally based on pseudo-scientific theories of intelligence, morality, and biology that were used to rationalize European imperialism, the colonization of "newly discovered" lands, and the violent displacement, domination, and enslavement of people in those lands.[2] While who is considered "White" has changed over the years,[3] what has not changed is the idea that White values are the standards to which everyone should aspire, and other values are fundamentally less than. Importantly, White values are entwined with masculine, Christian, straight, profit-oriented values, reflecting the identities of the people who generated them.[4]
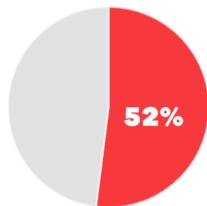
White supremacy is often associated with extremists such as the Ku Klux Klan, Nazis, and neo-Nazis who explicitly endorse violence against people who are not White, but its ideals are implicitly baked into White-dominant societies through systems of government, law and justice, education, housing, banking, health, and the workplace.[5] Because of this, White supremacist ideals can feel invisible since they are simply how society works; by the same token, these ideals are upheld not just by White people, but also by the very people who are marginalized by those ideals.[6]

We recognize that direct acknowledgement of the nature of racism and White supremacy can be uncomfortable for White people.[7] In this report, we are in no way conflating White supremacy with individual White people, or saying that all White people are racist—the data don't support such claims. Rather, we are shining a light on the realities of racism at work, and the ways in which it is intertwined with White defaults and White supremacy so that leaders, colleagues, and customers can work to eradicate it in its many forms.

Key Findings

66%

Two-thirds of employees from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States have **experienced racism at work during their career.**

52%

Half have experienced racism in their current job.
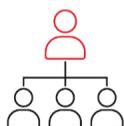
Among these employees:

Close to half described **workplace harassment** such as racist jokes, slurs, and other derogatory comments.

Workplace Harassment	48%

Nearly one third described **employment and professional inequities** such as pay gaps, being passed over for promotion, or being assigned more or less work than their colleagues.

Employment & Professional Inequities	32%

Racism also showed up in remarks about respondents' physical attributes and culture, and in racial stereotypes; many of these also embodied sexist, xenophobic, anti-Black, anti-Muslim, and other prejudiced views.

Leaders are the **most common instigators of racism**, but co-workers, customers, and clients engage in racist acts, too.

Women and men are equally likely to be instigators of racism.

Four out of five acts of racism are instigated by White people, and one out of five are instigated by another person from a marginalized racial or ethnic group.

Organizations can take action by:

Challenging the culture of White defaults at work.

Implementing systems to eliminate bias from hiring, development, and promotion processes.

Training managers to notice and take action when employees experience racism from teammates, customers, and other managers.

Because we gave survey respondents an open-ended prompt to describe the racism they've experienced in their current job, they were free to describe what happened in as much or little detail as they wanted. Quantifying the themes they raised in their stories allows us to identify salient patterns and corresponding strategies for action. But we must keep in mind that this technique does not provide a comprehensive snapshot of racism in the workplace since the amount and type of information in each respondent's story varied (e.g., some respondents described the instigators of racism, while others did not).

Whiteness Is the Norm at Work

Research shows that Whiteness is at the center of work contexts. It is used as a lens through which employees, organizational policies, and business strategies are judged, assessed, and valued. Looking at the workplace through this lens results in a "White gaze" which "distorts perceptions of people who deviate from Whiteness, subjecting them to bodily scrutiny and control."[8] This can result in, for example, dress codes that don't work for natural Black hair or performance assessment criteria that value White modes of leadership over others.[9] The White gaze at work is inherently othering and devalues the cultures, bodies, expertise, and ideas—the humanity—of people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups.

Other scholarship has explored the ways in which Whiteness becomes embedded in workplace culture, revealing that certain characteristics are venerated as guiding principles for how work is done.[10] Some of the characteristics probed include: either/or thinking; belief in a singular "one right way" of working; power hoarding; individualism; paternalism; perfectionism; and a right to comfort. While these characteristics may benefit some people (in part because they have never known anything different), they also harm people of all races and ethnicities by demanding conformity to a restricted range of human behavior that is heralded as the "right" way of being or working.

For many people, including people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups, White defaults and the White gaze are invisible—they are just the way things are. This speaks to how deeply entwined they are with societal and workplace systems.[11] But our research brings these norms into the open, demonstrating how Whiteness asserts itself through racism at work and making plain the daily impact White defaults and the White gaze have on employees from marginalized racial and ethnic groups.
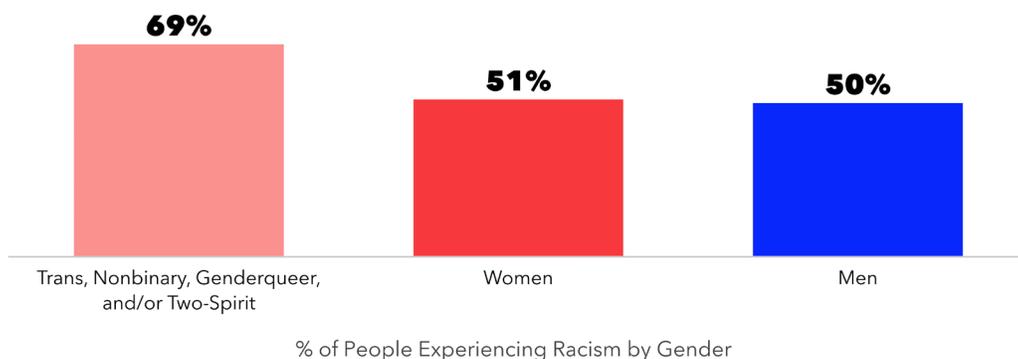
Racism Is a Common Experience

Two-thirds of employees from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States have experienced racism at work during their career, and half have experienced racism in their current job.

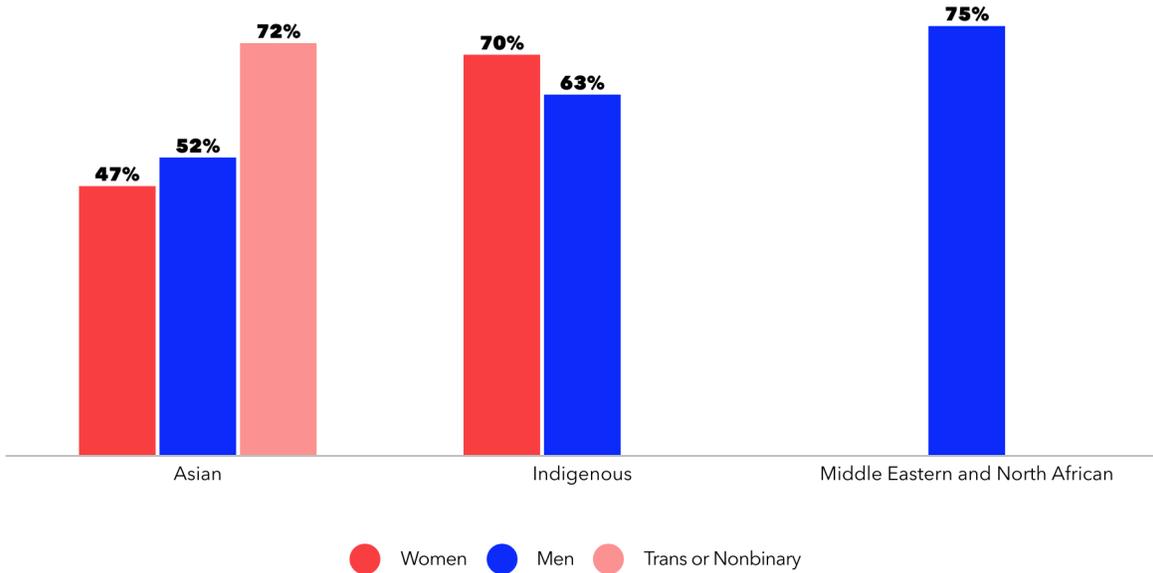**66%** have experienced racism at work **during their career**

52% have experienced racism at their **current job**

People who are trans or who identify outside the gender binary are more likely to have experienced racism in their current job.
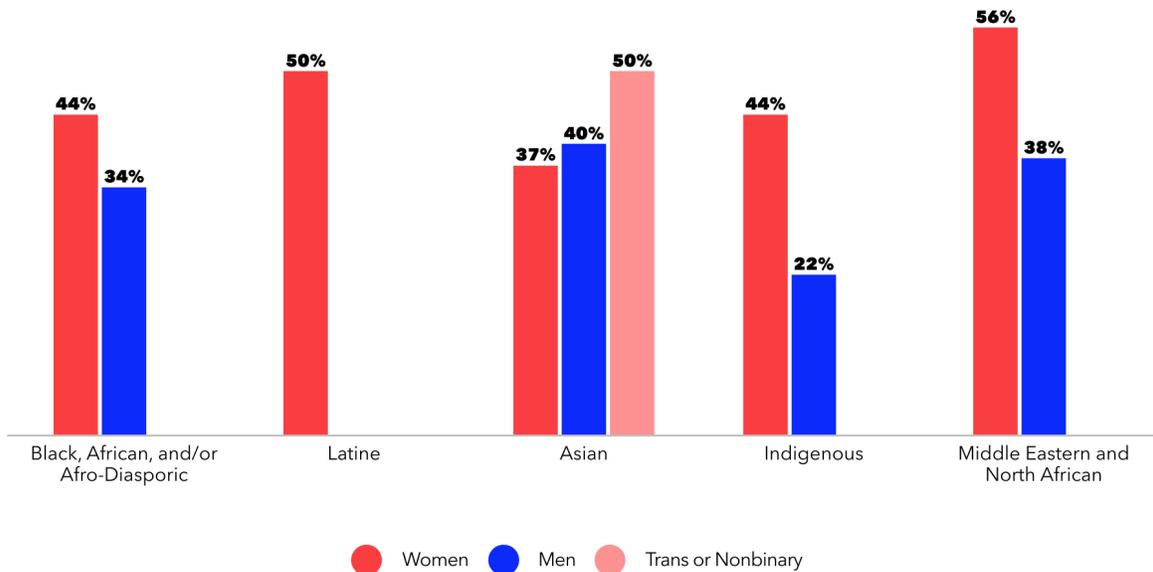

% of People Experiencing Racism by Gender

Country Breakouts: % of Employees Experiencing Racism in Their Current Job by Gender and Race[12]
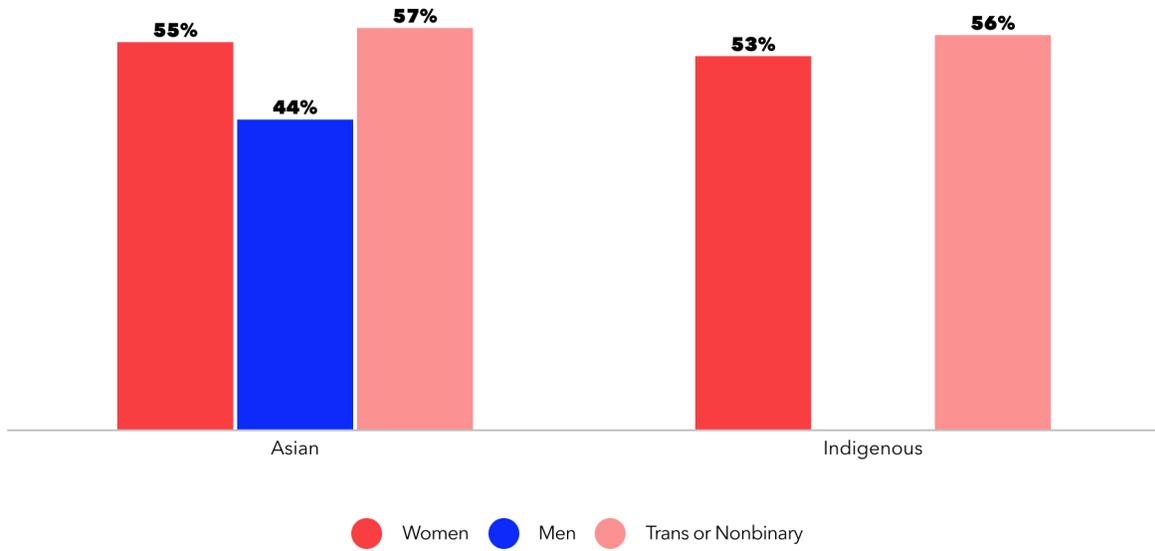
Australia

- Women
- Men
- Trans or Nonbinary

Note: Percentages are provided for groups that have a large enough sample for reliable interpretation of results.
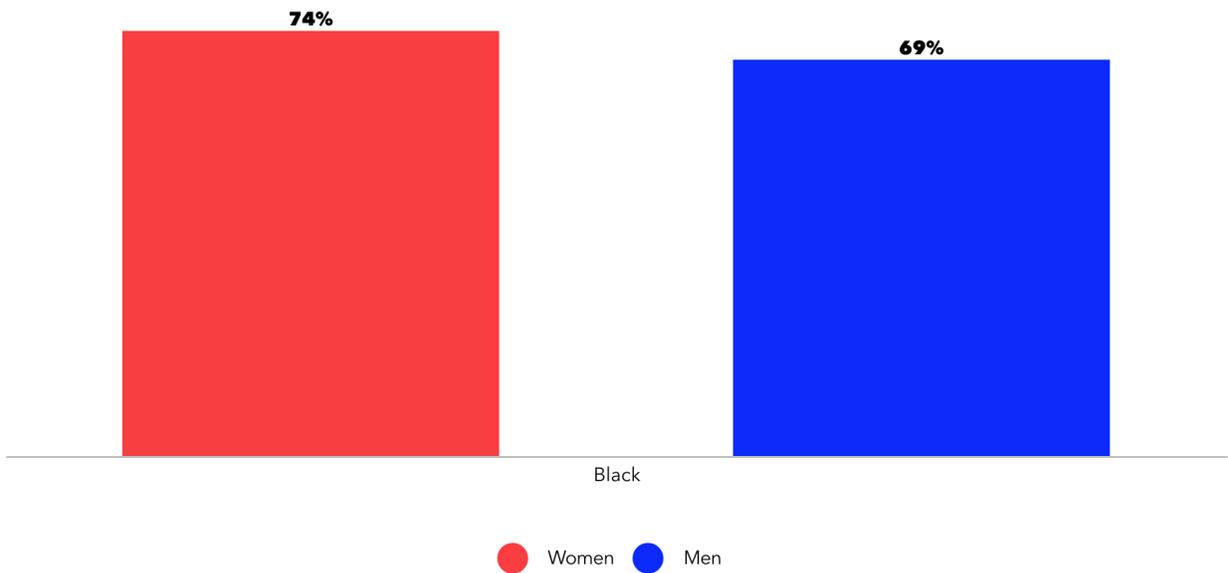
Canada

- Women
- Men
- Trans or Nonbinary

Note: Percentages are provided for groups that have a large enough sample for reliable interpretation of results.

New Zealand

Asian: Women 55%, Men 44%, Trans or Nonbinary 57%
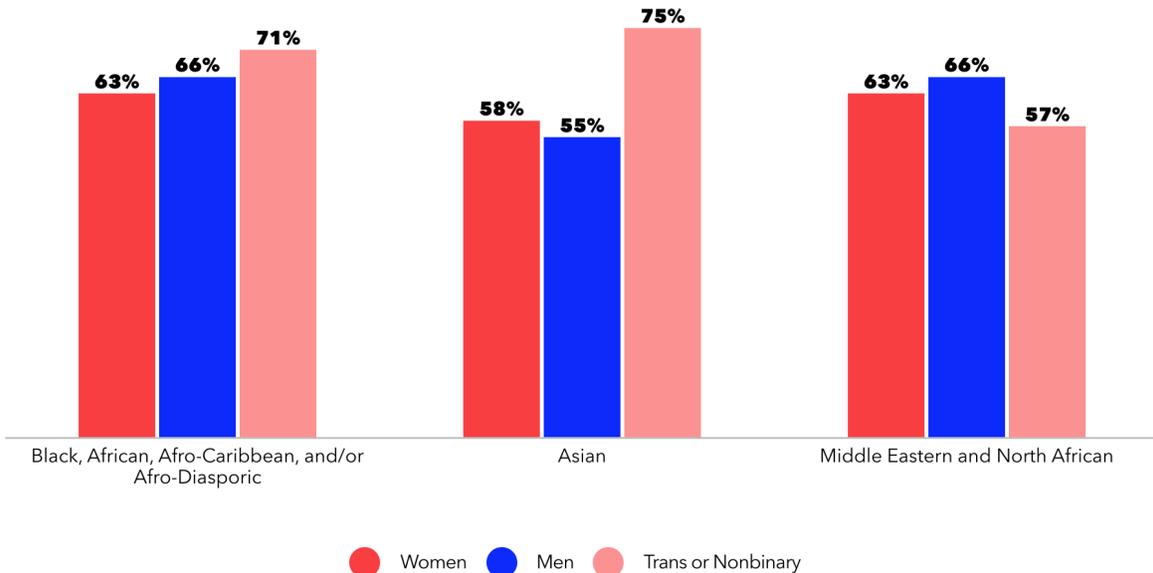Indigenous: Women 53%, Trans or Nonbinary 56%

● Women ● Men ● Trans or Nonbinary

Note: Percentages are provided for groups that have a large enough sample for reliable interpretation of results.
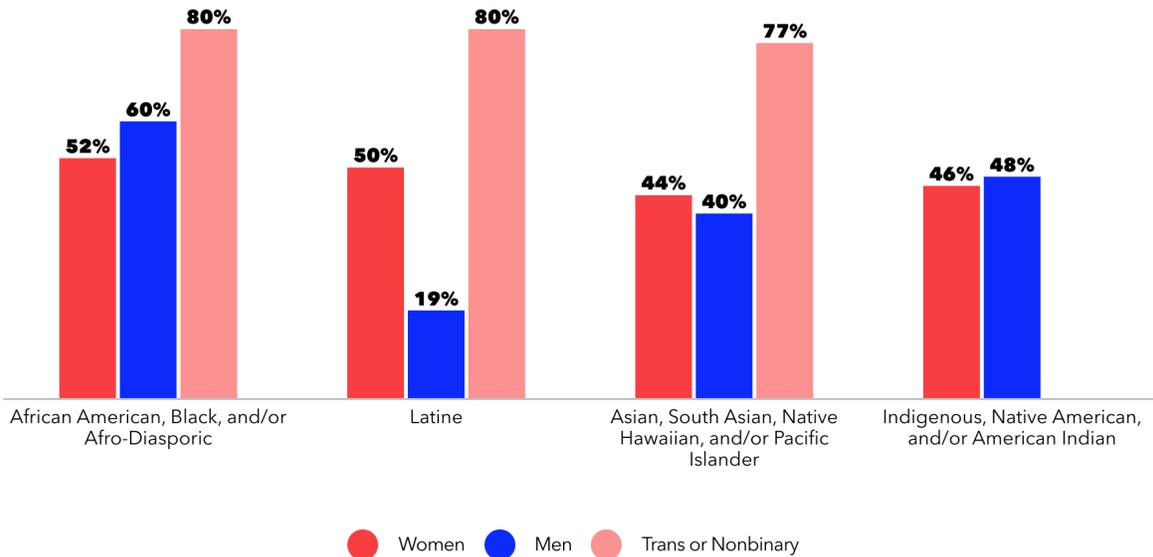
South Africa

Black: Women 74%, Men 69%

● Women ● Men

Note: Percentages are provided for groups that have a large enough sample for reliable interpretation of results.

United Kingdom

Bar chart — United Kingdom

- **Black, African, Afro-Caribbean, and/or Afro-Diasporic:** Women 63%, Men 66%, Trans or Nonbinary 71%
- **Asian:** Women 58%, Men 55%, Trans or Nonbinary 75%
- **Middle Eastern and North African:** Women 63%, Men 66%, Trans or Nonbinary 57%

Legend: Women (red), Men (blue), Trans or Nonbinary (pink)

Note: Percentages are provided for groups that have a large enough sample for reliable interpretation of results.

United States

Bar chart — United States

- **African American, Black, and/or Afro-Diasporic:** Women 52%, Men 60%, Trans or Nonbinary 80%
- **Latine:** Women 50%, Men 19%, Trans or Nonbinary 80%
- **Asian, South Asian, Native Hawaiian, and/or Pacific Islander:** Women 44%, Men 40%, Trans or Nonbinary 77%
- **Indigenous, Native American, and/or American Indian:** Women 46%, Men 48%

Legend: Women (red), Men (blue), Trans or Nonbinary (pink)

Note: Percentages are provided for groups that have a large enough sample for reliable interpretation of results.

Day-to-Day Racism Manifests in a Variety of Forms

Common Racist Experiences

Respondents who have experienced racism in their current job described a wide variety of racist acts, demonstrating that racism is multifaceted in how it shows up. The most common expressions of racism involved: 1) workplace harassment, which was cited by almost half of participants, and 2) employment and professional inequities, which were cited by about one-third.

48% have experienced **Workplace Harassment**

32% have experienced **Employment and Professional Inequities**

Workplace harassment: Being subjected to derogatory and snide remarks, racial slurs, racist jokes, comments about a person's accent or assumed native language, and comments to "go back to your country."

The interpersonal comments people described, including overt racist name-calling, are a crude and blunt method of enforcing White defaults at work by implicitly or explicitly telling people they don't belong and denigrating their culture.

I was told that I am not working right and I am lazy due to the colour of my skin. I was also told to go back to my country even though I was born in Canada.

—Black man, Canada

Someone mocked the Indian accent even though I have an Australian accent.

—Indian and European woman, Australia

I had a coworker who thought doing Indian tribal chants every time I come around was cool.

—Native American man, United States

Employment and professional inequities: Being passed over for promotion, paid less, given more or less work, and excluded from teamwork, meetings, resources, or opportunities.

Disparities in professional opportunities are another way of telling people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups they don't belong in the workplace, or in leadership, and that their skills and expertise are not valued, whether they conform to White defaults or not.

I expected a promotion in my previous job. I had the experience and skills but someone, my junior, got the job instead. That individual was White and had less experience and less years' service at the company than me.

—British Asian man, United Kingdom

I am the only Black employee. I am mostly given more work and not paid enough, I get sent to make tea or sent to the shops by my boss and that is not part of my job. When things go wrong within my team, I get blamed.

—South African woman, South Africa

I wasn't given the same amount or quantity of office equipment… I was told I was expected to cope since I came from a country with nothing and I had managed to be productive in spite of it! When I took offense, I was told it was meant as a compliment to my resourcefulness!!

—Black woman, New Zealand

Respondents were also subjected to racial stereotypes and comments about their looks and culture. The White gaze explicitly targets a threat it perceives in bodies that are different from its own, insulting: the bodies directly, characteristics it associates with those bodies, or the cultural practices valued by those bodies. Respondents revealed these insults through stories of their coworkers' and customers/clients' treatment of them.

Stereotypes: Racist assumptions about a person's intelligence, cleanliness, and/or language abilities, for example, as well as blame for Covid-19.

Degrading people's bodies: Calling out, mocking, or insulting a person's skin color, facial features, hair, or body type.

Disrespecting culture: Comments about a person's food or dress.

---

*This White man gives me this look and he says "dirty P**is" to my face and says he doesn't want to be assisted by me because I am not White.*

—Pakistani woman, United Kingdom

I got shamed because of how small my eyes are.

—Chinese woman, New Zealand

Being Muslim I have been excluded from parties at pubs since I don't drink alcohol and food given has pork or non-halal meat. I seem like a freak for respecting my religious beliefs.

—Pakistani-Australian man, Australia

Quick Reference: Systems of Oppression

Oppression shows up at work through interpersonal behaviors as well as practices and expectations built into larger organizational and societal systems and structures.[13]

Racism values White people and devalues people from other racial and ethnic groups.

Colorism values people with lighter skin tones and devalues people with darker skin tones.

Cissexism values cisgender people and devalues trans and nonbinary people.

Sexism values men and devalues women and nonbinary people.

Texturism values people with straighter and finer hair and devalues people with kinkier and coarser hair.

Heterosexism values straight people and devalues queer people.

Though we have described several different ways that people express racism, it is important to note that many examples illustrate racism that simultaneously embodies more than one of these types (e.g., harassment involving stereotypes). For example:

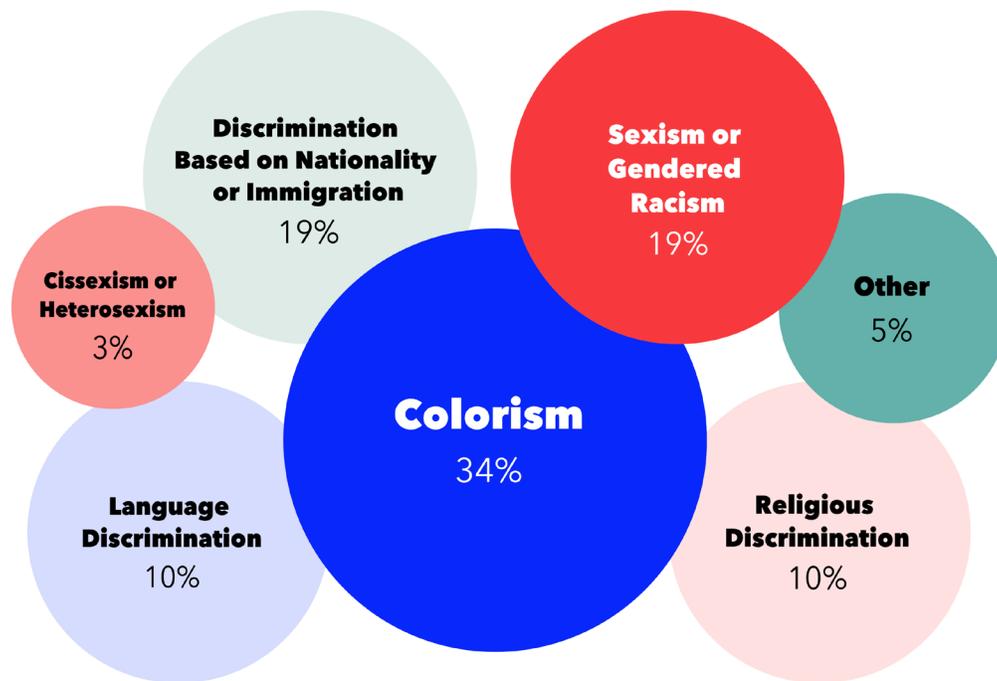*They said I don't deserve to be there and Black people aren't bright (in terms of thinking) in general.*

–Black man, South Africa

As an Asian man, I am consistently labeled as quiet and demure even though I'm not. I've been passed up for promotion because of this.

–Vietnamese man, United States

In addition, many respondents described experiences in which racism was intertwined with other forms of bias. These stories of racism were most often about colorism, but they also involved sexism or gendered racism, xenophobia, bias against a religion or language, and heterosexism. These types of comments show how White defaults are also tied up in norms related to gender, nationality, religion, language, and sexuality–and that people take advantage of this fact to instigate intersectional experiences of racism that wound people based on multiple identities that don't fit the White "norm."

Frequency of Types of Intersectional Racism

Discrimination Based on Nationality or Immigration
19%

Sexism or Gendered Racism
19%

Cissexism or Heterosexism
3%

Other
5%

Colorism
34%

Language Discrimination
10%

Religious Discrimination
10%

Clients not wanting to interact with me because of my race/gender and wanting to work with my White coworkers instead.

—Māori woman, New Zealand

I was unfairly targeted because I am Indigenous and people always joked that I am not Indigenous enough to speak up about Indigenous issues.

—Métis man, Canada

I was excluded in work and team talks through others using their mother tongue instead of English as we normally speak.

—Black man, South Africa

Who Gets to Be "American"?

Mostly during holidays like 4th of July everyone assumes I will work and that my family doesn't celebrate. They basically use me to cover shifts of "American" co-workers who are "really into the all-American holiday."
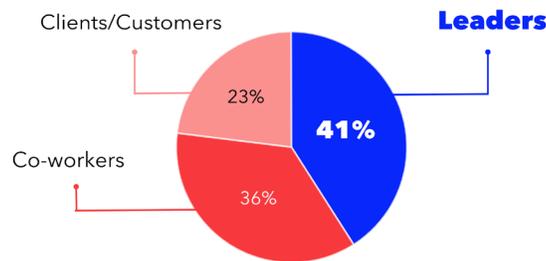
—Puerto Rican woman, United States

To many people, being American is synonymous with being White—which stands in stark contrast to the purportedly American ideal of equality for all. Research has shown that Asian Americans and African Americans are consistently judged to be less American than White Americans.[14] In a country of immigrants from around the world and descendants of enslaved Africans, Whiteness is still considered the norm—and reflects the power dynamics of US society. What will it take for non-White citizens—including those whose families have lived in the US for generations—to be fully accepted as Americans?
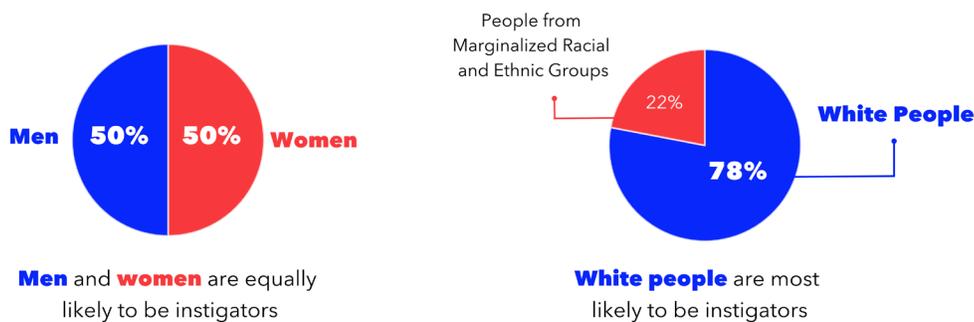
Instigators of Racism

Around one in five stories about a racist experience included information about the race and/or gender of the person or people who committed the racist act, and/or their relationship to the respondent. Analyzing this data shows us that racism can come from any direction, regardless of gender, race, or relationship.

Not only are people experiencing racism in interactions with their peers and customers, but racist acts are most often perpetrated by team leaders and senior managers—the very people who are responsible for assigning stretch opportunities, influencing promotions, and determining pay. The data show that leaders and those in positions of power are most likely to be White (and male).[15] This overrepresentation of White leaders, and thus the acceptance of White norms as a default, perpetuates inequities in the workplace.[16]

Men and women are equally likely to be instigators

White people are most likely to be instigators

Participants reported that men and women were equally likely to commit racist acts; notably, trans and nonbinary people were never listed as the instigators of racist acts. Though women are often less likely to express prejudice,[17] this was not the case in our survey. Additionally, though White people were overwhelmingly reported to be the perpetrators of racism in the workplace, approximately 1 in 5 participants discussed an incident where the person expressing racism belonged to a marginalized racial or ethnic group. This finding is consistent with research that shows that members of stigmatized racial or ethnic groups may express prejudice toward members of other stigmatized groups when expressing prejudice is the norm among the majority group (that is, White employees).[18] This is yet another example of how Whiteness dominates workplace culture by creating norms, or generally held expectations, where prejudice and racism are allowed to persist.

These data and stories show that people are cunning in how they find so many ways to injure people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups. Acts as different as a manager telling an employee they don't deserve a raise to a colleague making fun of an employee's name to a customer refusing to work with an employee wearing a headscarf all fall under the broad umbrella of racism in the workplace. Regardless of how it shows up, though, racism is made possible by a fundamental lack of respect for a person's racial and ethnic heritage and culture. Indeed, research has shown that racial and ethnic harassment is less likely in a respectful workplace.[19] When White norms and standards are seen as superior to others then it's no surprise that alternative perspectives are seen as "less than" and therefore afforded less respect.

It was during a break time on a normal work day. A colleague felt that non-White people do not have acceptable standards of hygiene.

—Taiwanese Chinese woman,
United States

Due to my culture the customer verbally abused me in a racist manner.

—Pakistani woman, United Kingdom

A White Australian female colleague treated me differently. She would tell everyone (most White and some Eastern European) good morning but not to me.

—Sri Lankan man, Australia

One of my supervisors told me that she had worked with people from "my country" before and said that I was much quieter and kinder than they were, so that I must be more "Canadian-ized." I felt that she was promoting a racialized stereotype and likely would have treated me worse if I hadn't performed or behaved exactly as she expected.

—Egyptian man, Canada

A male colleague said I should cut my afro, it is not neat.

—Black woman, South Africa

Some colleagues in my department who are from the Indian race always made remarks about me (being coloured) and another person, who is Black, dating. After asking several times that they should stop, they kept joking about it. I then escalated the problem and it has been resolved.

—Mixed race woman, South Africa

Got approached by a group of Indigenous kids at work and they yelled out, "Go back to China, you brought Covid to Australia."

—Vietnamese Australian woman,
Australia

Consequences of Racist Experiences

As these data show, inequities in promotion, pay, working conditions, and work experiences are not only a manifestation of racism but also an outcome of racism. Racism hurts individuals both in the moment and in the long-term as careers, salaries, and self-esteem are damaged.

Emotional Tax

Other consequences include the psychological and personal toll that many respondents described, even though we didn't specifically ask them about these outcomes. Some wrote about the emotional toll (e.g., feeling demeaned, unsafe, afraid, threatened), and others noted that they simply weren't comfortable sharing their story even in the anonymous survey.

These responses align with previous Catalyst research on Emotional Tax, the experience of being on guard against bias against race, ethnicity, and gender and the associated effects on well-being and ability to thrive at work.[20] Within the context of so much racist hostility, it is unsurprising that our prior research finds that 61% of employees from marginalized racial and ethnic groups are on guard against bias from their coworkers.[21] In addition, there is a large body of research on the physical and mental health effects of racism and discrimination and correlations with poor health outcomes which include heart disease, high blood pressure, higher body-mass index (BMI) and obesity, cardiovascular disease, poor sleep, stress hormone deregulation, inflammation, and many psychiatric disorders.[22]

I was very upset. It made me feel low and no person should feel like that or be treated in such a horrible way.

—Black woman, United States

It was absolutely unfair and outrageous.

—Chinese man, Canada

I felt angry and ashamed like no one even saw me as a human.

—Black man, United Kingdom

I'm uncomfortable answering this, very sorry.

—Black nonbinary person, United States

Reporting and Resolution (or Lack Thereof)

Some participants described reporting their experiences to their manager or organization. When this happened, however, organizations were just as likely to ignore the situation as they were to act. Disturbingly, many participants who spoke up about these experiences reported that they were retaliated against, compounding the harm they experienced. Organizations must do better. As these data make plain, experiences of racism at work are real, harmful, and must be addressed.

I had a problem with a supervisor; he used the N-word instead of calling me by my legal name. He lost his job because of this.

—African-American man, United States.

When a male colleague did something badly to me, I addressed the issue to the supervisor and manager, but they didn't trust me at all; they thought I was just trying to create the problems.

—Asian woman, Canada

I work within an environment where the darker skinned you are, the harder you work or the heavier the workload is. When I voice my frustration I am greeted with anger and no acknowledgement by management.

—Mixed race woman, United Kingdom

I was hired to do office administration at a consulting firm and I can remember that I was subjected to do things that my colleagues would never be asked to do. When I finally challenged this form of discrimination I was silenced and systematically fired from the firm.

—Black man, South Africa

As we have seen, racism often flies under the radar in offhand comments or other exclusionary behaviors. While the end goal is to create a workplace where racism does not occur, in the meantime, organizations must help employees call it out by setting up avenues for them to report it so it can be investigated and resolved.

But as our data reveal, reporting racism at work often comes at a deep cost for the employees who have already been mistreated through racist behavior. It's a risky coin toss: Will speaking up actually make things better or will it cost them their physical safety or job? Employees must have trust in the system, so it's important that leaders at every level of the organization communicate the goal of addressing racist and discriminatory incidents in the workplace and their commitment to the process.

The Catalyst Solution

Challenge White Defaults at Work

All races, ethnicities, and cultures are equally valuable and worthy of respect. When the workplace climate condones and ignores all the ways White defaults are upheld through racist acts, employees are harmed. Overt and covert harassment must be addressed, but to really make a difference, organizations must also create a climate of respect in which all employees feel they are valued and worthy as human beings—no matter their culture.[23] And when racism does occur, accountability is key.
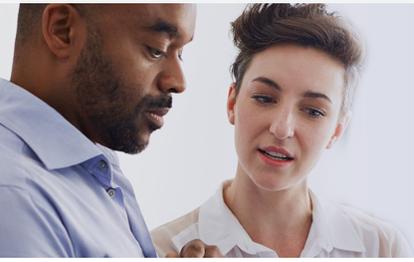
Climate of Harassment

✓ A "harassment climate" describes an organization's attitude toward inappropriate behavior—whether or not protections are in place for employees who experience harassment, they feel safe reporting it, and perpetrators are punished.

✓ Decrease harassment climate by creating organizational policies to combat racism and ensuring that leaders demonstrate their commitment to addressing racism. Research shows that positive perceptions around antiracist leader efforts and organizational policies predict decreased experiences of racial and ethnic harassment and discrimination.[24]

Climate of Respect

✓ Take steps to encourage a respectful workplace, in which employees are not only not harassed but also treated civilly and with dignity. Research finds that a climate of respect predicts fewer racist experiences even when controlling for climate of harassment.[25]

✓ Train all employees on the importance of a respectful climate so everyone can contribute to creating a workplace free of racism.[26]

✓ Make sure "respect" is not weaponized to silence people who are raising valid and possibly uncomfortable issues related to racism, White norms, and equity at work.[27]

Accountability

✓ Create a clear process for addressing racism when it occurs in your workplace, including a mechanism to report racist and discriminatory incidents anonymously,[28] guidelines for investigating, consequences that will be enforced, and a commitment to timely resolution of issues. Consider hiring an organizational ombuds who can be a resource for employees who want to report racial or other discrimination.[29]

✓ Ensure that any attempts at retaliation are also taken seriously and investigated.

✓ Consider restorative forms of justice which aim to heal victims of racism and discrimination and help people understand the harm they have caused so they can better repair the injury to the community.[30]

Implement Systems to Eliminate Racial Workplace Inequities

To get at the root of workplace disparities, organizations must explore how White norms of "professionalism" prevent people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups from developing and advancing. Because these norms are so embedded in our workplaces, they can be hard to notice at first.[31] Becoming alert to racial, ethnic, and gender norms and how they can create a cycle of self-reinforcement is the first step.

Development

✓ Women's leadership "potential" tends to be inaccurately underestimated compared to men's;[33] for women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups, biases against their race, ethnicity, and gender intersect to impact their experiences and opportunities at work.[34] To avoid this, clarify how leadership potential is measured and developed.

✓ Evaluate criteria and processes for selection into training and leadership development programs so that they are distributed equitably and not at the personal discretion of managers, where biases may come into play.[32]

✓ Develop rubrics so that people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups are not penalized more than others for the same mistakes or misconduct.[35]

Performance Reviews

✓ Assess performance criteria to ensure they don't demand conformity to White (and male) standards of thinking, behaving, personal presentation, wielding power, dealing with conflict, and comfort.[36]

✓ Measure employees against clear metrics and goals to reduce the opportunity for biases to creep in.

✓ When giving feedback, be sure to provide specific, constructive feedback so that people know what they have to improve and how, and avoid vague feedback on personality traits, which are often informed by biases and White norms.[37]

Promotions

✓ Keep contemporaneous notes throughout the assessment period of each employee's successes so you don't overlook the accomplishments of people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups. Research shows that, for example, Black women's contributions are particularly likely to be misremembered and miscredited to someone else.[38]

✓ Assess competencies at each level for clarity and consistency. At the same time, remove racialized and gendered expectations related to leadership skills.[39]

✓ Create measurement and accountability mechanisms to ensure that no racial or gender group is being promoted at disproportionate rates.

Eradicate Racist Harassment From Your Workplace

Organizations must address the interpersonal racism that employees experience via racist comments, slurs, and jokes that have no place in the workplace (or society). People from marginalized racial and ethnic groups who are the targets of such harassment are harmed professionally, socially, emotionally, and psychologically.[40] People who make these comments betray bias and hostility toward individual colleagues and whole groups of people.

Managers

✓ Help managers learn about the emotional tax that being on guard to bias against race, ethnicity, and gender levies against people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups, especially on work teams.[41]

✓ Once managers have a better understanding of how racist experiences harm employees, train them on allyship and curiosity, two leadership behaviors that have been shown to decrease experiences of racism and emotional tax.[42]

✓ Give managers the authority to follow through on clear processes for investigating and penalizing racist incidents.

Employees

✓ Clarify team expectations and norms for mutual respect and building an inclusive environment where everyone feels valued, trusted, authentic, and psychologically safe.[43]

✓ When there is conflict, help employees practice communicating across differences to have a dialogue rather than a debate.[44]

✓ Train employees to identify microaggressions and learn how to step in if they witness one.[45]

Customers

✓ Create a code of conduct for customers and clients that explicitly states your organization's expectations regarding civility, respect, common courtesy, and hurtful comments about race, ethnicity, gender, and other personal characteristics.

✓ Make it clear that the whole organization will support the denial of service to people who do not behave appropriately.

✓ Reports of customer incivility are on the rise,[46] and biases and stereotypes tend to emerge when people are angry. Organizations have a duty to their employees to protect them from bad behavior.

About the Authors

The authors are cisgender women living in the United States, and have a diverse set of identities, including Afro Indigenous, Asian, White, biracial, multiracial, queer, and straight. They have heritage from China and the United States.

Joy Ohm collaborates with colleagues on the Research and Development team to conceptualize, write, and manage Catalyst's cutting-edge knowledge products, and she is the leader of the Lead for Equity and Inclusion strategic pillar, which is the vehicle through which Catalyst partners with organizations to transform how they drive gender equity, fairness, and inclusion in the workplace globally.

Sheila Brassel, PhD, is a mixed-methods, interdisciplinary researcher committed to building more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces. At Catalyst, she contributes expertise in intersectionality, inclusion, sexual harassment, and experiences of bias related to gender, race, and sexual orientation to Catalyst's global research programs. Sheila uses data-driven insights on these and other DEI topics to provide organizations with actionable solutions for building inclusive workplaces.

Britney A. Jacobs, MS, is a mixed-methods researcher committed to developing more equitable and diverse spaces for historically and systematically excluded persons. At Catalyst, Britney is a Research Fellow using qualitative and quantitative methodologies to aid in the execution of research that transforms the lens of DEI in workplaces internationally.

Emily Shaffer, PhD, is a social psychologist whose research has focused on reducing disparities in education and career fields that arise from negative stereotypes about women and people from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. At Catalyst, Emily leads the Inclusive Workplace Cultures research team and is passionate about using her expertise in stereotyping and prejudice to help create more inclusive and equitable workplaces.

Methodology

About the World of Voices Series

This study is part of our World of Voices research series, which aims to amplify the voices of employees from marginalized racial, ethnic, and cultural groups; provide global business leaders with data-driven, intersectional insights; and help organizations not only drive positive change but also illuminate a path forward for equity and inclusion. Through this series, we tell untold, authentic, and unapologetic stories from marginalized voices, leveraging both qualitative and quantitative data.

About This Study

The aim of this study is to better understand the prevalence of racism in workplaces and the myriad ways it manifests, as well as to highlight the organizational and systemic factors that create atmospheres where racism is commonplace, tolerated, and persistent. Our aim is not to draw comparisons or conclusions about experiences of employees from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in different countries, but instead to show that racism and the systems that support racism exist globally.

We surveyed over 5,000 employees from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Of this group, 2,637 employees reported experiencing racism in their current jobs. The stories told in this report are from the nearly 2,600 respondents who chose to provide a description of their experience. Featured quotations have been lightly edited for clarity. See the Procedure and Analysis section below for more detail.

These countries were selected because of the ability to collect sufficient racial and/or ethnic demographic data from survey respondents. In each of these countries, people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups may have similar, though certainly not identical, experiences in navigating bias, unfair treatment, and discrimination in the workplace and society as a whole.

Procedure and Analysis

✓ Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they have experienced racism or discrimination in their current workplace and in their past workplaces. If they had experienced racism in their current workplace, they were asked to describe an instance where they felt unfairly targeted or treated differently because of their race, nationality, ethnicity, or culture.

✓ Four independent coders reviewed their responses and conducted an inductive thematic analysis to determine patterns that arose organically from the data and create a coding scheme. Once a coding scheme was established, two coders coded a subset of the responses. Once a sufficient level of reliability was established, the remainder of the responses were coded by a single coder.

✓ Frequencies were then conducted across the entire sample and within country and various demographic groups, such as gender and race and ethnicity.

Demographics

This section presents the demographic characteristics of the 2,637 respondents who experienced racism in their current job. Percentages may exceed 100 due to rounding.

Gender

55%
Women

1%
Trans Women

38%
Men

1%
Trans Men

5%
Nonbinary

Sexual Orientation

80%
Do not identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, and/or Asexual

15%
Identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, and/or Asexual
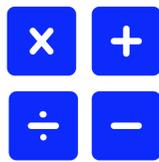
4%
Other

1%
Prefer Not to Say

Top Five Industries

17%
Administration / General Management

13%
Finance / Accounting / Purchasing
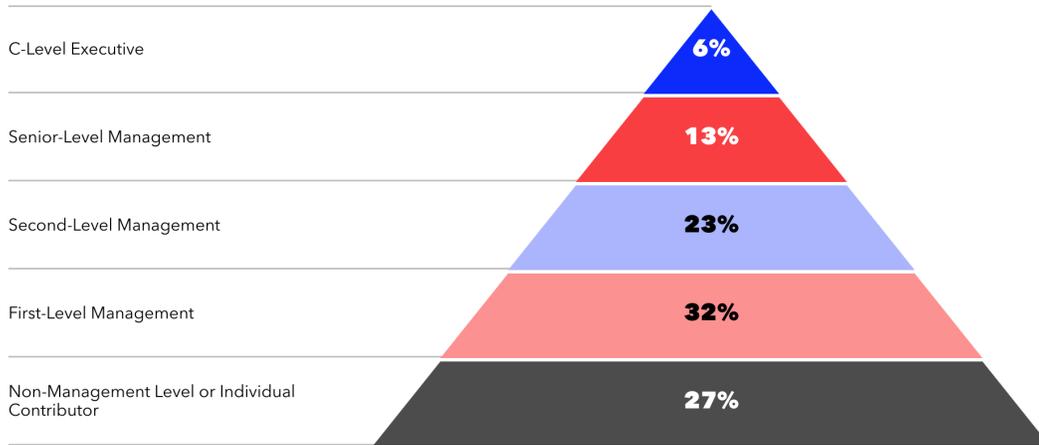
8%
Engineering
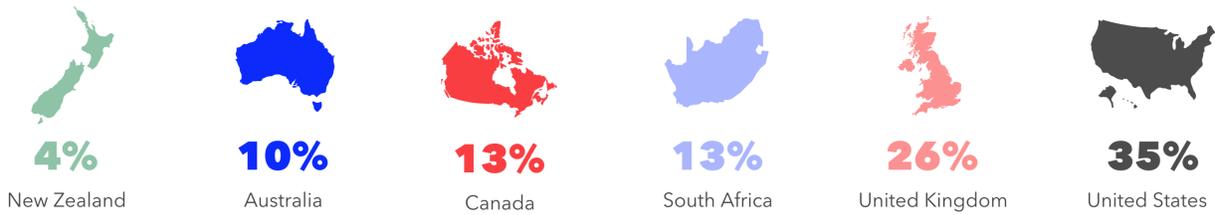
7%
Computer / Info Systems Management

7%
Consulting

Rank

C-Level Executive	6%
Senior-Level Management	13%
Second-Level Management	23%
First-Level Management	32%
Non-Management Level or Individual Contributor	27%

Countries

4%	**10%**	**13%**	**13%**	**26%**	**35%**
New Zealand	Australia	Canada	South Africa	United Kingdom	United States

Age

19   86

36
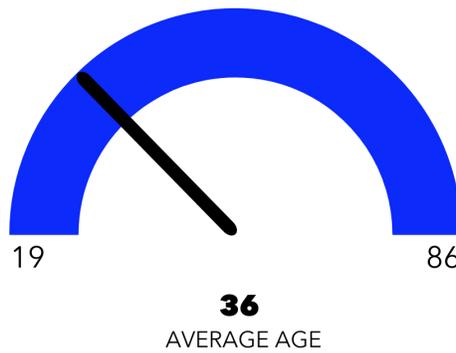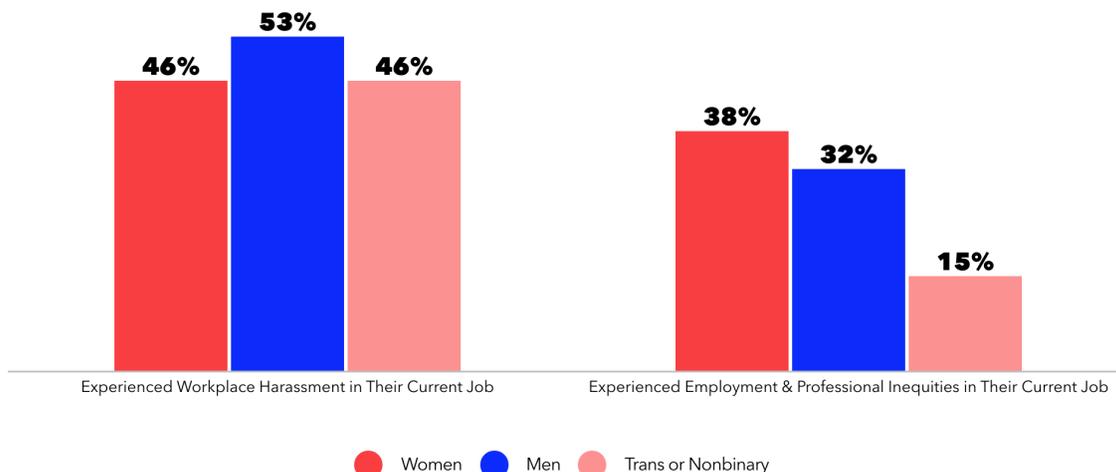AVERAGE AGE

Global Breakouts

Country Breakouts: % of Employees Experiencing Racism

Australia
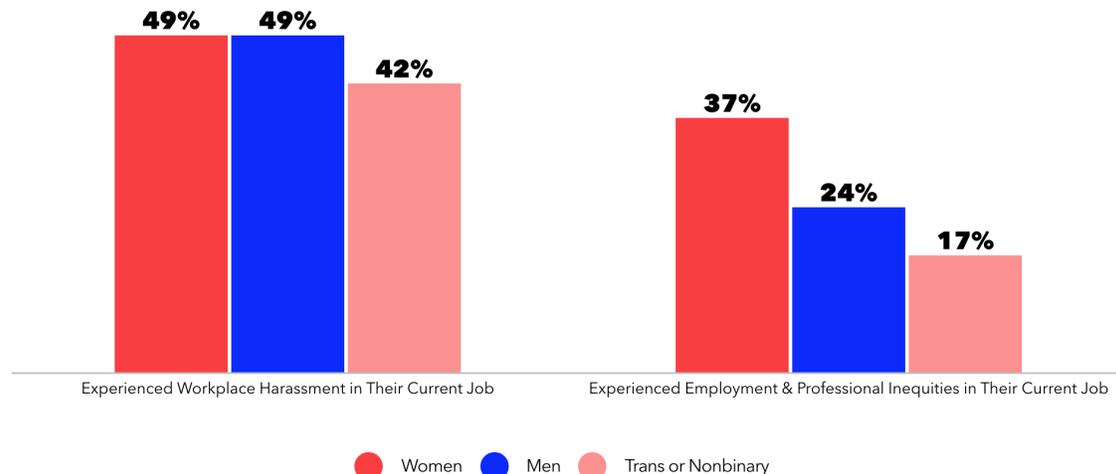
62% have experienced racism **in their career**.

49% have experience racism **in their current job**.

Experienced Workplace Harassment in Their Current Job
- Women: 46%
- Men: 53%
- Trans or Nonbinary: 46%

Experienced Employment & Professional Inequities in Their Current Job
- Women: 38%
- Men: 32%
- Trans or Nonbinary: 15%

Legend: ● Women ● Men ● Trans or Nonbinary

Canada

54% have experienced racism **in their career**.

37% have experience racism **in their current job**.

Experienced Workplace Harassment in Their Current Job
- Women: 49%
- Men: 49%
- Trans or Nonbinary: 42%

Experienced Employment & Professional Inequities in Their Current Job
- Women: 37%
- Men: 24%
- Trans or Nonbinary: 17%

Legend: ● Women ● Men ● Trans or Nonbinary

New Zealand

69% have experienced racism **in their career**.

53% have experience racism **in their current job**.

48% **33%** **57%**

29% **30%** **14%**

Experienced Workplace Harassment in Their Current Job

Experienced Employment & Professional Inequities in Their Current Job

● Women ● Men ● Trans or Nonbinary

South Africa

81% have experienced racism **in their career**.

67% have experience racism **in their current job**.

37% **43%** **50%**

59% **45%** **17%**

Experienced Workplace Harassment in Their Current Job

Experienced Employment & Professional Inequities in Their Current Job

● Women ● Men ● Trans or Nonbinary

United Kingdom

74% have experienced racism **in their career**.

59% have experience racism **in their current job**.

54% 53% 55%

30% 28% 23%

Experienced Workplace Harassment in Their Current Job

Experienced Employment & Professional Inequities in Their Current Job

● Women ● Men ● Trans or Nonbinary

United States

64% have experienced racism **in their career**.

51% have experience racism **in their current job**.

50% 37% 40%

25% 31% 19%

Experienced Workplace Harassment in Their Current Job

Experienced Employment & Professional Inequities in Their Current Job

● Women ● Men ● Trans or Nonbinary

It's important to note that our sample of trans and nonbinary participants was quite small and these numbers are likely deflated. The overwhelming majority of trans and nonbinary employees experience overt forms of discrimination at work; for example, findings from the US Transgender Survey, which collected data from over 25,000 trans and nonbinary people across the US, reveal that "Overall, approximately two-thirds (67%) of respondents who held or applied for a job in the past year reported that they were fired or forced to resign from a job, not hired for a job that they applied for, and/or denied a promotion."[47]

Contributor

The authors would like to thank Kathrina Robotham, PhD, for her support and thought leadership.

Acknowledgments

We thank our Lead for Equity and Inclusion donors for their generous support of our work in this area.

Lead Donor

Major Donors

Partner Donors

The Coca-Cola Company
Dell Technologies
KeyBank
Kimberly-Clark Corporation
KKR
KPMG LLP
RTX

Supporter Donors

Edward Jones
Pitney Bowes Inc.

How to cite: Ohm, J., Brassel, S., Jacobs, B. A., & Shaffer, E. (2023). *How racism shows up at work and the antiracist actions your organization can take*. Catalyst.

Endnotes

1. The concept of White defaults was influenced by research on masculine defaults. See Cheryan, S. & Markus, H. R. (2020). Masculine defaults: Identifying and mitigating hidden cultural biases. *Psychological Review, 127*(6), 1022-1052; *Flexible masculinities at work: Infographic.* (2023). Catalyst.

2. Sue, D. W. (2006). The invisible Whiteness of being: Whiteness, White supremacy, White privilege, and racism. In M. G. Constantine & D. W. Sue (Eds.), *Addressing racism: Facilitating cultural competence in mental health and educational settings* (pp. 15–30). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

3. Painter, N. I. (2020, June 27). White identity in America is ideology, not biology. The history of "Whiteness" proves it. NBC News; Go deeper: Race timeline. (2003). From Race–The Power of an Illusion. PBS/California Newsreel.

4. Okun, T. (2023). *What is White supremacy Culture?* White Supremacy Culture.

5. Costigan, A., Garnett, K., & Troiano, E. (2020). The impact of structural racism on Black Americans. Catalyst.

6. Gassam Asare, J. (2021, January 14). 4 myths about White supremacy that allow it to continue. *Forbes.*

7. DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism.* Beacon Press.

8. Rabelo, V. C., Robotham, K. J., & McCluney, C. L. (2021). "Against a sharp white background": How Black women experience the white gaze at work. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *28*(5), 1840-1858.

9. Gassam Asare, J. (2021, December 28). Understanding the White gaze and how it impacts your workplace. *Forbes.*

10. Okun, T. (2023). *White supremacy culture characteristics.* White Supremacy Culture.

11. Ray, V. (2019, November 19). Why so many organizations stay White. *Harvard Business Review.*

12. In the following charts, categories with fewer than 10 people were not included.

13. Bonilla-Silva, E. (1997). Rethinking racism: Toward a structural interpretation. *American Sociological Review*, 62(3), 465-480; Bonilla-Silva, E. (2021). What makes systemic racism systemic? *Sociological Inquiry, 91*(3), 513-533; Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.* Routledge; Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist.* One World.

14. Devos, T. & Banaji, M. R. (2005). American = White? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 88*(3), 447-466.

15. Guynn, J. & Fraser, J. (2023, February 16). How diverse is corporate America? There are more Black leaders but white men still run it. *USA Today*; Hinchliffe, E. (2023, June 5). Women CEOs run 10.4% of Fortune 500 companies. A quarter of the 52 leaders became CEO in the last year. *Fortune.*

16. Gassam Asare (2021, December 28); Rabelo, Robotham, & McCluney (2020).

17. Shapiro, J. R. & Neuberg, S. L. (2008). When do the stigmatized stigmatize? The ironic effects of being accountable to (perceived) majority group prejudice-expression norms. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 95*(4), 877-898.

18. Shapiro & Neuberg (2008).

19. Robotham, K. and Cortina, L. (2021). Promoting respect as a solution to workplace harassment. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, *40*(4), 410-429.

20. Emotional Tax. (2016-2022). Catalyst.

21. Brassel, S., Shaffer, E., & Travis, D. J. (2022). *Emotional tax and work teams: A view from five countries.* Catalyst

22. Paradies, Y., Ben, J., Denson, N., Elias, A., Priest, N., Pieterse, A., et al. (2015). Racism as a determinant of health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS ONE 10*(9); Harris, R., Cormack, D., Tobias, M., Yeh, L-C., Talamaivao, N., Minster, J., & Timutimu, R. (2012). The pervasive effects of racism: Experiences of racial discrimination in New Zealand over time and associations with multiple health domains. Social Science & Medicine. *Social Science & Medicine* 74(3), 408-415; Bichell, R. E. (2017, November 11). Scientists start to tease out the subtler ways racism hurts health. NPR.

23. Robotham & Cortina, 2021.

24. Bergman, M. E., Palmieri, P. A., Drasgow, F., & Ormerod, A. J. (2012). Racial/ethnic harassment and discrimination, its antecedents, and its effect on job-related outcomes. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 17*(1), 65-78.

25. Robotham & Cortina, 2021.

26. Robotham & Cortina, 2021.

27. Robotham & Cortina, 2021.

28. Zheng, L. (2020, October 8). Do your employees feel safe reporting abuse and discrimination? *Harvard Business Review.*

29. Hughes, V. & Troiano, E. (2020). How ombuds programs can promote diversity and inclusion: Topic overview. Catalyst.

30. Derick Debevoise, N. (2020, June 12). The second responders: How restorative HR makes workplaces more inclusive and equitable. *Forbes.*

31. Rabelo, Robotham, & McCluney (2020).

32. King, E. B., Botsford, W., Hebl, M. R., Kazama, S., Dawson, J. F., & Perkins, A. (2012). Benevolent sexism at work: Gender differences in the distribution of challenging developmental experiences. *Journal of Management*, *38*(6), 1835-1866; McDonald, A. (2021, June 1). The racism of the "hard-to-find" qualified Black candidate trope. *Stanford Social Innovation Review.*

33. Benson, A., Li, D., & Shue, K. (2022). "Potential" and the gender promotion gap. (Working paper).

34. Rosette, A. S., Ponce de Leon, R., Koval, C. Z., & Harrison, D. A. (2018). Intersectionality: Connecting experiences of gender with race at work. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 38*, 1-22.

35. Rosette, A. S. & Livingston, R. W. (2012). Failure is not an option for Black women: Effects of organizational performance on leaders with single versus dual-subordinate identities. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48*(5), 1162-1167; Luksyte, A., Waite, E., Avery, D. R., & Roy, R. (2013). Held to a different standard: Racial differences in the impact of lateness on advancement opportunity. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 86*(2), 142–165.

36. Okun, T. (2023). *White supremacy culture characteristics.* White Supremacy Culture.

37. Snyder, K & Lee, A. (2022, June 15). No more 'abrasive,' 'opinionated,' or 'nice': Why managers need to stop giving women and people of color feedback on their personality. *Fortune*; Correll, S. J. & Simard, C. (2016, April 29). Research: Vague feedback is holding women back. *Harvard Business Review*.

38. Sesko, A. K. & Biernat, M. (2010). Prototypes of race and gender: The invisibility of Black women. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 46*(2), 356-360.

39. MARC Research Team. (2023). *Flexible masculinities at work*. Catalyst; Ro, C. (2020, August 16). The docility myth flattening Asian women's careers. BBC; Ali, H. (2022, July 8). How leaders can better support Muslim women at work. *Harvard Business Review*; Motro, D., Evans, J. B., Ellis, A. P. J., & Benson III, L. (2022, January 31). The "Angry Black Woman" stereotype at work. *Harvard Business Review*; Hewlett, S. A., Allwood, N., & Sherbin, L. (2016, October 11). U.S. Latinos feel they can't be themselves at work. *Harvard Business Review*.

40. Brassel, S., Shaffer, E., & Travis, D. J. (2022). *Emotional tax and work teams: A view from five countries*. Catalyst; Erskine, S., Brassel, S., & Robotham, K. (2023). *Exposé of women's workplace experiences challenges antiracist leaders to step up*. Catalyst.

41. Brassel, Shaffer, & Travis (2022).

42. Erskine, Brassel, & Robotham (2023); Brassel, S., Ohm, J., & Travis, D. J. (2021). *Allyship and curiosity drive inclusion for people of color at work*. Catalyst.

43. Travis, D. J., Shaffer, E., & Thorpe-Moscon, J. (2019). *Getting real about inclusive leadership: Why change starts with you*. Catalyst.

44. *Engaging in conversations about gender, race, and ethnicity in the workplace*. (2016). Catalyst.

45. *Bystander intervention–How to interrupt racial & ethnic microaggressions: Knowledge burst*. (n.d.). Catalyst.

46. Dillon, J. D. (2022, December 12). 4 eye-opening tips for dealing with customer incivility from a 20-year service industry vet. Axonify; Porath, C. (2022, November 9). Frontline work when everyone is angry. *Harvard Business Review*.

47. James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). *The report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*. National Center for Transgender Equality.

CATALYST
WORKPLACES THAT WORK FOR WOMEN