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The Underrepresentation of Black Women in Executive Leadership Roles

Bre Hayward
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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Bre Hayward

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

The Underrepresentation of Black Women in Executive Leadership Roles

by

Bre Hayward

MA, California Coast University 2017

BS, California Coast University 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Organizational Leadership Development

Walden University

November 2025

Abstract

The problem that was addressed through this study is that Black women are underrepresented in executive leadership roles in the United States. Grounded in Ladson-Billings' critical race theory and Hill Collins' Black feminist theory, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles and their recommendations to address the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles. Data were collected using semistructured interviews of 13 adult Black female executive leaders in a private sector organization who had at least 2 years' experience. Qualitative content analysis was used, employing deductive and inductive coding. Five themes emerged: (a) workplace bias and discrimination, (b) microaggressions and workplace hostility compromising psychological safety and well-being, (c) absence of mentorship, sponsorship and exclusion from professional networks, (d) recommend development of mentorship and sponsorship programs and blind evaluation processes, and (e) recommend cultural competency training for leadership teams and diversity hiring. The findings of this study may contribute to positive social change by informing business leaders of challenges, and recommendations to cultivate the representation of Black women in executive leadership roles in the United States.

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Dedication

To my beloved daughter KrissLynn,

In every heartbeat, in every breath, I find echoes of my love for you. Through the divine wisdom of Matthew 19:26, remember that all things are truly possible. Let there be no mountain too high, no challenge too great, and no dream too distant. Stand firm in your convictions; never compromise your integrity or your true self to conform to another's expectations. Advocate for your own needs and desires fiercely and lovingly.

To my life partner, whose wisdom has unveiled to me the myriad hues of life, thank you for expanding my horizons, for urging me to ponder deeply, and for teaching me to embrace all souls wherever they stand, always hoping for the brighter days that faith foretells.

To my siblings, thank you for teaching me the dual arts of love and release. Your support and shared experiences have been my guide through life's complexities, teaching me how to hold on tightly to what matters while also having the courage to let go when necessary. Your influence is a quiet thread woven through the fabric of my life.

And to my mother, your resilience, persistence, and strength are the pillars on which I have built my life. Your journey, fraught with challenges yet abundant in triumphs, inspires me daily. I marvel at your strength and am eternally grateful for the sacrifices you made, often unseen and unsung.

May this work be a testament to the love and lessons you have each instilled in me. Love God, love yourself, and may you live each day with the fullness of joy that each new dawn brings. With all the love in my heart - I love you!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Study

In this study, I focused on crucial issues regarding the role of diversity, equity, and ethics in healthcare, education, and corporate leadership. Specifically, in this study, I examined women of color and Black women in both the public and private sectors, particularly in relation to their status as executive leaders. Although Black women occupy many ranks in the workforce, they are rarely found in top-level positions. Thus, it was essential to critically examine the underrepresentation of women in executive roles, as affects fairness, equal opportunity, and has substantial implications for organizational performance and business competitiveness (M. Lee, 2021). Organizations and institutions benefit from diverse leadership enriched with various problem-solving experiences and viewpoints. Without proper representation at the highest levels, the valuable perspectives, and potential contributions that Black women could provide based on their unique experiences and identities will not be fully realized or leveraged to benefit organizations.

The continued underrepresentation of Black women in leadership roles affects efforts to recruit, retain, and promote other women in those industries or those aspiring to leadership. When African American women rarely see themselves in positions of power and esteem, it may demoralize those who otherwise would have pursued advanced career pathways (Kowalewska, 2020). In this study, I explored the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles and their recommendations to address the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles. These study results may also serve as the foundation for initiating socially and organizationally driven change focused on a more

equitable distribution of opportunities. Reducing diversity biases promotes a stronger sense of inclusion and empowerment for all employees across sectors.

In Chapter 1, I provide important context and framing for the research study. In this chapter, I outline the background of the study and the problem of underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles as discussed in the existing literature. The problem statement is clearly articulated, and the purpose of the study and research questions are also presented. The conceptual frameworks of critical race theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings, 2009) and Black feminist theory (BFT) (Hill Collins, 1990, 2000) served as lenses through which the research problem was explored. Details regarding the qualitative research method and design are discussed in the nature of the study section. Key terms are defined to ensure clear understanding of concepts throughout the paper. Assumptions, scope, limitations, and the significance of the study were also presented. Finally, in the summary section, I synthesize the major elements of Chapter 1.

Background

Although women comprise more than half of the workforce in the United States, they remain underrepresented in the upper echelons of leadership (Forbes Staff, 2019). There is a significant deficiency in representation and a shortage of opportunities available for Black women specifically. Recent research by D. Lee and Hess (2022) investigating Fortune 500 companies indicated that executive and board roles held by Black women account for barely 1%. Black women represent only 6% of college and university presidents (West et al., 2016). In healthcare leadership, they hold a disproportionately small share of executive roles, only 4% (Helman et al., 2020). This

persistent gap suggests that systemic barriers may be preventing Black women from achieving equitable access to leadership opportunities. Past quantitative research by Dover et al. (2020) relied heavily on surveys and demographic data, which did not capture the nuanced insights of Black women themselves. In contrast, qualitative methods can provide a more in-depth understanding of underrepresentation by amplifying the lived experiences of those directly affected. Through qualitative inquiry, participants' descriptions of overcoming barriers, seeking support, and proposing recommendations may offer stakeholders culturally competent and meaningful strategies for change.

Gaining insight into the problem through the perspectives of those most impacted will be essential for addressing systemic inequities and transforming organizational cultures. The findings of this study may contribute to improved practices in recruitment, retention, and leadership development. By highlighting Black women's leadership perceptions, in this study, I aimed to fill an existing gap in knowledge regarding the challenges Black women face regarding their advancement and equitable representation across various industries in executive leadership positions. Participants' voices offered new perceptions that can inform the creation of inclusive leadership cultures that better reflect the diversity of society.

Problem Statement

The problem that was addressed through this study is that Black women are underrepresented in executive leadership roles in the United States. The extent to which systemic barriers and lack of opportunity have contributed to this persistent underrepresentation across industries remains unknown. Although a substantial body of

literature in the past 5 years has addressed diversity at a broad level, there remains a critical need to explore the specific mechanisms and lived realities underlying this disparity, particularly from the perspectives of those most affected (Carrel et al., 2022; Marvel, 2021).

Census data indicate that African American women hold less than 1% of executive and board roles within Fortune 500 companies (D. Lee & Hess, 2022) In higher education, only 6% of college presidents are Black women, despite their representation as 17% of female students. These statistics underscore the persistence of the problem and the inadequacy of current approaches to resolve it.

Accordingly, there was a need to conduct further investigation that centered the perspectives of Black women executives. Their insights and recommendations may illuminate structural and cultural barriers, offering a nuanced understanding of the problem through a lens of race, gender, and power. A qualitative study was an appropriate approach to uncover these dynamics and may contributed novel insights that informed organizational policy, leadership development, and systemic transformation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles and their recommendations for addressing their continued underrepresentation. Gaining insight into the leadership trajectories of Black women across various sectors provided meaningful contributions to understanding the systemic and structural barriers they faced. The voices of these professionals were used to bridge

gaps in the current literature by contextualizing lived experiences of navigating race and gender dynamics in executive environments. Exploring how Black women describe overcoming obstacles and what types of support they believed should be institutionalized offered valuable strategies for promoting equity and advancing leadership opportunities for historically underrepresented groups.

Research Questions

There remained a critical need to deepen understanding of the experiences of underrepresented Black women executives as they navigated barriers to leadership advancement. To address this gap in practice identified in the literature, I explored the perceptions and experiences of Black women leaders through a focused qualitative inquiry guided by the following research questions:

Research question 1 (RQ1): What are the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What are the recommendations of Black women executives for addressing the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles?

Conceptual Framework

I used two conceptual frameworks for this study: CRT (Ladson-Billings, 2009) and BFT (Hill Collins, 1990, 2000). CRT, as introduced in the educational context by Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009), originated from legal scholarship and later expanded to examine systemic racism in education and other societal institutions. Using CRT,

Ladson-Billings asserted that racism was not merely the result of individual bias, but rather a structural and institutional norm embedded in policies, practices, and systems (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Long, 2021; Sulé, 2020). The central proposition according to Ladson-Billings in applying CRT is that racism operates as an enduring framework that controlled and reproduced racial inequalities across domains, including education and leadership (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

BFT, introduced by Hill Collins (2000), emphasizes the unique experiences and knowledge of Black women at the intersection of race, gender, and class. BFT emerged as a response to the exclusion of Black women's voices from both traditional feminist and civil rights movements. According to Hill Collins, in applying BFT, Black women's collective identity and lived experiences as function to provide critical insight and resistance to systemic oppression (Hill Collins, 1990, 2000; Schmidt et al., 2023). A key proposition of BFT is that Black women experience compounded discrimination—both racial and gendered, which must be understood through an intersectional lens (Brantley, 2023).

Both CRT and BFT align with the basic qualitative research design and research questions of this study. CRT's focus on amplifying the voices of marginalized groups supports the study's aim of exploring the lived experiences of Black female executives navigating systemic barriers to leadership. I used in-depth, semistructured interviews to allow participants to share their perceptions on inequity, discrimination, and leadership access in ways that reflect the paradigms central to BFT and CRT (see Hill Collins, 1990, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Similarly, BFT's emphasis on shared experiences and community knowledge among Black women reinforced the study's methodological approach, which identified common themes across participants' narratives (see Eldh et al., 2020). Both frameworks were relevant to the first research question by highlighting the effect of discrimination on career outcomes, and to the second research question by recognizing Black women's ability to articulate transformative recommendations grounded in lived experiences. These conceptual lenses informed all aspects of the research methodology, analysis, and interpretation, as I sought to illuminate structural inequities and elevate solutions defined by those most affected.

Nature of the Study

I conducted a qualitative study to explore how Black women executives perceive and experience barriers to achieving executive-level leadership positions. I selected a qualitative research design to enable an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon from the perspectives of individuals directly experiencing it (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Participants took part in semistructured interviews that allowed them to describe their leadership journeys and the ways they have addressed organizational and systemic barriers. The study findings revealed the reported perceptions and experiences from Black women regarding why Black women remain significantly underrepresented in top executive roles in comparison to their White male counterparts.

The central focus of this investigation was the persistent underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles across U.S. industries. Although Black women currently comprise approximately 7.1% of the U.S. population, they remain

largely absent from senior leadership positions (D. Lee & Hess, 2022). This trend is well documented in literature across corporate, nonprofit, educational, and healthcare sectors (Helman et al., 2020; Kowalewska, 2020). I captured insights from Black women who have attained executive leadership roles despite facing systemic and institutional barriers.

In this study, I used a basic qualitative design to address the study's purpose and research questions. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with a purposive sample of 13 Black women currently serving in executive positions across the United States. Snowball sampling was also utilized to identify additional eligible participants. Interviews were conducted either via video conference, using only the audio function only. All interviews were audio recorded with consent and were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

I analyzed the data using content analysis guided by Yin's (2016) five-phase process for qualitative data analysis. I used this process to identify themes that captured participants' perspectives on barriers to executive leadership and their recommendations for addressing underrepresentation. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of systemic inequities and inform actionable solutions for increasing equity in leadership representation.

Definitions

Basic qualitative study: A basic qualitative study is research that seeks to understand how people interpret and make meaning of their experiences and the world around them (Eldh et al., 2020).

Black Feminist Theory (BFT): Black Feminist Theory is a theoretical framework that addresses the unique forms of oppression that Black women experience at the intersection of race, gender, and class (Hill Collins, 2000)

Critical Race Theory (CRT): CRT is a framework that asserts racism is a normalized and embedded feature of society, perpetuated through laws, policies, and institutional structures that reproduce racial inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano, 2021).

Diversity: Diversity refers to the presence of differences within a given setting, such as race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, language, ability status, marital status, educational background, or personality type (Helman et al., 2020).

Executive leadership roles: Executive leadership roles are top-level positions with significant authority and responsibility for strategic decision-making and organizational management (Schmidt et al., 2023).

Intersectionality: Intersectionality is a term that was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, a prominent civil rights advocate and leading scholar on critical race theory. She introduced the concept to address the experiences of oppression that could not be understood as a result of ordinary patterns of discrimination but that multiple social categories, such as race, class, and gender, intersect at the individual level, creating overlapping and interdependent systems of disadvantage or discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991).

Qualitative research: Qualitative research is a methodological approach that investigates human or social problems through the collection of rich, descriptive data in natural settings, with sensitivity to participants' contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Systemic barriers: Systemic barriers are structural obstacles embedded in policies, practices, and institutions that create or reinforce inequality for specific groups (Hardeman et al., 2016).

Underrepresentation: Underrepresentation refers to the unequal or disproportionately low inclusion of a social group relative to their proportion in the general population (Eldh et al., 2020).

Assumptions

In this study, I assumed that Black women in executive leadership roles would be willing and able to openly share their experiences and perspectives regarding the challenges they have faced and the strategies they have employed to attain leadership positions. This assumption was essential because I relied on rich, firsthand narratives obtained through semistructured interviews. However, participants might have chosen to withhold specific details, particularly those involving sensitive or personal strategies, which could limit the depth and scope of the data collected.

I informed participants during the consent process that their participation was entirely voluntary. They retained the right to skip any question or withdraw from the study at any time. Establishing rapport and trust during the informed consent process will be critical to encouraging open and authentic dialogue (see Creswell & Poth, 2017).

I assumed that the experiences shared by participants would provide valuable insight into the broader issue of the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership. I based this assumption on the premise that a small, purposive sample could yield meaningful patterns and themes that contribute to the scholarly understanding of leadership inequities. Although I acknowledged that each participant's unique environment could influence her career trajectory, I assumed that shared themes across interviews would provide relevant and transferable knowledge for practitioners, scholars, and organizational leaders seeking to foster more inclusive leadership cultures.

Although the findings of this study were not intended to be statistically generalizable, the use of a qualitative design was appropriate for examining this complex and nuanced issue. By focusing on the lived experiences of Black women executives, I aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of the systemic barriers to leadership and the strategies these women used to overcome them.

Scope and Delimitations

In this study, I addressed the problem of the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles within corporate organizations in the United States. In this study, I examined the perceptions and experiences of Black women who have attained executive-level positions to identify the barriers they encountered in advancing their careers and to gather their recommendations for overcoming those obstacles. Black women were the focus of this study because, despite decades of organizational diversity efforts, they remained significantly underrepresented at the highest levels of leadership (Marvel, 2021). Gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences of those who have

navigated and overcome these challenges provided valuable insight for promoting leadership equity.

The scope of the study was limited to the career trajectories, leadership experiences, and perceived barriers and solutions as described by Black women currently serving in executive roles. While leadership disparities among other demographic groups, such as those related to ethnicity, sexuality, or disability, are equally important to explore, they fell outside the boundaries of this research.

The delimitations of this study included its exclusive focus on Black women and the use of a basic qualitative design. As such, findings were not intended to be generalizable to all populations but are intended to provide contextually rich, transferable insights. Additionally, while various leadership theories could have been used to examine executive experiences (e.g., transformational leadership or motivation theory), this study was grounded in CRT and BFT due to their direct relevance to the intersection of race, gender, and systemic power structures. Although the participant pool was limited, the detailed, first-person accounts were expected to yield meaningful data for human resource professionals, diversity leaders, and scholars seeking to foster more inclusive and equitable leadership environments.

Limitations

Several limitations were anticipated in this study, primarily related to the research design, data collection methods, and the role of the researcher. One limitation was the small, purposive sample size typical of basic qualitative research. While the study aimed to gather rich, in-depth data from a select group of Black women executives through one-

on-one interviews, the limited number of participants may have affected the transferability of the findings to the broader population of Black female executives. Although efforts were made to include participants from diverse industries and backgrounds, the insights gained reflected the specific experiences of those interviewed rather than offering generalizable conclusions.

A second limitation was associated with the use of semistructured interviews. Participants may have chosen to withhold certain details due to the personal or sensitive nature of the subject matter, which could have limited the depth and breadth of the data collected (see Eldh et al., 2020). Despite efforts to build rapport and ensure participant comfort, there remained the possibility of incomplete disclosure. Additionally, participants' recollections and responses may have been shaped by their own biases or the perceived expectations of the interviewer (see Tomaszewski et al., 2020). To address these issues, member checking was employed to verify the accuracy of interpretations and clarify meaning.

A third potential limitation involved the researcher bias, given that the researcher was solely responsible for conducting interviews, analyzing data, and interpreting results. There was a risk that personal perspectives or assumptions could unintentionally influence the process. To mitigate this risk, reflexivity was practiced throughout the study. A reflective journal was maintained to document thoughts, assumptions, and decision-making throughout data collection and analysis (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). In addition, strategies such as bracketing, audit trails, and analytic memos were implemented to promote transparency and reduce the risk of confirmation bias (see

O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; see Shava et al., 2021). Member checking and peer debriefing were also utilized as strategies to enhance trustworthiness and credibility. While these limitations could not be entirely eliminated, acknowledging them and implementing methodological safeguards strengthened the rigor and validity of the study's findings.

Significance

This study had the potential to expand scholarly understanding of organizational leadership by addressing a gap in the literature concerning the challenges Black women face in attaining executive leadership positions. While diversity in leadership had been widely discussed, limited research had centered the voices of Black women executives and their firsthand experiences with systemic barriers. By analyzing diverse participant perspectives, this study aimed to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership roles.

The findings of this study contributed to identifying previously overlooked causes of inequity and informing a more complex view of leadership culture, one that acknowledged the intersection of race, gender, and institutional power. In doing so, the research findings may help fill a gap in practice that promotes awareness of how dominant leadership structures and practices can perpetuate exclusion.

Practically, the study findings offer actionable recommendations to organizations and leadership practitioners. Participant insights regarding mentorship, sponsorship, and systemic support structures could inform the development of policies and practices aimed at improving recruitment, retention, and advancement for Black women leaders. Organization leaders could draw upon these findings to implement inclusive strategies

such as equitable evaluation frameworks, flexible work environments, and intentional leadership development initiatives. On a broader level, the results may inform communication and advocacy efforts with professional associations or governmental agencies to support policy reforms that address structural bias. By amplifying the realities and resilience of Black female executives, the study findings moved the conversation from abstract rhetoric to concrete institutional change.

The implications for positive social change include increased visibility and affirmation of Black women's leadership contributions. Recognizing their experiences could inspire others from historically marginalized communities to pursue leadership roles, helping to diversify executive pipelines and reshape perceptions of who can lead. As more inclusive leadership models take root, organizations and society at large may benefit from a more equitable and representative distribution of power and influence.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I introduced the persistent underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles across industries in the U. S., despite their significant presence and contributions in the workforce. In the problem statement, I shared the phenomenon that was focused on in this study and the evidence that established the disparity as a systemic equity issue, highlighting how barriers related to race, gender, and organizational culture restrict leadership access. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles and their recommendations to address the underrepresentation of Black women in executive

leadership roles. A basic qualitative research design using semistructured interviews of 13 participants was selected to capture participants' voices and ensure that their perceptions remained central to the inquiry.

This chapter also outlined the significance of the study that would be accomplished by closing a gap in practice related to a more nuanced understanding of equity in organizational advancement. The findings are expected to inform diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies in executive leadership pipelines, highlight the importance of culturally responsive mentorship and evaluation systems, and provide actionable recommendations for dismantling institutional barriers. More broadly, in this study, the study findings promote positive social change by amplifying the voices of Black women leaders and challenging the structural inequities that perpetuate exclusion at the highest levels of leadership. In Chapter 2, I extend this foundation by reviewing the literature on leadership disparities, intersectionality, and representation, thereby contextualizing the study within existing scholarship.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles and their recommendations for addressing their continued underrepresentation. In this study, I addressed the problem that Black women remain significantly underrepresented in executive leadership roles in the United States. This issue has been reaffirmed by multiple scholars, including Huang et al. (2019) and Ely et al. (2011).

These findings collectively underscore the structural inequities that limited access to executive leadership for Black women. Taken together, these study findings demonstrate that the underrepresentation of Black women was not only a statistical disparity but also evidence of enduring systemic inequities across industries. This evidence reinforces the purpose of the present study, which was to capture the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles and their recommendations for addressing their continued underrepresentation. In Chapter 2, I present the literature review, beginning with the search strategy used to identify relevant research. Next, I then examine existing literature related to the key concepts of executive leadership disparities, intersectionality, and leadership theory, followed by a discussion of the study's guiding conceptual frameworks: CRT and BFT.

Literature Search Strategy

In my literature review, I used online libraries and databases such as Google Scholar, Academic Search Complete, EBSCO Open Access, Education Source, ERIC, and PsycINFO to identify relevant studies and research discussing leadership disparities and the underrepresentation of Black women in executive roles. I employed an organized search strategy using clearly defined research variables and terms to locate scholarly literature aligned with the purpose of the study.

In the search plan, I used various combinations of keywords and study concepts to generate the most relevant results. The literature search strategy accounted for appropriate subtopics by employing a range of keywords, terms, and phrases. The database filters were limited to studies published after 2017 to ensure the inclusion of recent literature. However, foundational studies from earlier periods were included to provide historical context where necessary.

The following search terms were applied: *gender disparity in leadership*, *gender disparity in leadership in the U.S.*, *challenges women face in leadership*, *challenges women face in leadership in the U.S.*, *future of women in leadership*, and *gender and racial disparity in leadership in the U.S.* These terms were combined using Boolean operators to refine and expand results as needed.

In addition to peer-reviewed articles, publications, and reports from sources such as QScience.com, DFAJ, and the West African Arabic Manuscript Database were also consulted. These supplementary sources provided global and contextual insights that supported the framing of the study. This layered approach ensured a comprehensive and

balanced review by integrating both contemporary scholarship and respected agency publications. By employing this multi-source strategy, I established a strong foundation for identifying gaps in existing knowledge and for advancing the discussion on leadership disparities. This systematic process ensured that both contemporary and historical perspectives were considered, thereby supporting a well-rounded understanding of the problem and creating a logical transition into the subsequent review of key concepts and variables.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, I was guided by two theoretical frameworks: CRT, first formulated by Derrick Bell and later applied in education by Ladson-Billings (1998), and BFT, introduced by Patricia Hill Collins in 1990. The central focus of the study was the persistent underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles across U.S. industries. Scholars such as Fassiotto et al. (2020) identified numerous systemic barriers that hinder the inclusion of Black women in top-tier leadership, contributing to their ongoing underrepresentation.

Ladson-Billings (1998) in applying CRT, posited that racism is entrenched within societal systems, including legal, educational, and institutional structures, and is perpetuated through policies, rules, and procedures that produce racially disparate outcomes (Solórzano, 2021). Rather than being viewed solely as an issue of individual bias, racism is understood as a structural and normalized force within U.S. institutions. CRT has been applied across disciplines by researchers such as Busey et al. (2023) and Pedroso et al. (2023), who explored how race influences representation and inequities in

education and social systems. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) emphasized CRT's role in promoting counter-narratives from marginalized groups to reveal structural injustice and drive social change. The core tenets of CRT include: (a) racism is ordinary and not aberrational in U.S. society; (b) storytelling and lived experience were essential in examining race; (c) CRT critiques liberalism's race-neutral ideologies; and (d) it promotes racial realism as a framework for understanding systemic inequality. In the context of this study, CRT served as a foundation for examining how legal and organizational structures may contribute to the underrepresentation of Black women in executive roles.

Busey et al. (2023) used CRT to examine the crossover of African American girls from child welfare systems into juvenile justice, highlighting how race and systemic inequities shape institutional experiences. Pedroso et al. (2023) applied CRT in higher education settings to enhance students' understanding of societal inequities. Both study findings illustrate CRT's relevance in unpacking structural racism and informing transformative practice. Critics of CRT, such as Ray and Gibbons (2021), noted increasing opposition to its use, especially in educational contexts, where some states have sought to prohibit it. Despite this controversy, CRT remains a powerful lens for understanding structural disadvantage and race-based exclusion.

BFT, introduced by (Hill Collins, 1990), emphasizes shared experience, collectivism, and cultural solidarity among Black women. This theory emerged as a response to the exclusion of Black women from mainstream feminist and civil rights movements, which were often centered on White women's experiences (Bell et al.,

2021). BFT highlights how race, gender, and class intersect to produce unique forms of oppression for Black women and encourages the creation of knowledge based on Black women lived experiences.

BFT has been applied in a variety of disciplines. For example, Bell, et al. (2021) A. Holder et al. (2015) explored Black women's learning strategies and used BFT to critique Western academic traditions and promote Afrocentric research approaches. Their study combined BFT with qualitative research methods such as narrative inquiry, case study, and ethnography, using tools like interviews, documents, and observation. Similarly, L. V. Jones and Harris (2019) used BFT to examine racial and gendered health disparities experienced by Black women. They concluded that BFT was critical in revealing systemic power structures that negatively impact Black women's health and well-being.

BFT serves as a complementary framework to CRT by centering the voices, cultural values, and communal knowledge of Black women. I used this framework, BFT, as a lens to understand the intersection of Black women's personal and professional identities and to examine their experiences navigating leadership spaces. In summary, the integration of CRT and BFT provide a robust conceptual foundation for this study. Together, they supported the investigation of the systemic, institutional, and cultural factors contributing to the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership. CRT offered insight into how racism is embedded in organizational systems, while BFT highlighted the significance of lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and resilience among Black women leaders. By grounding the study in CRT and BFT, in this literature

review, I established the conceptual foundation necessary for examining structural barriers and amplifying the voices of Black women executives. In the next section, I turn to existing scholarship on leadership disparities to situate these frameworks within broader patterns of inequity.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

Leadership Disparity

Leadership disparity, particularly as it affects women, is a widespread phenomenon across both public and private institutions. Research by Bernardi et al. (2020a) and Knoll et al. (2019) showed that gender-based leadership disparities persist despite decades of organizational reform efforts. In a qualitative study examining women in corporate leadership, Bernardi et al. (2020b) explored the systemic challenges these leaders face and the strategies they use to navigate them. Their study, which included in-depth interviews with 20 women across diverse industries, revealed that participants frequently encountered gender-based discrimination and stereotyping. However, they employed strategies such as mentorship, networking, and self-advocacy to overcome these barriers. The researchers emphasized the importance of inclusive organizational cultures and recommended creating spaces for mentorship and professional development to help women advance into leadership roles.

Similarly, Yue and Khosa (2020) conducted a mixed-methods study involving 500 women leaders across 100 tech startups. Their findings supported those of Bernardi et al. (2020b), confirming that women in leadership roles continue to experience challenges related to discrimination and exclusion. Their study also emphasized the

critical role that inclusive organizational cultures play in enabling women's advancement. Participants held a variety of high-level positions, such as chief executive officer, CEO, and chief technology officer, CTO, and represented a broad range of organizational sizes and sectors. The researchers found that inclusive environments and structural supports, such as access to leadership networks, key factors in mitigating leadership disparities.

The intersection of race and gender further compounds leadership inequality for women of color. Knoll et al. (2019) investigated this intersectionality within tech startup companies and found that women of color experience a double bind facing compounded discrimination based on both race and gender. Using a qualitative design that included in-depth interviews and observational research, their study findings revealed how intersecting biases led to additional challenges in leadership advancement. The researchers applied CRT to explore how racial and gender-based discrimination shaped participants' professional trajectories. Despite these obstacles, women leaders of color demonstrated resilience by leveraging mentorship, community support, and identity-centered strategies to advance in their careers. Knoll et al. concluded that addressing intersectional disparities requires organizations to adopt inclusive practices that acknowledge and confront both racial and gender-based biases.

Other researchers have highlighted the role of traditional power structures, organizational networks, and generational differences as contributors to leadership disparity. Kassam et al. (2021), through an ethnographic study of nonprofit organizations, found that leadership disparities deeply embedded in established philanthropic networks and long-standing cultural hierarchies. Their data, collected through fieldwork,

interviews, and document analysis, showed that such networks often reinforced exclusionary practices and limited access to leadership roles for underrepresented groups. The researchers recommended fostering equity in access to donor relationships and internal leadership pipelines to reduce systemic bias.

Odell et al. (2019) explored how generational differences also contribute to leadership disparity. Their study involved interviews with leaders from multiple generational cohorts, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials and used thematic analysis to examine differences in leadership styles and opportunities. The results indicated that older generations often maintained greater access to leadership positions, while younger leaders emphasized more collaborative approaches. These generational dynamics influenced perceptions of leadership readiness and created gaps in access to opportunities. Odell et al. concluded that organizations should bridge generational divides and support diverse leadership approaches by redefining leadership criteria and expanding access to networks.

In summary, existing research findings show that leadership inequities are influenced by a combination of interconnected factors such as race, gender, organizational culture, generation, and access to professional networks (Ely et al., 2011; Lomboy, 2020). These disparities are especially pronounced for Black women and other women of color, whose experiences are informed by layered systems of exclusion. This evidence reinforces the importance of examining leadership inequities through an intersectional lens and provide a foundation for the following section on corporate

executive leadership, where such disparities manifest in particularly persistent and complex ways.

Corporate Leadership Disparity

Leadership disparity in the private sector has been found to be driven in part by self-serving motives among organizational leaders. Kim and Ji (2021), for example, explored the reputational effects of corporate social responsibility (CSR) donations made by corporate leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Conducting surveys in both the U. S. and China, the researchers found that public awareness of CSR activities influenced how self-serving versus altruistic those actions were perceived. Their findings revealed that participants in the U.S. were more likely than those in China to accept self-serving motives, particularly when CSR actions led to favorable publicity for corporate leaders or their companies. The researchers concluded that institutional context and public knowledge of CSR motives play a significant role in shaping corporate and national reputations. These findings underscore how seemingly benevolent leadership actions can mask self-serving motives, ultimately reinforcing disparities in recognition and advancement within corporate structures.

In a related study, Javed et al. (2020) investigated how corporate social responsibility (CSR) affects both organizational image and profitability within a sample of 224 senior managers in Pakistan. Drawing from stakeholder and contingency theory, they found that socially responsible practices enhanced company performance and reputation. However, their results also revealed that leaders sometimes leveraged CSR activities to elevate their personal visibility and career advancement rather than to

promote genuine organizational equity. These findings suggest that personal motives such as enhancing one's own professional standing can influence leadership behavior and reinforce disparities in recognition and advancement. Taken together with Kim and Ji (2021), these study findings demonstrate that leadership behavior often privileges individual reputations over systemic equity, which can disadvantage women and racial minorities competing for advancement.

In the U.S. context, Caillier (2020) studied self-serving leadership behavior and its consequences for equity in organizational advancement. The researcher found that business leaders frequently rationalized inequitable behaviors, such as hoarding resources or promotion opportunities, through a psychological process called motivated reasoning. This tendency was associated with a perceived entitlement to leadership roles, which disadvantaged women and people of color. Caillier concluded that motivated reasoning not only sustains leadership disparity but also reinforces unequal access to advancement. This pattern revealed how inequities in corporate advancement are often rationalized as legitimate, further entrenching systemic exclusion.

Beyond self-interest, racial and gender biases are widely recognized as structural drivers of corporate leadership disparity. Drawing from qualitative interviews with senior leaders in Fortune 100 companies, Ali et al. (2023) found that racial and gender identity significantly shaped leadership access and advancement. The researchers emphasized that achieving genuine equity required intentional mentorship, inclusive policies, and bias-free decision-making at all organizational levels. In a complementary study, Asogwa et al. (2019) reported that women leaders frequently encountered stereotypes in hiring and

evaluation, particularly those tied to family or caregiving expectations, which limited advancement opportunities. Women in the study reported challenges balancing work and family expectations and noted the limited visibility of women in senior roles as a persistent obstacle to upward mobility. The authors concluded that gender equity in leadership required intentional efforts to counter bias, implement supportive policies, and increase representation at the executive level. These findings highlight how structural barriers operate across recruitment, evaluation, and promotion, perpetuating unequal access to executive leadership for women and racial minorities.

Intersectionality further compounds these barriers. Alvesson and Einola (2019) conducted in-depth interviews with senior executives who identified as both racial and gender minorities and found that these individuals faced unique challenges tied to their intersecting identities. These challenges included reduced access to sponsorship, fewer mentors who shared similar backgrounds, and systemic exclusion from elite networks. The authors emphasized that addressing leadership disparity requires not only general diversity policies but also those that directly acknowledge and respond to intersectional disadvantages. This reinforced the importance of intersectional analysis for this study, as Black women's experiences cannot be understood without accounting for the overlapping effects of race and gender.

Accordingly, Rock (2020) added that leadership style also influences disparity outcomes. In a study combining interviews and content analysis, Rock found that leaders who embraced inclusive leadership styles were more effective at fostering equity and reducing race- and gender-based disparities. Inclusive leaders were more likely to support

diverse teams, create psychologically safe environments, and distribute leadership opportunities more equitably. This evidence illustrates that leadership disparity is not inevitable; rather, it can be disrupted by intentional inclusive practices, a central concern of this study.

In summary, study findings demonstrate that leadership disparity in the private sector is driven by a combination of self-serving motives, racial and gender bias, and a lack of inclusive leadership practices. These dynamics create systemic barriers for women and racial minorities, particularly those navigating intersecting identities. Addressing these challenges requires more than broad-based diversity programs; it demanded intentional leadership development, cultural change, and policies that prioritized equity at the highest levels of organizational power. Building on these findings, in the next section, I examine executive leadership disparity, where inequities are even more deeply entrenched.

Executive Leadership Disparity

Women and people of color remain significantly underrepresented in executive and senior leadership roles, a disparity often attributed to the phenomenon known as the “glass ceiling”—the invisible barrier that prevents qualified individuals from advancing into top leadership positions (Goswami et al., 2022). This trend is especially evident in industries such as technology, finance, and healthcare, where white males continue to dominate the highest levels of organizational leadership. Studies by Goswami et al. (2022) and Shaikh et al. (2019) have confirmed that both racial and gender biases contribute to slower promotion rates and unequal leadership opportunities for these

groups. This evidence highlights that exclusion at the executive level was not the result of individual shortcomings but rather a systemic pattern of inequity embedded in organizational cultures. Together, these findings emphasize that barriers at the executive level are structural, not personal, setting the stage for examining how promotion practices perpetuate inequity.

Goswami et al. (2022) conducted a longitudinal study using data from a wide range of organizations to analyze promotion trends based on race and gender. Their findings revealed that women and people of color were consistently promoted at slower rates than their white male counterparts, despite having comparable qualifications. The researchers emphasized that addressing these disparities requires not only long-term organizational commitment but also significant cultural change and targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies. These findings reinforce the need for organizations to move beyond symbolic diversity efforts and commit to structural reforms that prioritize equity in advancement. This conclusion provides context for related phenomena such as the “glass cliff,” which illustrates another way bias shapes women’s leadership opportunities.

Shaikh et al. (2019) examined the glass cliff phenomenon, which refers to the tendency for women to be appointed to leadership positions in organizations that are experiencing crises or are at risk of failure. Through content analysis of leadership appointments and surveys of senior executives, the researchers found that women were more likely to be placed in precarious leadership roles compared to men. The study findings were that such appointments reflect gender bias and risk positioning women for

failure. Addressing the glass cliff, they argued, is essential to ensuring that women are not set up for disproportionate scrutiny or blame when placed in high-risk leadership roles. This dynamic demonstrates how systemic inequities not only limited access to leadership but also placed women at higher risk of professional harm once leadership positions were attained. These findings highlight the need for intentional policy interventions to counteract inequitable practices.

In response to these systemic challenges, affirmative action policies have played a meaningful role in increasing the representation of women and people of color in leadership, particularly in higher education and business. Kuo et al. (2019) and Spector and Overholser (2019) provided empirical evidence demonstrating the positive effects of such policies while also acknowledging the persistent presence of bias and structural barriers. Their work shows that policy solutions, while necessary, cannot fully resolve inequities without cultural transformation.

For instance, Kuo et al. (2019) examined the positive effect of affirmative action on racial and gender representation in administrative leadership positions within higher education. Their national survey of university administrators showed that affirmative action policies had improved representation, but that systemic inequities still limited equitable access to top leadership roles. The researchers recommended continued efforts to combat implicit bias and promote equity-focused leadership pipelines. These study findings suggest that while policy interventions are effective in broadening representation, they are insufficient on their own without cultural shifts in leadership

selection and evaluation. This reinforces the importance of considering how intersectionality shapes women's access to leadership opportunities.

Spector and Overholser (2019) explored the intersection of race and gender and its effect on the experiences of women of color in business leadership. Using a mixed-methods approach that combined surveys and qualitative interviews, their study revealed that intersectional identities shape access to decision-making, mentorship, and leadership development opportunities. The researchers concluded that understanding and addressing intersectionality is critical to building truly inclusive organizations. This insight underscores how Black women face compounded disadvantages that cannot be explained by race or gender alone.

Across studies, researchers consistently emphasized that discriminatory practices, whether overt or subtle, contribute to unequal access to high-visibility projects, leadership training, and career advancement. This lack of access perpetuates disparities and reinforces the glass ceiling. The cumulative evidence illustrates that leadership inequities persist because organizational systems continue to advantage white men while marginalizing women of color. This conclusion underscores the importance of focusing specifically on the experiences of Black women executives in this study to illuminate barriers that remain hidden within broad diversity narratives.

Gender Disparity in Leadership

Gender disparity in leadership refers to the unequal representation of men and women in positions of authority across sectors such as politics, business, and academia. This longstanding issue is rooted in deeply embedded societal norms, institutional biases,

and cultural expectations. Researchers such as Qamar et al. (2020) and Wu et al. (2019) emphasized the role of unconscious stereotypes in shaping hiring, promotion, and evaluation decisions, ultimately leading to the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. These findings demonstrate that inequities in leadership cannot be explained by talent or qualifications alone but must be understood as products of systemic and cultural bias. This establishes the importance of examining not just individual outcomes, but the structures that sustain inequality.

Qamar et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study to explore the factors contributing to gender disparity in corporate leadership. Through interviews and content analysis of company documents, they found that systemic bias, gender-based stereotypes, and a lack of mentorship significantly hindered women's advancement. The study concluded that addressing these barriers requires organizational-level changes, including the implementation of supportive policies and targeted leadership development opportunities for women. This evidence underscores that meaningful progress in gender equity depends on structural interventions rather than individual effort alone. These insights build a foundation for understanding how institutional practices can either reinforce or dismantle barriers for women leaders.

Similarly, Wu et al. (2019) investigated the experiences of women who successfully navigated the "glass ceiling" to attain leadership roles. Using in-depth qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, the researchers identified recurring themes such as the critical role of mentorship, resilience, and strategic self-advocacy. The narratives shared by participants illuminated both the challenges and strategies employed

by women leaders and highlighted the value of lived experience in understanding and addressing gender disparity. These results illustrate that women's advancement is possible but often contingent upon extraordinary individual resilience in the absence of systemic support, reinforcing the urgency of organizational reform. This connects to broader concerns about whether systemic inequities can be addressed through individual adaptation alone.

Gender disparity in leadership extends beyond achieving numerical representation to confronting the institutional and cultural forces that sustain exclusion. Kubik-Huch et al. (2020) found that workplace norms and policy frameworks within male-dominated organizations frequently restricted women's access to influential decision-making roles. Their case analysis demonstrated that these environments normalized inequitable practices, reinforcing the need for comprehensive structural and cultural reform rather than symbolic inclusion. These insights underscore that gender equity requires transformation in culture and policy, not simply increases in representation.

Building on this, Riaz et al. (2020) explored how intersecting racial and gender identities compound barriers to leadership advancement. Drawing on qualitative interviews and supporting quantitative data from three nonprofit organizations, they reported that women of color often encounter "double discrimination," in which overlapping stereotypes about race and gender create cumulative disadvantage. Their findings highlight that equity efforts must account for intersectionality, as single-axis approaches fail to address the complexity of bias experienced by Black women in leadership contexts.

In summary, in this section of the literature review, researchers demonstrated that gender disparity in leadership is not a uniform phenomenon. Women's experiences vary significantly depending on race, organizational culture, and access to support systems. Achieving equity in leadership requires both institutional reform and intentional efforts to challenge gender norms while dismantling the structural inequities embedded within leadership pipelines. In the next section, I explore racial disparity in leadership, further contextualizing these systemic inequities and showing how race compounds gendered barriers.

History of Gender Disparity in Leadership

Gender inequality in leadership has deep historical roots extending from antiquity to the present day. Phipps and Prieto (2021) traced this imbalance to enduring cultural and institutional systems that framed power and decision-making as inherently male domains. In early societies such as ancient Greece and Rome, women were largely excluded from political, religious, and civic authority, while rare leaders like Cleopatra and Wu Zetian succeeded only under extraordinary conditions and opposition. These early patterns normalized exclusion and entrenched gendered assumptions about leadership that continue to influence cultural expectations today.

During the Middle Ages, patriarchal hierarchies such as feudalism continued to restrict women's advancement, despite a few exceptional figures like Eleanor of Aquitaine and Isabella of Castile who challenged social convention (Phipps & Prieto, 2021). Enlightenment philosophy expanded discourse on human rights, yet women's participation in leadership remained largely symbolic. Mary Wollstonecraft's advocacy

for gender equality exemplified how reformist ideals often coexisted with rigid gender norms (Covington et al., 2020). This period demonstrated that even as societies began to embrace concepts of equality, women's leadership was still treated as an exception rather than the norm.

The Industrial Revolution further transformed social and economic structures but continued to relegate most women to subordinate labor roles. Momentum toward civic inclusion accelerated only with the late-nineteenth-century suffrage movement. Activists across the United States, the United Kingdom, and other nations secured voting rights, establishing a foundation for broader participation in leadership and governance (Wooding et al., 2020). These milestones demonstrated that political enfranchisement was a necessary precursor to leadership equity but remained insufficient to dismantle enduring cultural resistance.

World War I and World War II marked turning points in gender dynamics, as women assumed critical roles in both industry and the military during wartime. This increased visibility helped challenge traditional assumptions about women's capabilities and leadership potential (Wooding et al., 2020). However, despite these contributions, women were often expected to return to domestic roles after the wars ended. Still, these experiences laid the groundwork for the feminist movements that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s. These shifts revealed that crises temporarily disrupted gender norms but did not permanently dismantle systemic barriers to women's leadership.

These feminist movements were instrumental in advancing gender equality, demanding equal rights, pay, and leadership opportunities. In the United States, the Civil

Rights Act of 1964 and similar legislation worldwide helped prohibit gender-based employment discrimination (Joseph et al., 2021). Although these legal reforms represented progress, cultural and organizational barriers to leadership remained deeply embedded. This showed that legislation was necessary but insufficient, as cultural practices continued to uphold inequitable systems.

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have witnessed substantial gains. Women have broken barriers in politics, business, and academia. Prominent leaders such as Angela Merkel and Christine Lagarde exemplify this progress (Aguwa et al., 2021). However, these gains have not eradicated gender inequality. Women remain underrepresented in corporate boardrooms, top government positions, and C-suite leadership roles. Thus, while visible role models advanced representation, structural inequities persisted beneath symbolic breakthroughs.

Recent efforts to address gender disparity have expanded beyond legal mandates to include cultural and institutional transformation. Initiatives promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion have gained traction in the corporate world. Women's empowerment movements such as #MeToo have further fueled global conversations about gender dynamics in professional environments (Taha et al., 2021). Taha et al. conducted a comprehensive review of literature on gender inequality and found that stereotypes, caregiving burdens, and biased organizational cultures continue to impede women's advancement.

Saleem et al. (2021) supported these findings through qualitative interviews with 31 women in or pursuing leadership roles. Their research highlighted how systemic

barriers persist, often subtly, in the form of exclusion from high-visibility projects, lack of mentorship, and resistance to inclusive leadership practices. The study reinforced that, although progress has been made, deeply rooted biases and structural inequities remain major obstacles for women in leadership. Hence, contemporary reforms and movements have not fully eliminated structural bias, and women continue to face systemic disadvantages that slow their advancement into leadership.

In summary, while progress in addressing gender disparity has been achieved through social movements, legal reforms, and shifting cultural norms, the journey toward full gender equity in leadership remains incomplete. The persistent underrepresentation of women, especially women of color, reflects the need for continued efforts that address both historical legacies and modern systemic challenges.

Current Drivers of Gender Disparity in Leadership

Gender disparity in leadership roles remains a persistent and multifaceted issue across global sectors. Despite advancements in legislation, education, and organizational policy, women continue to be underrepresented in top leadership roles in business, politics, academia, and science. This disparity is influenced by a complex interplay of structural, cultural, and individual-level barriers, including gender stereotypes, unconscious bias, limited mentorship, caregiving responsibilities, and the lack of flexible work arrangements (O'Connor, 2020; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). These study findings demonstrate that progress at the policy level has not translated into equitable outcomes in practice, as systemic and cultural forces continue to disadvantage women leaders.

One of the most significant drivers of gender disparity in leadership is the prevalence of gender stereotypes and unconscious bias. Deeply embedded cultural norms continue to associate leadership traits such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and decisiveness, with masculinity, while viewing empathy and collaboration as feminine traits (O'Connor, 2020). In a perception-based survey, O'Connor found that these biases frequently result in women being overlooked for leadership opportunities. Similarly, Chadwick and Baruah (2020) found that implicit gender bias shapes how women in intensive care medicine perceive and pursue leadership roles. Their study revealed that workplace cultures continue to reward traditionally masculine behaviors while discouraging women from pursuing advancement, particularly in high-stakes professions.

Beyond stereotypes, a lack of visible female role models and the unequal burden of caregiving responsibilities are major contributors to gender leadership gaps. Caleo and Halim (2021) argued that the scarcity of women in leadership reinforces the perception that such roles are inherently male, limiting women's aspirations and self-efficacy. Castaño et al. (2019) supported this by demonstrating that caregiving responsibilities, especially in heterosexual households, disproportionately fall on women. Their research found that many women struggle to devote the time and energy necessary for advancement into leadership roles, which often penalizes mothers more severely than fathers, which is a phenomenon known as the motherhood penalty. These study findings underscore how cultural expectations around caregiving reinforce workplace inequities, reducing women's visibility and limiting their leadership prospects.

Access to mentorship and sponsorship is another critical factor. Women frequently lack mentors who can advocate for their promotion and provide guidance in navigating leadership pathways. According to Castaño et al. (2019), “the absence of mentorship and sponsorship networks limits women’s ability to access influential circles and leadership development opportunities” (p. 87). This lack of strategic career support, compounded by exclusion from informal networks, hinders women's access to key leadership opportunities. Without intentional mentoring structures, women remain excluded from the informal networks that often determine access to executive leadership roles, which further perpetuates inequity in advancement.

Economic barriers also persist. The gender pay gap discourages leadership aspirations by signaling that women’s contributions are undervalued. Alqahtani (2020) found that unequal pay undermines women’s ability to invest in professional development, making it harder to access executive pathways. Additionally, workplace discrimination and harassment contribute to toxic environments that deter women from aspiring to leadership. Eckel et al. (2021) added that societal expectations reinforce gendered norms, rewarding men for assertive behavior while penalizing women for exhibiting the same traits. These expectations shape who is considered "leadership material," creating systemic disadvantage for women. Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that economic inequities and workplace cultures not only discourage women from aspiring to leadership but also undermine their ability to sustain advancement once in leadership tracks.

The lack of flexible work arrangements also presents a significant obstacle. Tabassum and Nayak (2021) noted that rigid work structures make it challenging for women, especially those with caregiving responsibilities, to maintain career progression. Lawson et al. (2022) expanded on this by demonstrating how the absence of flexible hours and unconscious bias in hiring and promotions limits women's advancement, particularly in male-dominated sectors. They also emphasized that the absence of women in decision-making bodies results in policies that often fail to consider women's needs or career paths. These findings illustrate that workplace structures continue to privilege male career trajectories while disregarding the dual professional and caregiving roles many women navigate.

In fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), gender disparities are especially pronounced. Steffens et al. (2019) found that stereotypes and exclusionary cultures discourage women from entering or remaining in these fields, ultimately limiting their rise into leadership. Moreover, a lack of transparency in promotion and compensation processes allows bias to persist unchecked. Marcelin et al. (2019) reinforced these findings, noting that women from underrepresented groups face even greater barriers due to intersectionality, the compounded effects of gender, race, ethnicity, and other identity factors. Thus, one must consider intersectionality in any effort to address gender disparity, as the compounded barriers faced by women of color extend far beyond gender bias alone.

In summary, contemporary gender disparity in leadership is shaped by a combination of structural and cultural barriers. These include stereotypes, biases,

caregiving responsibilities, lack of mentorship, inadequate pay transparency, inflexible work arrangements, workplace discrimination, and underrepresentation in decision-making spaces. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach involving organizational reforms, cultural transformation, and supportive public policy.

Researchers consistently emphasize that advancing gender equity in leadership is both a moral and strategic imperative, fostering innovation, inclusive governance, and sustainable development across sectors (Prime & Salib, 2014). This discussion transitions into the examination of racial disparity in leadership, which reveals additional layers of systemic exclusion.

Racial Disparity in Leadership

Racial equity has significantly influenced both access to and effectiveness in leadership roles. Studies by D. R. Jones and Mandell (2020) and Kyere and Fukui (2023) demonstrated that racial equity plays a critical role in enabling effective leadership, particularly within education and healthcare contexts. D. R. Jones and Mandell (2020) conducted a case study examining educational leaders' efforts to address racial disparities in student outcomes. Using interviews, observations, and policy analysis, they found that leaders who actively engaged with issues of racial equity were able to positively impact student achievement. However, the study also highlighted ongoing challenges related to resource allocation and community engagement, concluding that leadership alone is insufficient without systemic policy and resource reform. Thus, while equity-focused leaders can make a difference, sustainable progress depends on institutional and policy-level transformation.

Similarly, Kyere and Fukui (2023) explored the perspectives of racially diverse healthcare executives addressing disparities in health outcomes. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the researchers found that “leadership committed to equity must address structural barriers, resource limitations, and cultural competence simultaneously to achieve sustainable impact” (p. 48). While some leaders implemented successful strategies to reduce disparities, the researchers emphasized that meaningful progress requires institutional commitment and policy-level change. Taken together, these findings underscore that equity-oriented leadership must be both intentional and supported by systemic transformation, reinforcing the importance of connecting leadership practice with institutional accountability.

For Black women and other women of color, leadership advancement frequently obstructed by overlapping barriers including limited access to quality education, hiring and promotion discrimination, and persistent stereotypes. Galloway and Ishimaru (2020) and Irby et al. (2020) examined the nuanced leadership experiences of Black women and other minority leaders. Galloway and Ishimaru used narrative inquiry to explore how women of color navigate educational leadership roles while contending with cultural norms, social prejudice, racial and gender stereotypes, and androcentric leadership expectations. These dynamics often restrict leadership pathways and contribute to chronic underrepresentation in executive roles. Hence, Black women’s leadership opportunities are constrained by the compounding effects of structural, cultural, and gendered barriers.

Irby et al. (2020) conducted a review of the literature on the intersection of race and leadership, concluding that traditional leadership norms are often embedded in

dominant cultural frameworks that may not align with the leadership styles and approaches of minority individuals. They argued that racially biased organizational structures continue to inhibit leadership development, effectiveness, and visibility for people of color, particularly Black women.

Expanding on these insights, Santamaria et al. (2022) examined the experiences of Black, African American, and Migrant Indigenous women in leadership across academia and industry. Their findings confirmed the scarcity of published research and documented narratives of women of color in leadership, particularly within human resource development, posing a problem for understanding their unique challenges and needs. Using CRT, BFT, the researchers advocated for more intentional application of these frameworks to highlight the systemic forces impacting women of color in leadership roles. They emphasized the importance of narrative and storytelling to expose and understand power dynamics, discrimination, and exclusion within organizational settings.

Sims and Carter (2019) similarly explored the leadership experiences of African American women and proposed an update to the African American Women Executive Leadership Model. Their study concluded that this model must be adapted to reflect sociocultural differences and intersectional identities. They emphasized that leadership frameworks should consider how individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds enact leadership within varied cultural contexts. Such adaptations are essential for cultivating inclusive leadership environments that reflect the realities of Black women and other marginalized groups.

In summary, the literature strongly supports the need to center racial equity and intersectionality in leadership development and policy reform. Without acknowledging the systemic and structural barriers that uniquely affect women of color, particularly Black women, organizations will continue to reproduce exclusionary leadership norms. Incorporating theoretical perspectives such as CRT and BFT provides a foundation for elevating the voices of underrepresented leaders and ensuring that equity becomes an integral part of leadership effectiveness and design.

African American Women in Leadership Positions

Kea-Edwards et al. (2023) found that Black women leaders often receive less frequent and less constructive feedback than their White counterparts, partly because racial and gender biases influence how evaluators interpret performance. The researchers observed that evaluation instruments and leadership norms can unintentionally perpetuate inequities, restricting advancement opportunities. Using semistructured interviews and an intersectional lens grounded in Crenshaw's (1991) framework, they examined how race and gender shaped participants' experiences with leadership evaluations. The study findings were that Black women leaders received less frequent and less actionable feedback than their White peers. Additionally, the feedback instruments themselves were often influenced by racial and gender bias. One key recommendation was to allow Black women to select their evaluators, when possible, in order to receive more equitable and constructive feedback. The study emphasized the importance of systemic reforms to ensure consistent and unbiased performance evaluations that support leadership development. These findings highlight how biased evaluation practices not only

undermine leadership growth but also perpetuate systemic barriers that reinforce underrepresentation.

Johnson and Fournillier (2023) also conducted a qualitative phenomenological study, focusing on senior-level Black women in K–20 educational leadership roles. Their research explored how participants' racial and gender identities influenced their leadership journeys. The researchers identified eight key areas that shaped their career navigation: visibility, education, collaboration, exposure, mentorship, pursuit, authenticity, and truth (Johnson & Fournillier, 2023). These themes revealed how Black women in educational leadership not only navigated professional responsibilities but also resisted dominant narratives that marginalize their presence and voice in leadership spaces.

Although Johnson and Fournillier's (2023) work focused on education, the thematic overlap, particularly around mentorship, authenticity, and exposure, suggests potential relevance for Black women in executive leadership across other sectors. The emergent themes from their study may mirror the experiences of participants in the proposed research, supporting the need for qualitative exploration into how Black women leaders negotiate leadership landscapes shaped by race and gender.

Together, these studies underscore how intersectionality shapes both the evaluation of leadership performance and the career progression of Black women. They also reinforce the importance of culturally responsive feedback mechanisms and mentorship structures that acknowledge the lived experiences of Black women leaders in a variety of organizational contexts. These insights set the stage for deeper exploration

into how intersectionality functions as a framework for analyzing leadership inequities in this study.

Gender and Race Intersectionality in Leadership

Gender and race intersectionality in leadership highlights the complex and interconnected nature of identity, discrimination, and power within organizational and societal systems. Intersectionality acknowledges that individuals do not experience social identities, such as gender, race, class, or ethnicity, in isolation, but rather as interdependent and overlapping. This interplay shapes individuals' experiences, opportunities, and outcomes in nuanced ways. Researchers such as Showunmi (2020) have explored how intersectionality informs leadership opportunities and performance outcomes across sectors. Showunmi (2020) conducted a quantitative study to examine the interaction effects of gender and race on leadership opportunities and outcomes. Using survey data from a large and diverse sample, the study analyzed variables related to leadership roles, career advancement, and perceived performance. Findings indicated that individuals with intersecting marginalized identities, particularly Black women, experience compounded disadvantages in leadership contexts. The study showed that the intersection of race and gender produced outcomes different from the sum of each factor independently, reinforcing the need for intersectional approaches to leadership analysis. Moreover, embracing intersectionality in leadership practice was associated with more inclusive decision-making and innovative organizational solutions, as leaders with diverse identities contributed unique perspectives and insights. These results demonstrate

that intersectionality is not simply descriptive but predictive, revealing patterns of disadvantage that single-identity frameworks fail to capture.

Leadership decisions involving hiring, promotion, and evaluation are often shaped by intersectional bias. Nelson and Piatak (2021) found that “the intersection of race and gender exerts a statistically significant effect on decision-making outcomes” in leadership contexts, demonstrating how implicit bias produces measurable disparities (p. 613). Likewise, Riner et al. (2021) analyzed academic surgical leadership and concluded that individuals with multiple marginalized identities “reported greater barriers to advancement and lower satisfaction with organizational inclusion efforts” (p. 486). Collectively, these study findings affirm that intersectional bias directly affects leadership outcomes, meaning equity initiatives that fail to incorporate intersectionality remain incomplete.

Intersectionality provides a critical framework for examining overlapping systems of oppression that constrain leadership pathways for marginalized groups. Corpuz et al. (2020) emphasized that intersecting identities, such as race, gender, and class, produce “unique configurations of disadvantage that remain invisible within traditional leadership discourse” (p. 142). Peters and Miles (2021) similarly observed that research often neglects culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women’s experiences, leading to an “erasure of their leadership narratives from mainstream scholarship” (p. 257). Zeinali et al. (2019) extended this argument through a multi-country study of Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and Brazil, finding that Black and minority ethnic women are “systematically erased from leadership narratives and denied the legitimacy accorded to their White

counterparts” (p. 98). These findings demonstrate that excluding intersectional perspectives not only perpetuates invisibility but also limits the potential for authentic organizational change.

The study by Zeinali et al. (2019) further underscored this point through a multi-country investigation of how race and gender influence women’s leadership practices in Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and Brazil. Their research revealed that Black and other minority ethnic women are often theoretically erased from dominant leadership narratives, limiting the visibility and legitimacy of their leadership practices. Zeinali et al. also referenced findings from Linkage’s 360° assessments of high-performing women leaders, which showed significant variations across racial and ethnic lines, as well as clear evidence of bias against women from marginalized groups.

Intersectionality is therefore not only a theoretical concept but a practical framework for fostering equity in leadership. Its application enables organizations to address the unique challenges faced by individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups. When organization leaders neglect intersectional analysis in their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, they risk perpetuating inequities and experiencing consequences such as reduced morale, increased staff turnover, and talent attrition. Integrating intersectionality into leadership development, evaluation, and policy reform is essential for promoting fairness, unlocking innovation, and ensuring the representation of diverse perspectives at all levels of leadership.

Underrepresentation of Black Women in Leadership

The underrepresentation of Black women in leadership positions remains a critical and well-documented issue. Despite comprising approximately 7% of the U.S. population, Black women hold only about 1 to 1.5% of senior management and executive roles in corporate America (Maylor et al., 2021). As of recent reports, no Black woman serves as a CEO in the Fortune 500. These stark statistics underscore the persistent barriers to upward mobility faced by Black women, rooted in both gender and racial inequality. According to Chance (2022), the pay gap further illustrates this inequity: while women overall earn approximately 76 to 84 cents for every dollar earned by White men, Black women earn closer to 63 cents. This wage disparity reflects broader systemic inequities and supports the concept of intersectionality, the overlapping of race and gender identities that intensify marginalization.

The broken rung metaphor from Lean In's report (as cited in Chance, 2022) illustrates how promotion disparities begin early in the career pipeline. For every 100 men promoted to manager, only 58 Black women are promoted, despite similar promotion request rates. This cumulative disadvantage reduces the pool of Black women eligible for higher leadership roles, exacerbating the gap at executive levels. A. Holder et al. (2015) argued that these outcomes are driven by systemic organizational structures and cultural expectations that disadvantage Black women at every stage of the leadership pipeline.

Although disparities affect all women of color, the nature and severity of the challenges differ by racial and ethnic group. Gause (2021) noted that while Asian

American women may have comparatively better representation in leadership roles in sectors such as tech and healthcare, Black women remain disproportionately underrepresented across all fields, including business, government, and academia.

Hispanic and Native American women face similar challenges, though data indicate that the pay and leadership gaps are often wider for Black women (Choubey et al., 2022).

Educational disparities, often exacerbated by socioeconomic inequities and systemic racism, further limit Black women's access to competitive leadership tracks.

In addition to structural exclusion, Black women must navigate unique stereotypes related to assertiveness, professional appearance, and leadership style. These cultural perceptions compound racial and gender bias and may lead to misinterpretation or undervaluation of leadership potential (Alegria, 2020). While women from other racial and ethnic groups also face bias, the intersectional experience of being both Black and female introduces distinct challenges. Kearse et al. (2022) emphasized that Black women's experiences are often qualitatively different due to the dual impact of racism and sexism. This compounded marginalization demands tailored strategies to address leadership disparity and ensures that one-size-fits-all approaches are insufficient.

Sims and Carter (2019) reinforced these findings through their review of Black women's leadership experiences in the U.S. They found that a lack of access to professional networks, experiences of racial discrimination, and limited mentorship opportunities hinder advancement into executive roles. In interviews with 15 Black women in mid- to senior-level corporate roles, participants described repeated instances of bias and exclusion at multiple career stages. Similarly, Rivera-Romano et al. (2020)

studied Black women academic nurse leaders and found that many felt tokenized, excluded from key decisions, and overlooked for promotions. Participants described being relegated to symbolic roles without meaningful influence—a pattern consistent with broader trends of structural marginalization.

Together, these study findings demonstrate that the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership is not only an issue of visibility but one rooted in entrenched institutional barriers. These barriers operate at the intersection of race and gender and are reinforced through disparities in promotion, pay, feedback, and workplace inclusion. To address these challenges, organizations must engage in systemic change that includes equitable hiring practices, pay transparency, mentorship investment, and an intentional dismantling of racial and gender bias within leadership development programs.

Equal Representation Initiatives and Diversity Policies

Equal representation initiatives and diversity policies are critical tools in the pursuit of more equitable and inclusive societies. These measures are designed to address historical and systemic imbalances across sectors, including government, corporate, educational, and cultural institutions, by promoting the fair inclusion of individuals from diverse backgrounds (Dover et al., 2020). By increasing the visibility and participation of underrepresented groups, these initiatives contribute to social justice while harnessing the innovation and insight that diversity brings to decision-making environments.

In the political sphere, equal representation initiatives seek to align the demographics of elected officials with those of the broader population. According to Dover et al. (2020), strategies such as quotas, reserved seats, and proportional

representation systems have been implemented globally to increase participation among marginalized groups. In the corporate context, diversity policies aim to enhance the representation of women, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities at all organizational levels. These initiatives often included targeted recruitment, inclusive promotion practices, and performance metrics linked to diversity goals.

Despite their promise, diversity initiatives are not without challenges. Yarram and Adapa (2021) noted that critics of such measures often raise concerns about tokenism or reverse discrimination. Others argue that prioritizing diversity should not come at the expense of merit-based hiring and promotions. These critiques underscore the importance of designing policies that balance fairness with effectiveness. Moreover, the success of such initiatives depends heavily on ongoing commitment, robust monitoring, and a willingness to revise strategies based on evolving needs and outcomes.

Tamtik and Guenter (2019) emphasized that diversity initiatives should not only focus on numerical representation but also foster inclusive environments where diverse perspectives are genuinely valued and integrated into institutional culture. When implemented thoughtfully, these policies enable individuals from all backgrounds to contribute meaningfully and thrive, reinforcing the importance of representation as both a social justice imperative and a practical benefit to institutions.

Governmental and Corporate Diversity Initiatives: Outcomes and Effectiveness

The effectiveness of equal representation initiatives varies widely, depending on policy design, stakeholder engagement, and institutional commitment. Eagly and Koenig

(2021) conducted a mixed-methods study comparing governmental diversity initiatives across countries. Their research combined quantitative data with qualitative case studies to assess implementation strategies and long-term impact. Interviews with government officials and members of underrepresented communities revealed that successful initiatives were those that were clearly defined, adequately resourced, and supported by strong political will. In such cases, public institutions became more reflective of their populations, fostering greater trust and legitimacy.

Similarly, Owen (2020) examined the impact of corporate diversity policies using a longitudinal quantitative analysis of organizational data across multiple industries. The findings indicated that comprehensive diversity programs were associated with increased employee representation, improved organizational culture, and stronger financial performance. Companies that embedded diversity into their strategic goals saw measurable improvements not only in workforce inclusivity but also in employee retention and innovation outcomes.

Both study findings emphasize that diversity efforts are most effective when they are systemic, sustained, and embedded into institutional frameworks. Isolated or symbolic initiatives may fall short, but comprehensive approaches, particularly those linked to measurable outcomes, can lead to substantial change. For both public and private sectors, learning from successful models and adapting strategies to fit local contexts is critical. Thus, the effectiveness of diversity policies depends as much on long-term commitment and adaptation as on the initial design of the initiative.

In sum, equal representation initiatives and diversity policies represent vital strategies in dismantling systemic inequities. While challenges remain, the research strongly supports their potential to drive institutional transformation when implemented with intention and accountability. As the demographic composition of societies continues to evolve, these efforts will remain essential in ensuring that leadership and decision-making spaces reflect the full spectrum of voices and experiences.

Organizational Equal Representation Initiatives, Diversity Policies and Their Effectiveness

Organizational equal representation initiatives and diversity policies are often motivated by a desire to create more inclusive workplaces and to harness the well-documented benefits of a diverse workforce. However, the effectiveness of these efforts varied widely depending on organizational context, leadership commitment, and implementation strategy. Research by Lawless et al. (2021) and Patton et al. (2019) offered insights into both the motivations behind these policies and their measurable impact. Lawless et al. (2021) conducted a systematic literature review examining the adoption and outcomes of equal representation initiatives and diversity policies across the corporate sector. Drawing on academic studies, industry case reports, and cross-sectoral data, the authors found that while many organizations implement these policies with strong intentions, success is often inconsistent. Key motivations included improving organizational culture, meeting legal or ethical standards, increasing innovation, and enhancing brand reputation. However, the study concluded that a one-size-fits-all

approach to diversity rarely yields optimal outcomes. Lawless et al. emphasized the importance of tailoring strategies to the specific organizational context and

In a complementary study, Patton et al. (2019) conducted a longitudinal analysis of diversity initiatives within a single organization over a multi-year period. The researchers assessed changes in employee demographics, employee satisfaction, and organizational performance before and after the implementation of diversity programs. Data included workforce demographic metrics, internal employee surveys on inclusivity and workplace culture, and financial performance indicators. The results revealed that the organization's comprehensive diversity initiatives led to a marked increase in workforce diversity and significantly improved employee satisfaction. Moreover, the organization experienced enhanced productivity and financial performance in the years following the rollout of these initiatives.

Together, these study findings underscore that while diversity policies are essential tools for institutional equity, their effectiveness depends on thoughtful, data-driven implementation and sustained leadership commitment. When aligned with clear goals and supported by accountability structures, such initiatives not only improve representation but also drive meaningful cultural and operational change. Conversely, organizations that adopt performative or poorly designed diversity strategies may struggle to see long-term results, risking disillusionment among stakeholders and missed opportunities for growth.

This study addressed the persistent and well-documented issue of the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership positions Within the United

States, scholars such as Huang et al. (2019) and Ely et al. (2011) have consistently highlighted this disparity across sectors. For instance, Forbes Staff (2019) report revealing that only 4.8% of Fortune 500 CEOs were women, and among them, women of color comprised just 2.4%. These figures illustrate a stark contrast between the presence of women, particularly Black women in executive leadership roles and their proportional representation in the U.S. population.

Further data from Huang et al. (2019) revealed a 0.3% decline in the representation of Black women in executive leadership between the years 2017 and 2018, reflecting not only stagnant progress but a troubling regression. Compounding this issue is the decreasing frequency of studies specifically examining the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership, further obscuring the structural and cultural barriers that persist. Despite these important contributions, scholars such as Lomboy (2020) and Schnall (2021) contend that the field still lacks a comprehensive understanding of the multidimensional factors contributing to this disparity. While previous research has illuminated parts of the issue, there remains a critical need to explore the intersectional experiences, institutional barriers, and systemic inequities that hinder Black women's advancement into executive leadership.

The problem that was addressed through this study is that Black women are underrepresented in executive leadership roles in the United States. I aimed to fill a gap in practice with this research exploring the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives and exploring their lived experiences navigating structural bias, underrepresentation, and pathways to leadership. In doing so, it sought to contribute

actionable insights for promoting equity, improving leadership pipelines, and creating inclusive organizational cultures. By focusing directly on participants' perceptions and experiences, these study findings connected theory with practice.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles and their recommendations for addressing the persistent underrepresentation of Black women in such positions. This literature review provided a comprehensive examination of the systemic, structural, and interpersonal barriers contributing to this disparity.

According to Abraham and Burbano (2022), “systemic inequities are maintained through institutional policies and cultural norms that privilege dominant groups while marginalizing others” (p. 214), which collectively highlights the complex interplay of race, gender, and institutional norms that hinder the advancement of Black women into executive leadership. The use of CRT and BFT as guiding frameworks for this study was well-justified by prior research. For example, CRT has been used to investigate racial disparities in sectors such as juvenile justice (Ray & Gibbons, 2021), while BFT has been applied to analyze learning and health inequities affecting Black women (L. V. Jones & Harris, 2019), together these frameworks provided the analytical lens necessary to interrogate inequity and amplify counter-narratives from underrepresented leaders.

Across the literature, researchers have identified multiple structural and behavioral drivers of leadership inequity. Ali et al. (2023) observed that exclusionary

networks and biased evaluation practices limit advancement for women of color, while Asogwa et al. (2019) noted that stereotypes and unequal access to mentoring reinforce systemic exclusion. Knoll et al. (2019) added that self-interested leadership behaviors and organizational politics often compound these barriers by privileging dominant groups. Collectively, these studies indicate that self-serving motives, exclusion from influential networks, and intersectional bias remain persistent contributors to leadership disparity. Yet, as Galloway and Ishimaru (2020) and D. R. Jones and Mandell (2020) argued, scholarship still lacks a holistic account of the complex, overlapping challenges that uniquely shape Black women's leadership trajectories. This gap underscores the continuing need for research that centers Black women's voices and lived experiences.

In this study, I aimed to address this gap in practice by exploring the perceptions and experiences of Black women in executive leadership roles to offer deeper insight into the obstacles they encountered and the strategies they recommended for organizational change. In doing so, in this research study, I sought to contribute practical, theory-informed recommendations that support diversity, equity, and inclusion at the highest levels of leadership. In this way, these study findings bridge academic inquiry with real-world application, positioning the findings as both scholarly and practical contributions. In Chapter 3, I detail the methodological approach used to explore these perceptions experiences including the rationale for a basic qualitative design, participant selection, data collection procedures, and data analysis. Building on the foundation laid by this literature review, the next chapter outlines how the research was conducted to generate rich, contextual insights into the leadership journeys of Black women executives.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles and their recommendations for addressing their continued underrepresentation. In this chapter, I present the research design and rationale for the study, followed by a discussion of the role of the researcher. The methodology section includes detailed descriptions of the participant recruitment strategy, criteria for participation, and the procedures for data collection.

Next, the data analysis plan is outlined, including the steps taken to code, categorize, and interpret the data. This is followed by a discussion of how trustworthiness will be established through strategies such as credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. In Chapter 3, I also address ethical considerations related to participant rights, confidentiality, and data security. Together, these components describe the rigorous and ethical approach taken to conduct this study and ensure the integrity and relevance of the findings. I conclude the chapter with a summary of key methodological decisions and their alignment with the study's purpose and research questions.

Research Design and Rationale

I answered two research questions in this basic qualitative study:

RQ1: What are the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles?

RQ2: What are the recommendations of Black women executives for addressing the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles?

I used these research questions to frame the inquiry around both the barriers encountered and the solutions proposed. This approach ensured that the study examined not only challenges to advancement but also strategies for systemic change. In this study, I explored the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership positions within the United States. This phenomenon is characterized by the disproportionately low number of Black women in top leadership roles across various sectors, despite their significant contributions to the workforce (A. Holder et al., 2015). While Black women represent approximately 7.4% of the U.S. population, they occupy only 4.4% of management positions and a mere 1.4% of C-suite roles such as Chief Executive Officer, Chief Marketing Officer, and Chief Security Officer (Castaño et al., 2019; Eckel et al., 2021). In the realm of higher education, Kea-Edwards et al. (2023) noted that Black women are significantly underrepresented in senior leadership, particularly within predominantly White institutions (PWIs). These statistics illustrate that underrepresentation is systemic across industries and highlight the need to examine not just outcomes but also the perceptions and experiences shaping these disparities.

This underrepresentation suggests persistent inequities in leadership pathways and points to systemic barriers that limit access and advancement for Black women. Exploring this phenomenon from the perceptions of Black women executives themselves was critical to understanding the structures that perpetuate exclusion and identifying strategies for institutional change. By situating the phenomenon in real experiences, the study findings provide a bridge between statistical patterns and actionable reforms.

Research Tradition

I employed a basic qualitative research design, which was grounded in the collection and analysis of non-numerical data to explore how individuals interpret and make meaning of their perceptions and experiences (see Busetto et al., 2020). This approach is particularly suited for examining perceptions, attitudes, and interpretations within a real-world context. Common data sources in basic qualitative research include interviews, focus groups, observations, documents, and artifacts (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

The rationale for selecting a basic qualitative design is its emphasis on understanding how individuals construct meaning from their experiences. As Tomaszewski et al. (2020) noted, this design is especially effective when the goal is to explore what people experience and how they make sense of it, rather than explaining causal relationships or generating new theories. In this study, I examined the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles and their recommendations for addressing the persistent underrepresentation of Black women in such positions. I used a basic qualitative approach to conduct an in-depth exploration of these individual and collective experiences in a way that honored context and personal meaning. Using this design, I purposefully selected participants who provided rich, diverse, and relevant data related to the research questions. Semistructured interviews with probing questions were conducted to gather nuanced insights. As Busetto et al. (2020) emphasized, researchers who adopt a basic qualitative approach seek to understand how people interpret their experiences, how

they construct meaning, and how they assign significance to events within their social and professional worlds.

Several qualitative traditions were considered but ultimately rejected in favor of a basic qualitative design. One such approach was the case study design. Although widely used to examine individuals, groups, or institutions, the case study tradition is best suited for answering “how” and “why” questions and typically requires well-defined case boundaries (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Since this study was guided by “what” questions and involved a national sample of participants rather than a bounded case, this design was not appropriate.

I also considered a phenomenological design. Phenomenology focuses on describing the essence and structure of lived experiences shared by individuals who have encountered a specific phenomenon (Busetto et al., 2020). Although this study involved exploring lived experiences, it does not seek to reduce those experiences to a shared essence, as required in phenomenological inquiry. Instead, the emphasis was on capturing diverse, individual perspectives and contextual meanings, making phenomenology less suitable.

I also evaluated and ultimately dismissed grounded theory. This design is commonly used to develop a theory based on patterns and concepts that emerge from the data (Busetto et al., 2020). Because I did not seek to construct a new theoretical framework, but instead aimed to understand and interpret participants’ experiences and perceptions, grounded theory was not selected.

I selected the basic qualitative tradition because it allowed me to conduct a comprehensive exploration of the meanings, perceptions, and recommendations shared by Black women executives regarding their leadership journeys and the systemic barriers they faced. I used this design to ensure methodological rigor while preserving the richness of lived experiences as central to the study's findings by using one data collection tool and focusing on one participant population (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Role of the Researcher

As a doctoral candidate at Walden University, I served multiple roles throughout the research process, including creating the study design, and engaging in data collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of the findings. My primary role was that of an observer and interpreter, engaging in meaning-making based on what I heard, saw, and felt throughout the research process (see Collins & Stockton, 2022). As the sole researcher, I was responsible for ensuring the integrity of the study by upholding ethical standards, maintaining participant confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, and promoting trustworthiness throughout the research process. This positioning reinforced that the credibility of the study depended on my transparency, ethical rigor, and reflexive engagement with the data.

In this study, I conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews and probed participants to access their thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences regarding the barriers to executive leadership for Black women. There were no personal or professional relationships between me and the participants. I held no supervisory roles, and there were no power differentials or conflicts of interest related to this research. My role was purely

as a doctoral candidate researcher conducting independent academic inquiry under the supervision of my dissertation committee.

To uphold credibility and minimize researcher bias, several intentional safeguards were incorporated throughout the study. Data collection bias, the tendency to frame or lead participants' responses was mitigated by using open-ended, neutrally worded questions and a standardized interview guide designed to maintain consistency across sessions (see Yarborough, 2021). I used member-checking procedures to further ensure that data interpretation accurately reflected participants' intended meanings (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Procedural bias, which can occur when participants are constrained by time or context, was minimized by allowing extended interview durations and encouraging reflection before responding (Florczak, 2022). To counter confirmation bias, I engaged participants in reviewing preliminary findings for accuracy and solicited committee feedback to test emerging interpretations (see Yarborough, 2021). Multiple coding techniques, both a Priori and inductive, were applied to strengthen analytic neutrality and consistency.

To address analysis bias, or the selective privileging of data that aligns with researcher assumptions, I maintained detailed field and reflexive journals documenting analytic decisions and insights (see Busetto et al., 2020; see Fischer, 2009). This practice supported bracketing, a reflexive process of consciously setting aside personal beliefs and experiences during interpretation (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Together, these

strategies established a transparent methodological audit trail and enhanced the trustworthiness of the study.

Bracketing was used throughout the study to distinguish my personal background and leadership experiences from those of the participants. I also kept a field journal to record contextual details from interviews and a researcher's journal to document ongoing reflections, emotional responses, and analytical decisions. These strategies were intended to maintain transparency, enhance self-awareness, and improve analytical rigor. Together, these reflexive practices underscored the commitment to producing findings that were trustworthy, balanced, and grounded in participants' perceptions rather than researcher assumptions.

To support participant recruitment, each individual was given a gift card in the amount of \$20 as a token of my appreciation for participation. The use of modest incentives is intended to facilitate timely recruitment of a purposeful sample, without coercion or undue influence. Additionally, I conducted a grand tour style preliminary interview with potential participants to ensure they met the inclusion criteria, in consultation with my dissertation committee. This reinforced that recruitment was both ethical and purposeful, aligning with IRB standards and ensuring the right participants contributed to the study.

Methodology

In this section, I outline the methods and procedures that guided the execution of this basic qualitative study. Thus, I include a detailed description of the research approach, participant selection process, data collection instruments, and strategies for

recruitment and participation. Additionally, in this section, I present the procedures for data collection and provide a comprehensive overview of the data analysis plan. The methodology was designed to ensure the trustworthiness, ethical integrity, and rigor necessary to explore the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding their pathways to executive leadership and their recommendations for addressing underrepresentation.

Participant Selection

The population for this study consisted of professional Black women who currently hold executive leadership roles within private sector organizations in the United States. The target sample included individuals who met these criteria and who offered in-depth insights into the phenomenon under investigation, namely, the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which researchers deliberately select individuals who possess specific characteristics relevant to the study (Campbell et al., 2020). This method is appropriate when researchers have a clear understanding of the attributes they wish to examine and seek participants with lived experience of the phenomenon. In this study, purposive sampling enabled the intentional selection of Black women who occupied executive leadership roles, ensuring that the sample aligned with the study's objective of exploring their perceptions, experiences, and recommendations regarding leadership access and equity. This approach increased the

likelihood that the data gathered would be rich, relevant, and directly aligned with the research purpose.

I achieved the desired sample size using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods. Purposive sampling allowed for the intentional selection of participants who possessed relevant experience as Black women in executive leadership. To complement this strategy, snowball sampling was used to broaden access to additional qualified participants. In this approach, existing participants referred colleagues within their professional networks who met the inclusion criteria, a method shown to be especially effective for studies involving specialized or hard-to-reach populations (Campbell et al., 2020). Together, these techniques supported the identification of information-rich participants and enhanced the overall depth and contextual relevance of the qualitative data.

Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

Participants in this study met specific criteria to ensure alignment with the research purpose and to enhance the validity of the data collected. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) participants were required to be age 21 or older; (b) identify as a Black or African American woman; (c) currently held an executive leadership role within a private sector organization in the U.S.; and (d) had a minimum of 2 years of experience in an executive leadership position.

Exclusion criteria included identifying as male, identifying with any ethnicity other than Black or African American, or lacking at least 2 years of experience in an executive leadership role. Participants self-selected into the study based on the inclusion

criteria outlined in the recruitment materials. Eligibility was further verified during the informed consent process and confirmed verbally at the start of each interview, which was documented in the audio recordings. Individuals who do not meet the established inclusion criteria were excluded from participation in the study. This structured vetting process reinforced the credibility of the findings by ensuring that participants' experiences were directly relevant to the research questions.

Sample Size and Data Saturation

The final sample for this study consisted of 13 participants who met the inclusion criteria. This number aligns with the proposed sample size range of 12 to 15 participants, which was identified as sufficient to gather rich, meaningful data to address the research questions. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) suggested that data saturation in qualitative research is often reached with sample sizes between five and 24 participants, depending on the complexity and depth of the topic.

In this study, data saturation was reached by the 13th interview, as no new information or insights were emerging and participant responses began to repeat similar patterns and perspectives (see O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). Thus, the final sample of 13 participants was adequate for meeting the objectives of the study while maintaining methodological rigor. This outcome confirmed that the study design was methodologically sound and that the findings rested on a robust and reliable dataset.

Participant Recruitment

This study qualified for expedited review by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) as a low-risk study involving work-related interviews, in accordance

with the Walden IRB Manual for low-risk work related interviews. Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. I initially identified and contacted potential participants using a letter of invitation, preapproved by Walden IRB for low-risk, work-related interviews. The recruitment message was posted on social media platforms (e.g., LinkedIn and professional networks) and public websites frequented by Black women executives. Additionally, open public records and electronic bulletin boards relevant to executive leadership and diversity initiatives were used to reach the target population.

Interested individuals contacted me directly and were screened using a brief eligibility checklist to confirm that they met all inclusion criteria. A grand tour-style screening interview was conducted to confirm eligibility, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation. Each participant was assigned a unique pseudonym to maintain confidentiality throughout the study.

To expand the sample, participants were invited to refer other Black women executives who met the inclusion criteria, employing a snowball sampling approach. This method was particularly useful in accessing individuals within professional circles that might not have been reached through public postings alone.

Each participant completed a single, semistructured phone interview, which lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent using a secure, encrypted device. The purpose of the interviews was to explore participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the challenges they faced in attaining executive leadership roles and their recommendations for addressing underrepresentation.

Interview questions were guided by a preapproved interview protocol. Upon completion of the interview, each participant received a \$20 Visa gift card as a token of appreciation.

There were no anticipated physical, psychological, social, economic, or legal risks to participants. Confidentiality was ensured by securely storing all audio files and transcripts in a password-protected digital folder accessible only to the researcher. No identifying details were included in the dissertation, nor will they be included in any future publications. All data will be retained for 5 years, per Walden IRB requirements, and then permanently deleted. These recruitment and confidentiality protocols demonstrated that ethical integrity was upheld at every stage of participant engagement.

Instrumentation

The sources of data for this study consisted of semistructured interviews, field notes, and my researcher's journal. The data collection instruments in this study included a researcher-designed interview protocol and an audio recorder. The interview protocol was self-produced, meaning I developed it specifically for this research study to ensure alignment with the study's context, conceptual framework, and objectives (see Buntins et al., 2021). This approach allowed me to maintain control over the data collection process and to collect data systematically and objectively. This design ensured that the process was consistent, context-specific, and directly aligned with the purpose of the study.

To confirm the reliability and feasibility of the research instrument, I utilized an expert panel consisting of my research supervisors and methodologists with expertise in qualitative research. Content validity was established through expert panel review, relying on the knowledge of subject matter experts. The panel provided feedback on

content relevance, clarity, and the design of open-ended questions to ensure they would elicit meaningful responses aligned with the research questions (Bengtsson, 2016). This process strengthened the credibility of the interview tool by ensuring that the questions were both theoretically sound and practically effective in generating rich data.

While creating the research instrument, I paid close attention to culture-specific and context-specific considerations relevant to the population under investigation. The alignment of the interview protocol with the study's conceptual framework was documented, and a crosswalk table was created to show how each interview question aligned with the research questions and theoretical constructs of CRT and BFT. Table 1 reflects the alignment of the research question, interview question, conceptual framework and corresponding theory, CRT or BFT elements that supported the conceptual framework. This explicit crosswalk ensured that the instrument captured the key elements of the two theories that reflected the conceptual framework and helped me to establish the alignment and content validity of the instrument.

Table 1

*Crosswalk of Research Question, Interview Questions, and Conceptual Framework
Based on CRT, and BFT*

Interview question number	RQ	Interview question number	Conceptual framework	Framework Element
Opening questions	N/A	Tell me about your career journey.	CRT/ BFT	Lived experiences of Black women
IQ1	RQ1	What challenges have you faced in achieving executive leadership roles?	CRT	Intersectionality of racism and sexism
IQ2	RQ1	What are your thoughts regarding the underrepresentation of Black females in Executive leadership positions?		Experiences of racism
IQ3	RQ1	What factors do you believe have contributed to your underrepresentation at the executive level? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompt for: • Philosophy/Vision • Beliefs • Practices • Attitudes • Leadership • Communication • Absence of DEI initiatives 	CRT/ BFT	Intersectionality of racism and sexism
Q4	RQ1	What supports or resources have been provided by in organizations where you have worked to address underrepresentation of Black females in Executive leadership positions?		Intersectionality of racism and sexism
IQ5	RQ2	What recommendations do you have for addressing the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership?	BFT	Black feminist standpoint
IQ6	RQ2	What strategies would help more Black women to advance into executive roles?	BFT	Black feminist standpoint
Closing question	RQ 1-2	Is there anything else you'd like to share about this topic?	CRT/ BFT	Experiences of racism and intersectionality

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

During the data collection process, I employed interviews and probing questions to explore the concerns shared by participants in alignment with the purpose of the study (see Creswell & Poth, 2017). I conducted 13 semistructured interviews and continued data analysis until no new codes or categories emerged, thereby indicating that data saturation had likely been reached (see Braun & Clarke, 2023). The self-designed interview protocol enabled me to effectively explore the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they faced in attaining executive leadership roles, as well as their recommendations for addressing the underrepresentation of Black women in such roles. This approach ensured that data collection was systematic yet flexible, allowing for deep exploration while maintaining alignment with the research questions.

Content validity is typically used to determine the measurement efficacy of research instruments. In this study, I established content validity through a review of the instrument by my committee members and expert panel. The experts examined the self-designed protocol for content relevance and alignment with the study's conceptual framework (see Bengtsson, 2016). I also engaged in member checking to support the credibility and accuracy of my interpretation of participants' responses. Specifically, I returned a draft summary of the findings to each participant and invited them to review and verify whether my interpretations accurately reflected their shared experiences (see Adler, 2022). Together, these strategies reinforced the trustworthiness of the findings by ensuring accuracy and alignment with participants' intended meanings.

Recruiting Procedures

In qualitative studies, participant recruitment is a key component of the research process. To recruit Black women in executive leadership roles from different states across the U.S., several strategies were implemented. I recruited participants through appropriate online communities and social media platforms frequented by Black female executives. I posted the Walden IRB preapproved forms included in the expedited manual for low-risk, work-related interviews.

Once potential participants are self-selected into the study by responding to the recruitment flyer or Walden letter of invitation, I sent them the informed consent form using the preapproved templates from the Walden IRB expedited manual. The recruitment flyer provided details about the study, including its purpose, to understand the challenges Black female executives have experienced in attaining executive leadership roles and their recommendations to address underrepresentation.

The flyer stated that participation involved a 30- to 60-minute phone interview, which would be audio recorded but not video recorded. The flyer also informed participants that they would receive a \$20 Visa gift card as a token of appreciation and that confidentiality would be maintained by omitting names or identifying information in any published reports. The flyer listed the inclusion criteria: Black female, age 21 or older, holding an executive leadership role in a private sector organization with a minimum of 2 years of experience.

The flyer also reflected that the interviews were part of a Walden University EdD dissertation study conducted during May–June 2024. Potential participants were

instructed to contact me via email if they were interested in learning more or participating. I confirmed eligibility by reviewing the inclusion criteria during initial email exchanges and prior to each scheduled interview. I also provided my contact information, including email and phone number, to answer any questions potential participants might have. This transparent process balanced accessibility and clarity, ensuring that participation was both voluntary and informed.

Providing Informed Consent

The informed consent process was a key aspect of the ethical conduct of this research involving human subjects. Informed consent refers to a voluntary choice based on adequate information and proper understanding of the study and its implications (Klykken, 2022). This process involved informing participants about the main aspects of the research and what their participation would involve (see O’Sullivan et al., 2021). In this study, informed consent was obtained using the preapproved Walden IRB consent form from the IRB manual for low-risk work-related interviews.

The consent document contained the following elements: (a) a statement that participation was voluntary; (b) a summary of the study, including its purpose, estimated duration, and procedures; (c) anticipated benefits; and (d) foreseeable discomforts or risks (O’Sullivan et al., 2021). The form was written in plain, accessible language suitable for the target population. This ensured that consent was meaningful as well as procedural, respecting the autonomy and rights of each participant.

Data Collection

Semistructured interviews were employed for data collection. I conducted each interview using a consistent procedure before, during, and after the session. I followed a researcher-developed interview protocol composed of open-ended questions aligned with the research questions (see Table 1). Probing questions were used to deepen participants' responses and elicit rich data to address each research question.

All interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom using audio-only recording with the platform's default audio recorder. Video recording was not used. Recruitment was conducted nationally through social media and professional websites frequented by Black women executives. Participants were screened to ensure they met the inclusion criteria after receiving and reviewing the informed consent form.

A total of 13 participants completed interviews, each lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted only after verbal consent was obtained and reconfirmed at the start of each session, with consent captured in the audio recording. The interview setting, protocol, and procedures allowed for flexibility while maintaining consistency across sessions. This structure balanced methodological rigor with participant comfort, creating conditions that encouraged authentic and detailed sharing.

Exit from the Study

Participants exited the study after completing their participation. They concluded their involvement once the full interview protocol had been completed and all relevant probes were used. At the conclusion of each interview, I thanked participants for their time and valuable insights and acknowledged their contributions. The interview was then

closed in a conversational manner. I ended the session by asking a final open-ended question to see if participants had any additional questions or comments.

I reminded them about the member checking process and provided an estimated timeline for receiving and returning their feedback (see Coates et al., 2021). I also confirmed my contact information and let each participant know they could reach out via email or phone if they had any follow-up questions. Expressing gratitude was essential (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants received a \$20 electronic Visa gift card following the interview. I confirmed their email address before sending the digital certificate. This respectful closure process reinforced trust, ensured transparency, and strengthened participant engagement in the member-checking process.

Data Analysis Plan

All of the data collected were used to address the two research questions. Data concerning the views and experiences of Black female executives, particularly the challenges they faced in achieving senior leadership roles in private sector organizations in the United States, helped answer the first research question. Data regarding their recommendations for addressing the underrepresentation of Black women in executive roles informed the second research question. Verbatim transcripts of the individual interviews were analyzed using content analysis and Yin's Five-Step process for qualitative data analysis (Yin, 2016). I used spreadsheets with embedded pivot tables to support the text analysis and to facilitate the identification of codes, categories, and emerging themes. This systematic process ensured that the analysis was both rigorous and transparent, directly linking participants' narratives to the research questions.

I employed both qualitative content analysis and Yin's Five-Step method (2016), applying a Priori and open descriptive coding techniques to analyze data obtained from the interviews. Content analysis allowed for the determination of the presence and frequency of particular concepts, themes, or words within the text (Shava et al., 2021). This method enabled me to quantify and interpret the magnitude of these themes and examine the relationships between codes and categories (Bengtsson, 2016; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Comparisons were made between inductive, open descriptive coding, and deductive, a Priori, coding to explore potential patterns and reinforce alignment with the conceptual framework. These coding categories were derived directly from the data and informed by the framework guiding the study. Together, the integration of Yin's structured method (2016) with qualitative content analysis provided flexibility and methodological rigor, ensuring that emergent themes were grounded in participant accounts.

Content analysis was particularly appropriate for this study as it helped transform raw data from interviews into meaningful insights regarding participants' perceptions and experiences. I reviewed and refined important points from the transcripts, identifying codes, categories, and recurring patterns (Bengtsson, 2016). This process enabled me to organize and elicit meaning from the data and draw credible conclusions about the studied phenomenon. By systematically coding and categorizing participant responses, I ensured that emergent themes were grounded in the data rather than researcher assumptions.

Yin's Five-Step method further supported the analysis. The five steps are: (a) compiling the data, (b) disassembling the data, (c) reassembling the data, (d) interpreting the data, and (e) concluding (Yin, 2016). In the compiling phase, I created individual participant databases using spreadsheets to store and organize all interview data, including audio recordings, transcriptions, field notes, and journal entries. In the disassembling phase, I manually coded and sorted data from interviews, field notes, and the researcher's journal using both a *Priori* and open descriptive coding strategies. Data were broken into fragments and labeled to identify key ideas and categories. Queries were used to identify frequent phrases and patterns. Pivot tables supported pattern recognition. The reassembling phase involved grouping and recombining data to identify meaningful themes and relationships aligned with the research questions. Data were categorized and tabulated to highlight common experiences and perceptions. During the interpreting phase, I analyzed the emergent patterns to derive meaning and assess how participants' shared experiences addressed the research questions. Finally, in the concluding phase, I drew insights and formulated conclusions from the analysis. These conclusions informed recommendations for future research based on the new findings that emerged from the study. This dual use of content analysis and Yin's method reinforced the credibility of the study by providing both rigor and transparency throughout the analytic process.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was critically important in this qualitative research. It referred to the level of confidence in the data, interpretations, and methodological rigor employed to

ensure research quality (Adler, 2022). To ensure trustworthiness, I established the four widely accepted criteria in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility serves as the foundation of trustworthy findings. It refers to the confidence in the accuracy and truthfulness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several strategies will be employed to establish credibility in this study. Member checking will be utilized, in which the collected data will be returned to participants for verification of accuracy (Adler, 2022). In addition, credibility was supported through the achievement of data saturation, maintenance of an audit trail, engagement in peer debriefing, reflexivity, and the use of thick, rich descriptions of the research participants. Together, these strategies ensured that findings accurately reflected participants' voices rather than researcher bias.

Transferability

The second criterion of trustworthiness is transferability. Transferability refers to the extent to which the results of a qualitative study can be applied or generalized to other settings and/or contexts (Adler, 2022). In this study, transferability was supported by providing thick, detailed descriptions of the participant selection process and the procedures used for data collection. These details were outlined with sufficient clarity to enable replication in similar contexts. As this study included a national sample, there was no single, identified setting; however, the perceptions and experiences of the Black female participants were described thoroughly to ensure readers understand the context in

which the data were generated. To protect participant confidentiality, the specific executive leadership settings of these individuals were not disclosed. This balance of transparency and confidentiality allowed future researchers to judge how findings may apply to other contexts.

Dependability

The third criterion of trustworthiness is dependability. Dependability referred to the extent to which the study's findings are consistent and repeatable across time and conditions (Adler, 2022). It establishes that the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure dependability in this study, a detailed and transparent description of the research design and data collection methods was provided. Peer debriefing was employed during the data analysis process to enhance methodological rigor. Additional strategies strengthened dependability included data triangulation, reflexivity, member checking, investigator triangulation through involvement of multiple researchers, and the maintenance of a thorough audit trail documenting decisions made throughout the study. By combining these strategies, I ensured that the study could be audited and reproduced, reinforcing the stability of its findings across contexts.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the final element of trustworthiness. It refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be corroborated or confirmed by other researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, confirmability was established through the use of reflexivity and the maintenance of an audit trail. I acknowledged my role in the research

process and recognize that my assumptions, beliefs, and prior experiences may influence data interpretation and decision-making (see Adler, 2022). By engaging in ongoing reflexive practices and documenting key decisions and analytic choices throughout the study, I enhanced the transparency and confirmability of the research. The audit trail included notes from data collection, coding processes, analytic memos, and reflections, allowing others to trace how conclusions were drawn from the data. These strategies ensured that the findings were not solely the product of researcher perspective but could be independently validated, thereby strengthening overall trustworthiness.

Ethical Procedures

Before data collection began, approval was obtained from the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB), as this study involved human participants. According to Moriña (2021), ethical concerns related to recruitment materials and procedures include the potential for undue influence or coercion. These concerns were addressed by adhering to the "Respect for Persons" principle outlined in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) one of the core ethical principles guiding human subjects' research. This principle affirms that participants must be treated as autonomous agents, and those with diminished autonomy are entitled to special protection (Nagai et al., 2022). In this study, respect for persons was upheld by ensuring that all participation was voluntary and that potential participants were given sufficient time and information to decide whether to participate.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection using the Walden IRB preapproved consent form from the IRB manual for low-risk, work-related interviews. This form included a confidentiality clause, a summary of the study purpose, expected duration, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and a statement confirming the voluntary nature of participation.

Participants were provided the opportunity to choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. To protect participant confidentiality, each individual was assigned a pseudonym, and all transcripts were sanitized to remove identifiable information, including organizational affiliations. Only pseudonyms appear in the final report.

All data will be stored securely and will be saved for 5 years in compliance with Walden IRB policy. Paper data were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home office, and electronic data are stored on a password-protected, stand-alone computer. After 5 years, data will be destroyed: physical records will be shredded, and electronic files will be deleted using secure data destruction methods, including disk overwriting and physical disk destruction.

Research outcomes, including findings and recommendations, were appropriately disseminated appropriately. An executive summary of the study results was shared with participants. All published reports maintain confidentiality by omitting identifying details.

Summary

In this study, I used a basic qualitative research design, selected for its alignment with the exploratory, participant-centered, and flexible goals of the research. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The study was guided by two research questions, and data were collected using a self-designed, open-ended interview protocol. Black women in executive leadership roles were recruited via preapproved Walden University recruitment materials posted on social media sites commonly accessed by this demographic.

Informed consent was obtained from participants who voluntarily self-selected into the study. Data were analyzed using content analysis with both a *A priori* and open descriptive coding, as well as Yin's Five-Step method. (Yin, 2016). Spreadsheets with embedded pivot tables aided in identifying codes, categories, and emerging themes through both deductive and inductive approaches.

All four criteria of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, were established through practices such as member checking (Adler, 2022), peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), reflexive journaling (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018), and maintaining an audit trail (Busetto et al., 2020). Confidentiality was rigorously protected using pseudonyms and secure data handling procedures. In Chapter 4, the process of data analysis, coding, categorization, and identification of key themes is presented, along with a summary of the study findings.

Chapter 4: Results

The problem that I addressed through this study is that Black women are underrepresented in executive leadership roles in the United States. Although women comprise more than half of the workforce in the United States, they remain underrepresented in the upper echelons of leadership. Study findings by D. Lee and Hess (2022) investigating Fortune 500 companies indicated that executive and board roles held by Black women account for barely 1%. Black women represent only 6% of college and university presidents (West et al., 2016). In higher education, only 6% of college presidents are Black women, despite their representation as 17% of female students (West et al., 2016). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles and their recommendations for addressing their continued underrepresentation. Guided by the conceptual frameworks of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) and BFT (Hill Collins, 2000), I examined the intersectional barriers these women encountered and the recommendations they offered to foster greater equity in leadership.

In Chapter 4, I present the findings. I begin the chapter by restating the research questions, followed by an overview of the research setting and participant demographics. Next, I describe the data collection and data analysis processes, including how codes were developed and organized into categories and themes. I present the results, organized by themes by each research question with supporting participant quotes and analysis.

I then discuss evidence of trustworthiness, demonstrating how credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were maintained throughout the study.

The findings were derived from in-depth, semistructured interviews with 13 Black women who currently or previously held executive-level positions across a variety of industries. The diversity of participants' backgrounds strengthened the study by capturing cross-sectoral perspectives on systemic barriers and strategies for change. The data were analyzed through a rigorous, multi-phase coding process that combined inductive and deductive strategies. Deductive codes were guided by a Priori concepts drawn from CRT and BFT, while inductive codes were developed directly from participants' narratives, allowing both theory and lived experience to shape the analytic process.

I answered the following research questions in this study:

RQ1: What are the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives about the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles?

RQ2: What are the recommendations of Black women executives about how to address the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles?

In this basic qualitative study, I used a national recruitment strategy and employed purposive and snowball sampling through professional networks, executive women's forums, LinkedIn groups, and peer referrals. I conducted the study virtually, engaging participants in one-on-one interviews via Zoom or telephone. This remote format provided both flexibility and accessibility, allowing participation from diverse regions across the United States. The virtual setting supported geographic diversity, convenience,

and confidentiality, creating conditions in which participants could share personal and often sensitive experiences.

Although participants' professional paths and titles varied, they shared a common reality: navigating exclusionary environments shaped by both racial and gender dynamics. Several participants noted being the only Black woman at the leadership table within their organizations. Their experiences offered rich insights into the systemic, interpersonal, and cultural barriers encountered both on the journey to leadership and within executive spaces. In the next section, I present a demographic overview of the participants.

Demographics

Thirteen Black women participated in this study. Each participant met the inclusion criteria of being age 21 or older, self-identifying as Black or African American, and having held, or currently holding, an executive or senior leadership role within their organization for at least 2 years. Participants were recruited from across the Northeast, South, Midwest, and West Coast of the U.S., providing a geographically diverse perspective on leadership experiences.

The participants held a variety of executive titles, including director, senior vice president, chief operating officer, and executive director. Industries represented included healthcare, education, nonprofit, government, finance, and corporate sectors. Their professional tenures ranged from 10 to more than 25 years, with leadership experience spanning 5 to 20 years.

Table 2 includes a demographic overview of participants, including pseudonyms (used to ensure confidentiality), years in leadership roles, and current or most recent executive position. Pseudonyms were randomly assigned and used consistently throughout the findings to protect participant identity.

Table 2

Participants and Demographics

Participant	Years in role	Role
P1	20	Insurance & Adoption Services
P2	5	Retail & Quality Assurance
P3	10	Medical & Organizational Management
P4	15	Healthcare Administration
P5	15	Revenue Cycle & Insurance
P6	20	Healthcare (Medical Assistant to Supervisor)
P7	15	Operations Management
P8	18	Project Management
P9	12	Community Health
P10	15	Education (Curriculum Leadership)
P11	8	Risk Management and Compliance
P12	10	Financial Services
P13	12	Healthcare Operations

I purposefully selected participants based on their alignment with the inclusion criteria, which included: (a) identifying as age 21 or older; (b) identifying as a Black or African American woman; (c) holding an executive leadership role within a private sector organization in the United States; and (d) having a minimum of 2 years of experience in an executive leadership position. Participants' roles spanned sectors such as healthcare, education, finance, technology, nonprofit leadership, and corporate management. All participants were based in the U.S. and had at least 10 years of professional experience, with a minimum of 5 years in leadership.

Although participants represented diverse industries and leadership trajectories, they shared common themes in how they experienced the workplace. Most noted being one of the few, or the only, Black woman in leadership within their organizations. Several described workplace cultures as isolating, with limited access to mentorship, sponsorship, or leadership development opportunities tailored to their unique needs. Participants' education levels ranged from bachelor's to doctoral degrees, with many also holding certifications or advanced professional training. These shared and varied experiences informed the thematic findings presented in the sections that follow. The next section details the data collection and analysis process used to interpret participant narratives and identify core themes.

Data Collection

Following IRB approval from Walden University, IRB approval #08-13-24-1106796 data collection was carried out through in-depth, semistructured interviews with 13 participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling strategies via professional networks, executive women's forums, LinkedIn groups, and peer referrals. Once potential participants expressed interest, a brief eligibility screening was conducted. Informed consent was obtained via email and reconfirmed verbally at the start of each interview.

While the virtual setting enhanced accessibility and participant comfort, some challenges emerged during the scheduling process. A few interviews required rescheduling due to participants' demanding professional commitments. In some cases, interruptions occurred during the interviews such as work-related calls or personal

obligations but were handled respectfully and did not compromise the integrity of the data collection. These instances further underscored the participants' commitment to sharing their stories despite the demands of their leadership roles. The virtual format, combined with flexible scheduling and optional anonymity, was instrumental in fostering trust and capturing the candid, emotionally resonant reflections that form the foundation of this study.

All interviews were conducted one-on-one using Zoom or by phone, based on participant preference. Audio was recorded using Zoom's built-in recording tool. Each audio file was securely uploaded to Kaltura, then transcribed using Kaltura. The resulting dirty transcripts were reviewed and edited for accuracy to create clean Word documents for analysis, ensuring the preservation of participants' intended meanings.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, with most averaging around 60 minutes.

The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions aligned with the research questions, focusing on participants lived experiences, perceived barriers, and recommended solutions related to executive leadership. Table 3 provides the length of each interview.

Table 3*Length of Participant Interviews*

Participant	Length of interview
P1	58 minutes
P2	52 minutes
P3	82 minutes
P4	75 minutes
P5	73 minutes
P6	58 minutes
P7	41 minutes
P8	69 minutes
P9	63 minutes
P10	67 minutes
P11	49 minutes
P12	61 minutes
P13	66 minutes

Probing questions were used throughout each interview to deepen responses, clarify details, and elicit specific examples. These response-specific probes allowed participants to expand on critical moments and reflect more fully on their leadership journeys. The use of probing questions is consistent with Creswell and Poth's (2017) recommendation to employ open-ended, flexible questioning techniques to obtain rich, descriptive data in qualitative studies. This strategy contributed to the depth of the data and supported the attainment of data saturation, which was reached when no new codes or themes emerged (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

To maintain reflexivity and guard against researcher bias, I kept a reflective journal throughout the data collection process. Following each interview, I documented emotional reactions, assumptions, and potential interpretive filters. Reflexive journaling has been recommended as a key strategy to enhance credibility and confirmability by bracketing researcher perspectives and maintaining transparency in the analytic process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). This reflexive process helped separate my personal leadership identity and experiences from those of the participants, ensuring that the findings remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than researcher assumptions.

All data were stored in accordance with Walden University's IRB guidelines. Audio files, transcripts, field notes, and analytic memos were saved on a password-protected external hard drive accessible only to the researcher. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality, and no identifying information appears in the published report. Consistent with best practices for ethical research, all materials will be retained securely for 5 years and then permanently destroyed (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979; Walden University IRB Manual, 2024).

These practices collectively strengthened credibility, dependability, and confirmability by demonstrating transparency in the research process, protecting participants, and ensuring that findings were firmly rooted in the data.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process for this study followed a phenomenological research tradition (Moustakas, 1994) and was supplemented by qualitative content analysis techniques (Bengtsson, 2016; Krippendorff, 2013; Saldaña, 2021). This combined approach supported a deep exploration of the lived experiences of Black women executives and enabled the identification of recurring patterns, meaning units, and emergent themes rooted in their narratives. Content analysis facilitated the identification and measurement of specific concepts, themes, or terms found in the data (see Shava et al., 2021). Using this approach, I was able to assess the extent and connections of these themes while investigating how different codes and categories interrelate (Bengtsson, 2016; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). By comparing inductive, open descriptive coding with deductive, a Priori coding, I was able to identify patterns and ensure consistency with the conceptual framework.

Content analysis was well-suited for this research because I used this data analysis approach to convert the raw interview data into valuable understandings of participants' viewpoints and experiences. I carefully examined and refined significant aspects from the participants' transcripts, by identifying relevant codes, categories, and repeating patterns (see Bengtsson, 2016). This approach allowed me to structure and interpret the data effectively and reach credible insights about the phenomenon under study. In the following section, I outline the specific steps of the data analysis process that were employed to uncover the study's findings.

Coding Process

To systematically analyze the data, Yin's (2016) five-phase cycle of analysis was applied, which entailed compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. These phases provided a structured framework for transitioning raw interview data into meaningful insights related to the research questions. This framework also ensured that the analysis was methodical, transparent, and aligned with best practices in qualitative research.

I used a coding strategy in which I incorporated both deductive and inductive techniques. Deductive coding involved using the conceptual framework of the study, which included constructs from CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano, 2021) and BFT (Few-Demo, 2014; Hill Collins, 2000) such as intersectionality, workplace bias, systemic exclusion, and leadership access. Inductive, open coding was also applied to allow new and unexpected themes to emerge directly from the participants' narratives. This hybrid strategy ensured that while the analysis was theoretically informed, it also remained grounded in the lived experiences of the participants (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

The coding and analysis were completed manually in Microsoft Excel to maintain a detailed and transparent record of data interpretation. I conducted line-by-line review of each transcript, identifying initial codes and refining them through iterative memo writing and comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Huberman & Miles, 2002). Pseudonyms were applied throughout the analysis to preserve participant confidentiality. The analytic process combined qualitative content analysis with both *a Priori* (deductive)

and open (inductive) coding strategies to capture recurring concepts and emergent themes. Pattern coding was then used to consolidate related ideas into broader categories that reflected shared meanings across participants. To guide this process, I employed Yin's (2016) five-phase model of qualitative analysis—compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding—which provided a systematic structure for moving from raw data toward conceptual synthesis.

Compiling

All interviews were audio recorded via Zoom and transcribed using Kaltura editor in Kaltura media in Canvas. The audio files were uploaded to Kaltura for additional audio processing. Transcripts were first exported as raw (dirty) drafts, then edited into clean Word documents. During this phase, I compiled interview transcripts, field notes, reflective journal entries, and analytic memos into a centralized spreadsheet. A master Excel workbook was used to house all coded excerpts, with each participant represented in a separate tab. I pasted the research questions and a Priori codes at the top of each worksheet to guide analysis. This step, referred to as compiling (Yin, 2016) and *unitizing* (Krippendorff, 2013), ensured consistent focus on meaningful data segments aligned with the study's aims. In the compiling stage I immersed myself into the participant transcripts and cleaned all transcripts removing repeated or inaccurate words and also made certain that the transcripts did not reflect any confidential information. Next, I began to disassemble the data by reviewing the participant transcripts line-by-line employing both a Priori and open descriptive coding.

Disassembling

During the disassembling phase, I conducted the a Priori, deductive coding, and open descriptive coding, or inductive coding. To accomplish this task with integrity, I immersed myself in the participant transcripts reading each transcript for accuracy and meaning. There were six key a Priori codes that included: (a) Intersectionality, (b) Lack of Institutional Support, (c) Microaggressions & Workplace Hostility, (d) Resilience, (e) Systemic Barriers, and (f) Underrepresentation in Leadership, and Workplace bias and discrimination. I used workbooks in an Excel spreadsheet to manage my data analysis process. I used the Master workbook tab in the Excel workbook to manage all of the coded data. I used pivot tables derived from the Master tab to track frequency of codes across Participant interviews, discern emerging codes and patterns, and to support transparency in the analytic process. Table 4 represents the a Priori codes derived from both theories that supported the conceptual framework.

Table 4*Crosswalk of a Priori Codes and Definition Derived from Conceptual Frameworks*

Term	Theory supporting conceptual framework	Scholarly definition
Intersectionality (racism & sexism)	CRT/BFT	A framework describing how overlapping identities such as race and gender create unique experiences of oppression that cannot be understood separately (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000).
Lack of Institutional Support	CRT	The absence of organizational structures, resources, or policies that promote equity, resulting in systemic exclusion from leadership pathways (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000).
Microaggressions & Workplace Hostility	CRT/BFT	Everyday slights, insults, or discriminatory behaviors directed at marginalized groups that reinforce exclusion and create hostile work environments (Hill Collins, 2000; Sue et al., 2019).
Resilience	CRT/BFT	The ability of Black women to adapt, persist, and succeed despite systemic barriers, often through community, cultural knowledge, and self-advocacy (Luthar, 2006; C.S. Collins, 2000)
Systemic Barriers	CRT	Structural inequities embedded in laws, policies, and institutional practices that disadvantage marginalized groups in access to leadership (Bell et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).
Underrepresentation in Leadership	CRT/BFT	The disproportionately low presence of Black women in executive roles, reflecting systemic exclusion and compounded identity-based inequities (Parker, 2005; Wingfield, 2021)
Workplace Bias & Discrimination	CRT/BFT	Prejudice or unequal treatment in hiring, promotion, and evaluation processes based on race, gender, or intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Ely & Meyerson, 2000).
CRT		

Term	Theory supporting conceptual framework	Scholarly definition
BFT		<p>A theoretical framework that examines how systemic racism is embedded in legal, social, and institutional structures, producing inequitable outcomes for marginalized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).</p> <p>A framework centering the knowledge, experiences, and resistance strategies of Black women to highlight how intersecting oppressions shape their lives and leadership (Few-Demo, 2014; Hill Collins, 2000)</p>

I reviewed the transcripts line-by-line and assigned an a Priori codes to text excerpts. I copied and placed text excerpts into the Excel spreadsheet and assigned each excerpt an a Priori code based on the scholarly terms displayed in Table 4. I pasted 468 pieces of text into the spreadsheet across all 13 Participant transcripts and assigned an accompanying appropriate a Priori code. After I completed this process, I reviewed the data in a pivot table to discern the count of coded text by CRT and BFT a Priori codes, thereby reflecting evidence of the conceptual frameworks. Table 5 reflects the number of a Priori codes by each scholarly term and associated with the conceptual frameworks, CRT, and BFT.

Table 5*A Priori Codes and Count of Text Excerpts by A Priori Code*

a Priori codes	Count of interview raw data text excerpts
BFT	62
CRT	64
Intersectionality	30
Lack of Institutional Support	49
Microaggressions & Workplace Hostility	53
Resilience	31
Systemic Barriers	90
Underrepresentation in Leadership	56
Workplace Bias & Discrimination	33
Grand Total	468

As I examined the transcripts, I aligned the coded text to the a Priori scholarly term. In all, I had seven specific CRT codes and one collective code a I used for BFT. I compiled a sampling of the a Priori codes, scholarly terms, and text excerpt to support transparency and coding process. Table 6 reflects a sampling of the a Priori codes, sample text excerpt, and the participant from whom the text excerpt was collected. A Priori Codes are reflected across participants.

Table 6*A Priori Codes and Sampling of Text Excerpts by Participant*

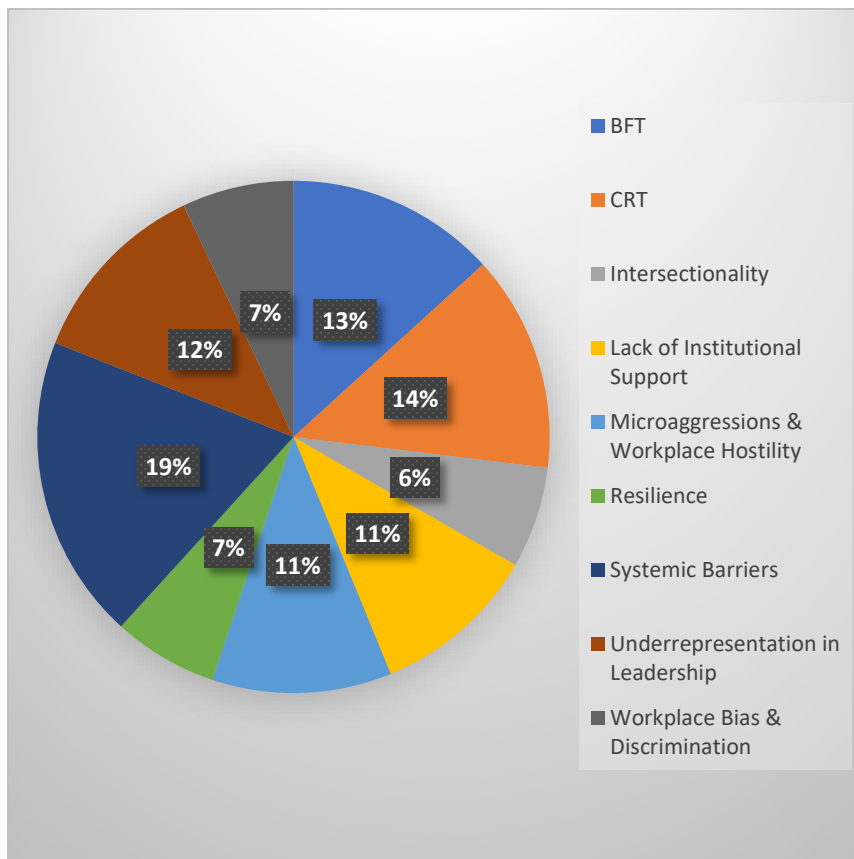
A Priori Code	Text Excerpt	Participant
Intersectionality	I hope to one day mentor young professionals and ensure they see leaders who look like them, because representation matters in shaping career aspirations.	Participant 9
Intersectionality	We need more initiatives like these to uplift women of color, particularly in industries where we are almost invisible in leadership roles.	Participant 4
Lack of Institutional Support	Black women are less likely to receive sponsorship opportunities compared to their peers, which hinders career progression.	Participant 10
Lack of Institutional Support	None. The companies I've worked with have provided minimal structured guidance or development programs tailored to our needs.	Participant 1
Microaggressions & Workplace Hostility	Black women often feel isolated in leadership spaces and must navigate microaggressions that undermine authority.	Participant 8
Microaggressions & Workplace Hostility	Comments about being "too aggressive" or "intimidating" are common, even when expressing the same ideas as male colleagues.	Participant 5
Resilience	Despite systemic challenges, I have learned to adapt, advocate for myself, and create my own opportunities.	Participant 7
Resilience	I push forward, knowing that my success can open doors for the next generation of women leaders.	Participant 12
Systemic Barriers	Advancement often depends on networks we're excluded from, creating invisible ceilings that are hard to break.	Participant 3
Systemic Barriers	I've had to work twice as hard to prove my worth, even with credentials equal to or better than my peers.	Participant 6
Underrepresentation in Leadership	Rarely do I see women who look like me in the boardroom, which sends a subtle but powerful message about who belongs.	Participant 2

A Priori Code	Text Excerpt	Participant
Underrepresentation in Leadership	The absence of diverse voices in decision-making impacts the policies and culture of the entire organization.	Participant 11
Workplace Bias & Discrimination	Pay inequities remain a constant reminder that our contributions are undervalued compared to others.	Participant 13
Workplace Bias & Discrimination	I've been overlooked for promotions despite meeting all the stated qualifications, with vague reasons given.	Participant 1
BFT	Representation is essential for driving innovation and challenging outdated norms in leadership.	Participant 1
BFT	The lack of leadership representation is a direct reflection of systemic issues that BFT brings to light.	Participant 4

I used the functions in the spreadsheet to analyze the data. Specifically, I used the pivot tables to review the frequency of coded text by a Priori code. Figure 1 reflects the percentage of a Priori codes by each scholarly term associated with the conceptual framework, CRT, and with globally with the BFT. Systemic barriers, underrepresentation of leadership, and workplace aggressions and hostilities were the top three most frequently identified a Priori, deductive codes that emerged from the a Priori coding process.

Figure 1

A Priori Codes and Percent of Coded Text by CRT and BFT



After completing the a Priori, deductive coding, I continued the disassembling phase, by conducting initial open descriptive coding using the same line-by-line using analysis method. I reviewed all of the text excerpts that I pasted into the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and assigned an open descriptive code to the same text that I had previously assigned an a Priori code to. Thus, I examined all participant text excerpts using more than one coding approach. In addition, I also reviewed the participant transcripts to confirm that I had extracted all critical text excerpts and placed them into the spreadsheet for analysis. Using two coding approaches for the same text excerpts facilitated the

deeper understanding of extracting meaning from participants' narratives. A total of 14 Round 1 open descriptive codes were identified, representing perceived barriers and recommended solutions shared by Black women executives. These codes reflect both individual experiences and systemic patterns. Table 7 provides a breakdown of the Round 1 open descriptive codes, and the number of interview excerpts associated with each code. This initial, Round 1 open descriptive coding served as the foundation for further coding and categorization in the reassembling phase.

Table 7

Round 1 Open Descriptive Coding and Count of Codes

Round 1 Open descriptive codes	Count of interview raw data text excerpts
Perceived: Affecting Career Progression	31
Perceived: Barriers to Career Advancement	20
Perceived: Exclusion from Professional Networks	12
Perceived: Lack of Mentorship & Sponsorship	47
Perceived: Lack of Psychological Safety	30
Perceived: Leadership Access & Systemic Barriers	34
Perceived: Microaggressions & Workplace Hostility	23
Perceived: Underrepresentation in Leadership	32
Perceived: Unfair Performance Evaluations	15
Perceived: Workplace Bias & Discrimination	56
Recommend: Develop structured mentorship and sponsorship programs targeting Black women for leadership training	30
Recommend: Establish formal sponsorship programs where executives actively advocate for Black women in leadership	27
Recommend: Implement structured leadership pathways and blind evaluation processes to ensure equitable promotion opportunities	48

Round 1 Open descriptive codes	Count of interview raw data text excerpts
Recommend: Introduce cultural competency training for leadership teams to foster an inclusive environment	31
Recommend: Require leadership teams to set and track diversity hiring and promotion targets	32
Grand Total	468

I examined the data in the pivot table and analyzed in the 14 Round 1 open descriptive codes. I used the stem of each research question to help sort the open descriptive Round 1 Codes. Thus, there were nine Round 1 open descriptive codes for research question 1, and there were five Round 1 open descriptive codes for research question two. I looked for possible similarities in the Round 1 Open Descriptive codes and considered if any of the Round 1 Open Descriptive codes could be grouped together or combined. In looking at the collapsing of similar codes, I then moved to the reassembling phase.

Reassembling

During the reassembling phase, data were organized and regrouped to uncover significant themes and connections relevant to the research questions. This step included collapsing the Round 1 codes and then examining the Round 2 open descriptive codes for potential categories. My objective was to conduct the data analysis in order to reveal shared experiences and viewpoints of the participants. In Round 2 of open descriptive coding, I collapsed the 14 Round 1 open descriptive codes into five Round 2 open descriptive codes. Table 8 reflects the Round 2 open descriptive codes and count of text coded to each Round 2 code.

Table 8*Round 2 Open Descriptive Codes and Count of Codes*

Round 2 Open descriptive coding	Count of interview raw data text excerpt
Exclusion Mentorship/sponsorship	59
Psychological Safety	53
Recommendations: Mentorship/Sponsorship/Blind Evaluation	105
Training/Hiring/Promotion targets	63
Workplace bias/discrimination/access	188

In considering the possible patterns in the Round 1 open descriptive codes, I reflected on the possible similarities and connections between the codes and the narratives shared by the participants in their interviews. Hence, of the 14 total Round 1 codes, the nine open codes identified in Round 1 open coding collapsed into three - Round 2 codes aligning with Research Questions 1, and the five open codes identified in Round 1 open coding collapsed into two - Round 2 open codes aligned to Research question 2. Table 9 reflects the Round 1 to Round 2 open descriptive coding process.

Table 9*Round 1 to Round 2 Open Descriptive Codes and Count of Codes*

Round 1 or Round 2 open descriptive code	Round 1 to Round 2 open descriptive codes	Count of interview raw data text excerpts
Round 2 Open descriptive code	Exclusion Mentorship/sponsorship	59
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Perceived: Exclusion from Professional Networks	12
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Perceived: Lack of Mentorship & Sponsorship	47
Round 2 Open descriptive code	Psychological Safety	53

Round 1 or Round 2 open descriptive code	Round 1 to Round 2 open descriptive codes	Count of interview raw data text excerpts
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Perceived: Lack of Psychological Safety	30
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Perceived: Microaggressions & Workplace Hostility	23
Round 2 Open descriptive code	Recommend: Mentorship/Sponsorship/Blind Evaluation	105
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Recommend: Develop structured mentorship and sponsorship programs targeting Black women for leadership training.	30
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Recommend: Establish formal sponsorship programs where executives actively advocate for Black women in leadership.	27
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Recommend: Implement structured leadership pathways and blind evaluation processes to ensure equitable promotion opportunities.	48
Round 2 Open descriptive code	Training/Hiring/Promotion targets	63
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Recommend: Introduce cultural competency training for leadership teams to foster an inclusive environment.	31
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Recommend: Require leadership teams to set and track diversity hiring and promotion targets.	32
Round 2 Open descriptive code	Workplace bias/discrimination/access	188
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Perceived: Affecting Career Progression	31
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Perceived: Barriers to Career Advancement	20
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Perceived: Leadership Access & Systemic Barriers	34
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Perceived: Underrepresentation in Leadership	32
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Perceived: Unfair Performance Evaluations	15
Round 1 Open descriptive code	Perceived: Workplace Bias & Discrimination	56
Grand Total		468

In the reassembling phase, the Round 2 codes were examined, and pattern codes were discerned. This included clustering codes related to racialized workplace experiences, access barriers, and psychological burden under overarching constructs such as “Workplace Bias and Discrimination” and “Lack of Psychological Safety.” The

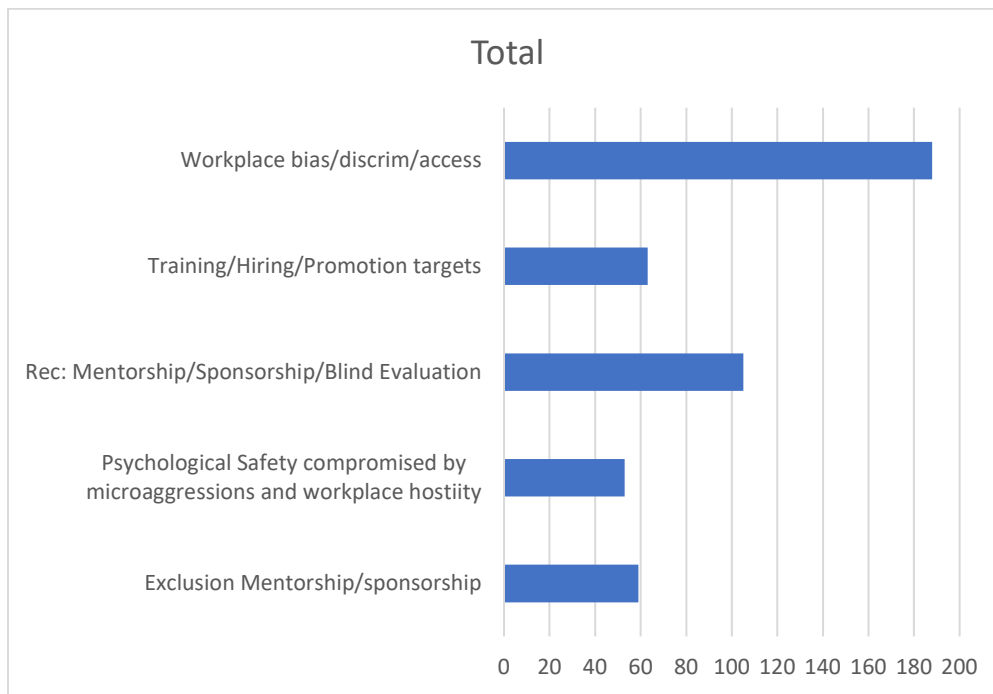
reduction of codes occurred by eliminating overlap and collapsing similar categories, resulting in five core categories. Table 10 reflects the categories identified from the five Round 2 open descriptive codes.

Table 10

Categories and Count of Text Excerpts Coded by Category

Research Question	Categories	Count of interview raw data text excerpt
RQ 1	Exclusion Mentorship/sponsorship	59
RQ1	Psychological Safety compromised by microaggressions and workplace hostility	53
RQ1	Workplace bias/discrimination/access	188
RQ2	Recommendation: Mentorship/Sponsorship/Blind Evaluation	105
RQ2	Recommendation: Training/Hiring/Promotion targets	63
Grand Total		468

In examining the categories by research question, the category of workplace bias and discrimination emerged as the category with the highest frequency count. The other two categories that informed the themes for Research question 1 were equally weighed in terms of magnitude. For Research question 2, two categories emerged from the pattern coding and although one category carried more coded textual excerpts, the participants conveyed these recommendations as possible remedies to the problem explored with equal importance. Figure 2 reflects the magnitude of coded data by category.

Figure 2*Categories and Count of Coded Text****Interpreting***

In the interpreting phase, I moved beyond categorization to interpret the deeper meaning embedded within participants' narratives. This stage involved synthesizing the relationships among the pattern codes, a priori codes, and emergent categories to understand how Black women executives make sense of their leadership journeys in the context of racial and gendered experiences. The process of inferring required constant comparison across participants to identify consistent patterns, divergences, and nuanced expressions of shared realities (Charmaz, 2014).

Themes were not only derived from frequency but from the weight and significance participants placed on particular barriers or recommendations. I considered

the emotional intensity of their language, the repetition of concepts across contexts, and the alignment of participant reflections with the conceptual frameworks of CRT and BFT. For example, participants frequently described “being the only one” or encountering “invisible barriers”—statements that were linked with themes such as tokenism, exclusion from networks, and systemic bias.

Through analytic memoing and cross-referencing coded excerpts, I inferred five overarching themes that collectively reflect how structural, interpersonal, and psychological factors intersect to shape the leadership experiences of Black women. These themes also revealed how participants navigated, resisted, and transformed their environments despite systemic inequities. Each theme was supported with representative quotes to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the participants lived realities. Table 11 reflects the Categories to Themes process and count of coded text by Category and by each of the five Themes.

Table 11

Categories to Theme and Count of Text Excerpts

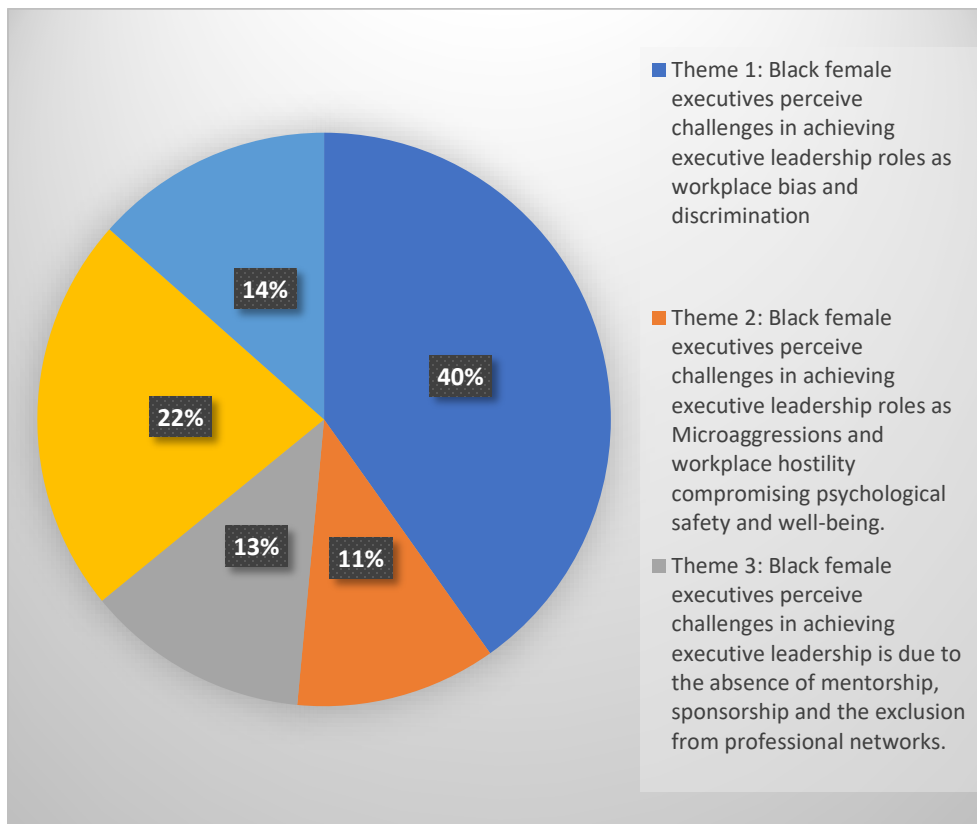
Category or Theme	Themes to categories	Count of interview raw data text excerpts
Theme	Theme 1: Black female executives perceive challenges in achieving executive leadership roles as workplace bias and discrimination.	188
Category	Workplace bias/discrimination/access	188
Theme	Theme 2: Black female executives perceive challenges in achieving executive leadership roles as Microaggressions and workplace hostility compromising psychological safety and well-being.	53
Category	Psychological Safety compromised by microaggressions and workplace hostility	53

Category or Theme	Themes to categories	Count of interview raw data text excerpts
Theme	Theme 3: Black female executives perceive challenges in achieving executive leadership is due to the absence of mentorship, sponsorship, and the exclusion from professional networks.	59
Category	Exclusion Mentorship/sponsorship	59
Theme	Theme 4: Black women executives recommend the development of mentorship and sponsorship programs and blind evaluation processes to ensure equitable promotion opportunities for Black women in leadership.	105
Category	Recommend: Mentorship/Sponsorship/Blind Evaluation	105
Theme	Theme 5 Black women executives recommend the cultural competency training for leadership teams and diversity hiring and promotion targets to foster an inclusive work environment for Black women in leadership.	63
Category	Recommend: Training/Hiring/Promotion targets	63
Grand Total		468

I carefully considered each of the five categories in relation to Research question 1 and Research question 2. There were three categories that resulted from the pattern coding that aligned to RQ 1 and there were two categories that were discerned and that were related to RQ2. Each of the five categories had a corresponding Theme. There were three themes for RQ 1 and two Themes for RQ 2. Figure 3 reflects the percentage of coded text by each of the five themes.

Figure 3

Percentage of Text Coded by Theme



Lastly, during the concluding phase, I extracted key insights and developed conclusions from the analysis. These conclusions provided the basis for recommendations for future research, informed by the unique findings of this basic qualitative study. In the next section, I describe the concluding phase of the data analysis process.

Concluding

The concluding phase of the data analysis involved distilling the final themes and drawing insights that directly addressed the research questions guiding this study. After identifying and interpreting the emergent themes, I revisited the central phenomenon, the

underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership, and examined how the findings offered answers to the two research questions:

1. What are the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives about the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles?
2. What are the recommendations of Black women executives about how to address the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles?

The five overarching themes that emerged provided a holistic view of both the barriers and the strategies that Black women described in their leadership journeys. Each theme reflects a unique dimension of the systemic, interpersonal, and institutional dynamics that affect leadership access, advancement, and experience. These insights underscore how intersectional oppression, not only by race or gender but through their combination, shapes executive experiences in complex ways.

This phase also included validating the coherence and completeness of the themes through a return to the raw data, the conceptual framework, and the original research questions. The findings were confirmed through thick description, direct participant quotations, and consistency across coded narratives. The analysis affirmed that the voices of Black women leaders are essential in understanding how racialized and gendered structures operate and in revealing how these structures might be challenged and changed. Figure 4 and Figure 5 reflect the Themes for Research questions 1 and 2. There were three themes for RQ1 and there were two Themes for RQ2.

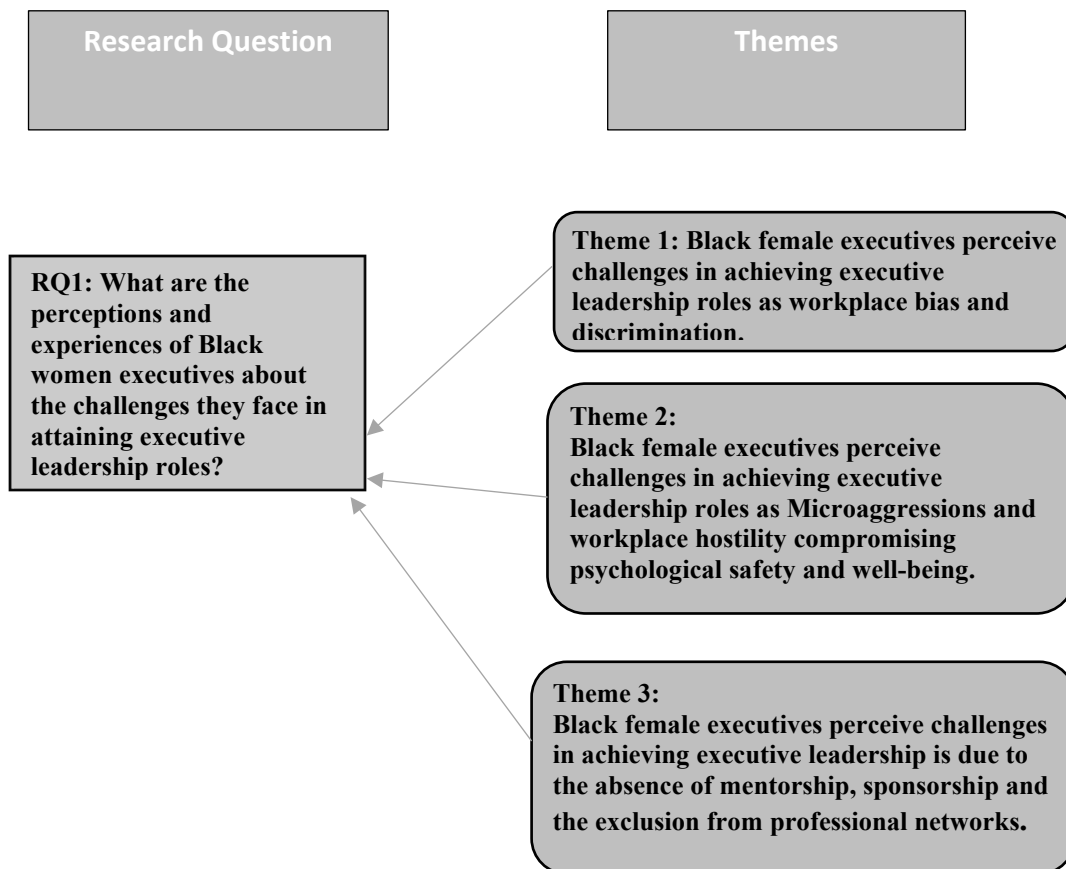
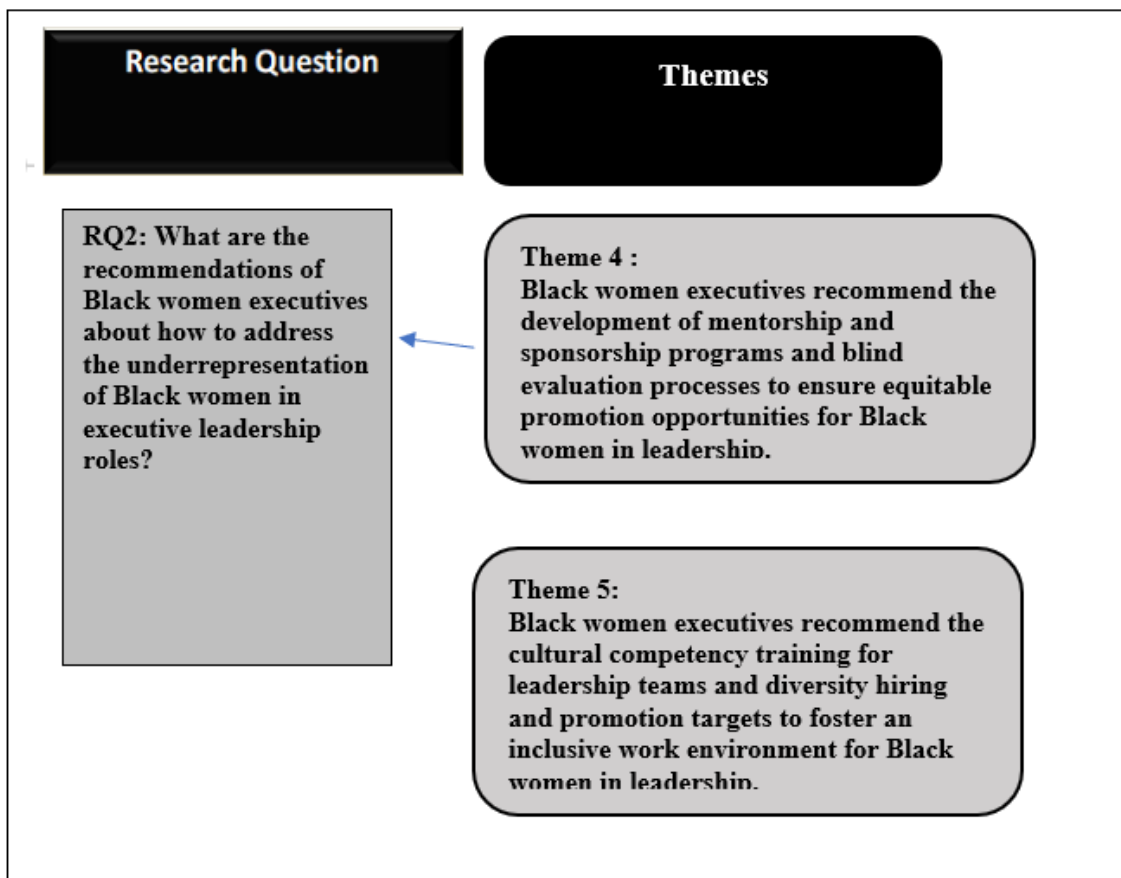
Figure 4*Themes for Research Question 1*

Figure 5*Themes for Research Question 2*

In the next section, I present the five major themes with accompanying evidence in the form of text excerpts. I have organized the Themes to tell the participants' story and experiences as Black women executives. I have also organized the Themes by relevance to the two research questions.

Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they face in attaining

executive leadership roles and their recommendations to address the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles. Through in-depth, semistructured interviews with 13 Black women who currently or previously held executive positions, I sought to capture both the overt and nuanced perceptions and experiences they have faced, as well as their reflections on the systemic, interpersonal, and organizational dynamics that shaped their leadership trajectories.

The research questions guiding this study were:

RQ1: How do Black female executives perceive the challenges they encounter in

RQ2: What recommendations do Black female executives have for addressing the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles?

Following data collection, interview transcripts were analyzed through a rigorous, multi-phase coding process. A Priori codes derived from the study's conceptual framework included constructs such as intersectionality, systemic barriers, tokenism, exclusion from networks, and resilience. After completing a Priori coding I engaged in open coding. Open coding was used to identify emerging ideas from participants' own words and to analyze the data inductively. I conducted 2 Rounds of Open descriptive coding. I used Pattern coding to group recurring experiences and perceptions. Next, I identified categories and finally emerging themes for each RQ.

The results are presented in five major themes by research question. Each theme reflects a critical dimension of participants' leadership journey ranging from experiences of workplace bias and discrimination to the psychological toll of underrepresentation, the lack of mentorship and sponsorship, exclusion from critical leadership networks, and

actionable recommendations for systemic reform. Participant quotations or text excerpts are embedded throughout to preserve the authenticity of their voices. The frequency and consistency with which these themes surfaced are noted to underscore their relevance.

To visualize how the five emergent themes aligned with the study's research questions, Table 12 presents the distribution of coded text excerpts by Theme and RQ. This crosswalk helped confirm that each Theme was directly relevant to the perceptions and experiences explored through RQ1 and RQ2 and demonstrates the density and alignment of findings.

Table 12

Themes by Research Question and Count of Coded Text Excerpts by Theme

Research Question	Theme	Count of interview raw data text excerpts
Research Question 1	Theme 1: Black female executives perceive challenges in achieving executive leadership roles as workplace bias and discrimination.	188
Research Question 1	Theme 2: Black female executives perceive challenges in achieving executive leadership roles as Microaggressions and workplace hostility compromising psychological safety and well-being.	53
Research Question 1	Theme 3: Black female executives perceive challenges in achieving executive leadership is due to the absence of mentorship, sponsorship, and the exclusion from professional networks.	59
Research Question 2	Theme 4: Black women executives recommend the development of mentorship and sponsorship programs and blind evaluation processes to ensure equitable promotion opportunities for Black women in leadership.	105
Research Question 2	Theme 5: Black women executives recommend the cultural competency training for leadership teams and diversity hiring and promotion targets to foster an inclusive work environment for Black women in leadership.	63
Grand Total		468

There were three themes that emerged for RQ1. The themes related to workplace bias and discrimination, microaggressions and workplace hostility compromising psychological safety and well-being, and challenges with executive leadership. In the next section, I describe the themes and provide quotes from participants to support each theme for RQ 1 that pertained to perceptions of participants related to the phenomenon being explored.

Theme 1: Black Female Executives Perceive Challenges In Achieving Executive Leadership Roles As Workplace Bias And Discrimination

Theme 1 is that Black female executives perceive challenges in achieving executive leadership roles as workplace bias and discrimination. Black women in professional settings face entrenched systemic and institutional barriers that significantly hinder their access to leadership roles. Despite high levels of qualification and demonstrated work ethic, these women are routinely excluded from executive pathways due to a complex interplay of racial and gender biases embedded in hiring, promotion, and leadership inclusion practices.

All participant accounts underscored that access to leadership is not simply earned by merit but instead mediated by systems that reward conformity to dominant cultural norms and legacy connections. As a result, Black women must often rely on informal pathways or external interventions, such as diversity mandates, to gain visibility. The barriers identified by participants are structural, persistent, and often hidden behind rhetoric about diversity, equity, and inclusion. What emerged from these conversations is

a pattern of gatekeeping that keeps leadership inaccessible unless organizations are forced to make space.

Workplace Bias

In this section, I explore how cultural stereotypes, and biased evaluations distort how Black women's leadership behaviors are interpreted, often penalizing them for traits that are celebrated in others. These stereotypes significantly shape how Black women are perceived in leadership roles, skewing interpretations of their behaviors, intentions, and capabilities. Participants described how qualities traditionally associated with effective leadership, confidence, directness, and innovation are frequently reframed through a racialized and gendered lens that punishes rather than rewards them. These misinterpretations create environments in which authenticity must be constantly moderated, and self-expression becomes a professional risk.

Many participants described how cultural stereotypes and biased perceptions of communication styles create unique challenges for Black women in leadership. Their expressions of confidence, decisiveness, and directness, traits often applauded in other leaders, were instead met with resistance, scrutiny, and even disciplinary consequences. P6 explained, "Being assertive is often misinterpreted as being aggressive," a sentiment echoed by several others who shared the burden of navigating a fine line between appearing confident and being labeled combative. P5 expanded on this idea, stating, "The stereotypes about Black women being aggressive or overly emotional often hinder our progress, even when we're simply advocating for fairness and respect." These reflections underscore how Black women's communication styles, which may align with effective

leadership models in other contexts, are often judged more harshly or perceived as disruptive within predominantly white, male-dominated organizational cultures. This pattern of misinterpretation not only distorts how Black women's leadership is perceived but also feeds into broader systems of unfair evaluation and career stagnation, where bias extends from interpersonal dynamics to formal performance reviews and promotion decisions.

Many participants reflected on the limitations placed on their self-expression in leadership roles, particularly when their confidence or innovation deviated from dominant cultural expectations. P13 succinctly captured the limitations placed on expression by sharing, "Be innovative but do not overpower," a comment that highlights how even positive traits such as creativity and initiative are discouraged when they challenge established norms. These narratives collectively reveal a pattern in which the behaviors celebrated in other leaders are reframed as threats when embodied by Black women. As a result, leadership evaluations become less about merit and more about conformity to dominant cultural standards.

The consequences of these biased perceptions are far-reaching. When Black women are required to perform emotional labor just to counteract negative assumptions or to make others comfortable, it diverts focus from strategic thinking and innovation. Furthermore, these dynamics send an implicit message: to succeed, Black women must either suppress their authenticity or risk being excluded from advancement. These ingrained biases serve to reinforce exclusionary leadership pipelines and maintain systems that marginalize diverse leadership styles. These biases in how leadership traits

are perceived not only stifle authenticity but also directly impact access, shaping who is invited into decision-making spaces and who remains on the margins. These experiences illustrate how bias in leadership evaluations extends beyond performance, subtly shaping who is viewed as a leader and reinforcing longstanding barriers to access.

Discrimination in Evaluation and Promotion

All participants detailed the ways in which discriminatory evaluation and promotion practices create systemic disadvantages for Black women in leadership trajectories. Across narratives, there was a clear perception that leadership was not earned through merit alone but often withheld due to bias embedded in subjective review processes. P1 shared, “I have been passed over for promotions multiple times despite exceeding expectations,” illustrating how qualifications and work ethic were often not enough to secure advancement.

Discriminatory evaluation and promotion practices emerged as a universal concern among participants, revealing how Black women are routinely overlooked for advancement despite meeting or exceeding performance expectations. This sentiment was echoed by P8, who recalled, “Even when I was qualified and others were not, I found myself training those who were given roles that I had aspired to.” Such reflections suggest that Black women are often seen as capable enough to support others in leadership, but not to be positioned in those roles themselves. These accounts challenge the notion of equitable evaluation and point to deeper systemic inequities in how talent is recognized and rewarded.

Most participants also highlighted the unequal expectations placed on Black women in leadership, where overperformance is demanded without proportional recognition or opportunity. P10 further emphasized the burden of these double standards, stating, “We are held to higher performance standards while receiving fewer opportunities.” Her comment reveals how Black women are expected to consistently overperform just to remain visible, let alone be promoted. These heightened expectations are not matched by institutional support or reward structures, reinforcing a cycle of overwork and under-recognition.

Together, these experiences paint a portrait of leadership pathways shaped more by perception than performance. Participants made clear that excellence alone is insufficient to overcome a system that selectively recognizes potential, often through a racialized and gendered lens. The result is a pattern where Black women must consistently validate their right to belong, while watching less qualified peers advance with ease. These disparities underscore the need for organizations to develop transparent, bias-resistant evaluation systems that prioritize fairness over familiarity. These systemic disparities in recognition and reward highlight how exclusion is not just structural—it is reinforced through everyday decisions about who is deemed promotable and why. In the next section, participants describe how these inequities extend into limited access to leadership spaces and sponsorship opportunities.

Barriers to Leadership Access

Most Participants described persistent structural obstacles that limit access to leadership roles, even when Black women hold titles or possess the qualifications to lead.

These barriers are not simply about gaining entry to leadership positions, they are about the conditional and incomplete inclusion that follows. P9 shared, “Being the only Black woman in leadership makes workplace culture feel isolating,” revealing the emotional toll of tokenism and the absence of peer support. Her reflection points to the broader reality that visibility does not equal influence. This sentiment was reinforced by others who described exclusion from informal decision-making spaces and a lack of meaningful investment in their growth. While Black women may hold leadership titles, the absence of influence, sponsorship, and full participation in strategic discussions continues to restrict their advancement and reinforces their marginalization.

Many participants reported that leadership access for Black women is often superficial, as exclusion from key conversations and strategic spaces persists even after formal titles are attained. P4 echoed this experience, explaining, “I’ve experienced being excluded from important discussions and decision-making processes, often learning about critical developments too late.” This account highlights a troubling dynamic in which Black women, even after achieving leadership status, are still denied access to the spaces where strategic power is exercised. This exclusion from informal and formal networks alike reinforces a hierarchy in which Black women are present, but not fully empowered.

Beyond exclusion, participants also emphasized the difficulty of securing sponsorship or institutional investment are critical elements in leadership development. P4 further noted, “Finding someone to invest in me was a significant challenge. Although many leaders recognized my potential, I was often overlooked for opportunities in favor of others based on ethnicity or gender.” This quote conveys the participant’s perception

and experience of the structural selectivity of the leadership pipeline, where advancement is often determined by subjective perceptions rather than objective capability.

These reported perceptions and experiences underscore a consistent theme that access to leadership is not uniformly granted but filtered through a lens of racialized and gendered bias. As a result, Black women are frequently passed over, not because of a lack of skill, but because their presence challenges dominant norms about who belongs at the table. Leadership access is not merely about earning a seat, but it is about being allowed to use one's voice when seated. The cumulative impact of these exclusions creates a leadership culture that is neither inclusive nor equitable, reinforcing the very structures that maintain the underrepresentation of Black women in executive roles.

Theme 1 illustrates that Black women's leadership journeys are shaped by deeply rooted systemic and institutional exclusion. From appearance-based bias and exclusion from leadership conversations to unequal performance evaluations and overlooked promotions, the workplace continues to operate in ways that preserve existing power structures.

Participants emphasized the need for structured leadership pipelines and transparent hiring to dismantle these biases. These findings align with the study's purpose and underscore the urgency for organization stakeholders to evaluate and reform internal leadership practices. In the following theme, I explore how microaggressions, workplace hostility, and lack of psychological safety further impact the lived experiences of Black women in executive roles.

Theme 2: Black Female Executives Perceive Challenges In Achieving Executive Leadership Roles As Microaggressions And Workplace Hostility Compromising Psychological Safety And Well-Being

The pursuit of leadership by Black women is often weighed down by more than structural barriers; it is emotionally and mentally taxing due to the layered microaggressions, exclusionary environments, and psychological stress they must navigate. Participants across roles and industries reported that even when they reached leadership roles, the workplace was not a sanctuary but a site of continued vigilance, where misinterpretation, marginalization, and silencing were routine. This theme captures the human cost of leadership for Black women characterized by the constant negotiation of identity, safety, and emotional well-being in spaces that were not built to support them.

Across the dataset, 10 out of 13 participants directly referenced experiences of microaggressions and workplace hostility, six participants explicitly described a lack of psychological safety, and nine participants addressed the emotional and mental burden of navigating their roles. These experiences, though expressed differently, reflect a shared reality: leadership for Black women is often accompanied by invisible and cumulative emotional labor.

Most participants (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10, P11, P13) described how subtle and overt acts of exclusion shaped their day-to-day leadership experiences, reinforcing feelings of hyper-surveillance and emotional vulnerability. In this section, I explore how these interactions ranging from coded language to dismissive body language influenced Black women to self-regulate in ways that stifled authentic expression. Rather

than lead with confidence, they often had to perform careful calculations to avoid reinforcing stereotypes. P6 explained, “Being assertive is often misinterpreted as being aggressive,” a sentiment echoed by several others who shared the burden of navigating a fine line between appearing confident and being labeled combative. P5 reflected, “The stereotypes about Black women being aggressive or overly emotional often hinder our progress, even when we’re simply advocating for fairness and respect.” These reflections underscore how Black women’s communication styles, which may align with effective leadership models in other contexts, are often judged more harshly or perceived as disruptive within predominantly white, male-dominated organizational cultures.

P13 succinctly captured the limitations placed on expression by sharing, “Be innovative but do not overpower,” a comment that highlights how even positive traits such as creativity and initiative are discouraged when they challenge established norms. These narratives collectively reveal a pattern in which the behaviors celebrated in other leaders are reframed as threats when embodied by Black women. As a result, leadership evaluations become less about merit and more about conformity to dominant cultural standards.

The consequences of these biased perceptions are far-reaching. When Black women are required to perform emotional labor just to counteract negative assumptions or to make others comfortable, it diverts focus from strategic thinking and innovation. Furthermore, these dynamics send an implicit message: to succeed, Black women must either suppress their authenticity or risk being excluded from advancement. These biases represent ingrained beliefs and serve to reinforce exclusionary leadership pipelines and

maintain systems that marginalize diverse leadership styles. These biases in how leadership traits are perceived not only stifle authenticity but also limit opportunities for advancement, determining whose voices are heard in decision-making spaces and whose contributions are consistently sidelined. These experiences of coded exclusion are not just frustrating; they destabilize the psychological safety needed for Black women to thrive in leadership. The next section explores how this lack of safety manifests as described by participants.

Lack of Psychological Safety

Most participants described an emotional landscape of vigilance and alienation, where psychological safety or the ability to express oneself without fear of negative consequences was often missing from their leadership environments. Rather than feel empowered to contribute freely, participants reported walking a fine line between professional presence and self-protection. In this section, I explore how the perceived absence of psychological safety undermines confidence, silences voices, and reinforces conditional inclusion for Black women in leadership.

P11 shared, “I have been asked to justify my presence in leadership roles more than my peers.” Similarly, P4 reflected, “I encountered biases based on race and gender, which required me to constantly defend my position and prove my worth.” These accounts describe how the presence of Black women in leadership does not guarantee psychological inclusion, and often, their roles are conditional, contingent on ongoing validation and defense of their authority.

This exclusion extended beyond formal evaluation to interpersonal and structural silencing. P2 recalled, “Often, when I address issues or bring facts to light in meetings, I’m labeled as a problem rather than someone contributing to solutions.” These insights show how the lack of psychological safety compounds the difficulty of advocating for oneself or others. P10 emphasized how representation without power compounds psychological harm: “We are often given ‘diversity roles’ rather than positions with real power.” These roles, though public-facing and symbolic, often lack decision-making authority and leave Black women exposed without substantive support or influence. In these environments, several participants including P3, P4, and P11 described feeling the need to overcompensate, minimize their voice, or emotionally detach to protect themselves. The constant self-monitoring, emotional withdrawal, and fear of being misunderstood speak to a deeper burden that accumulates overtime and directly affects Black women’s emotional well-being. In the next section, I explore the emotional and mental toll of navigating executive leadership under these conditions. Most participants, including P1, P5, P9, and P10, described the cumulative toll of navigating microaggressions, unsafe environments, and ongoing scrutiny, revealing that the emotional and mental weight of leadership can be just as demanding as the work itself. These descriptions highlight the invisible labor of constantly negotiating identity, guarding against bias, and recovering from chronic invalidation, all of which contribute to emotional fatigue and long-term psychological strain.

P1 noted the stress of “constantly proving my worth,” while P9 emphasized how Black women often have to be “overqualified to get half the recognition.” Their

reflections illustrate how even high-achieving leaders carry emotional burdens that are unseen but deeply felt. P1 summarized this experience, stating, “My journey hasn’t been easy. I’ve faced numerous challenges, from being overlooked despite my qualifications to dealing with the stress of constantly proving my worth. P9 added, “Black women often have to work twice as hard and be overqualified to get half the recognition.” This reality, echoed by many, creates an exhausting cycle where effort is undervalued, and exhaustion is normalized. P10 offered another reflection: “Black women like me often face assumptions that we lack the ability or experience to lead effectively.” These assumptions chip away at confidence, dampen morale, and create ongoing emotional labor to prove otherwise.

Participants also described strategic withdrawal, burnout, or hypervigilance as common responses to this burden. While these coping strategies may offer short-term protection, they further isolate Black women and limit their leadership influence over time. This emotional taxation is often unseen and unaddressed by workplace structures, which tend to focus on outcomes rather than lived experience. These insights reinforce that the cost of leadership for Black women is not limited to unequal opportunities as it includes the emotional price of surviving systems that were not designed to support them. The following conclusion captures how this theme connects back to the purpose of the study and sets the stage for exploring structural solutions in Theme 3.

Theme 2 underscores that leadership for Black women is not simply about performance or promotion, but it is about navigating emotional and psychological minefields. From persistent microaggressions to the absence of psychological safety, the

cost of leadership is compounded by a lack of institutional awareness and support. These findings deepen the understanding of how racialized and gendered bias impacts not only opportunity but also well-being.

Participants emphasized the need for structural interventions that go beyond recruitment therefore calling for inclusive work environments that acknowledge emotional labor, validate diverse leadership styles, and ensure real access to influence and decision-making. Some participants advocated for wellness-focused leadership programs, accountability for harmful behaviors, and safe reporting mechanisms to reduce the emotional burden placed on Black women in leadership. In the following theme, I explore how the absence of mentorship, sponsorship, and professional networks further exacerbates these challenges and reinforces the cycle of exclusion for Black women in executive leadership roles.

Theme 3: Black Female Executives Perceive Challenges In Achieving Executive Leadership Due To The Absence Of Mentorship, Sponsorship, And The Exclusion From Professional Networks

The journey to executive leadership for Black women is not solely hindered by external structural barriers, but also by a persistent absence of critical internal support mechanisms. Professional advancement is often closely tied to access to networks, advocates, and decision-makers who can open doors. In this theme, I explore how the absence of mentorship, sponsorship, and professional networks compounds leadership barriers, making upward mobility more difficult to attain and sustain. Across the dataset, 11 of the 13 participants described being excluded from informal and formal networks,

while nine participants discussed the lack of direct mentorship or organizational sponsorship as a persistent obstacle. These findings set the stage for the following theme, which highlights how Black women executives are responding to these gaps by recommending intentional mentorship, sponsorship, and evaluation strategies to foster more equitable leadership advancement.

Exclusion from Professional Networks

In this section, explore how systemic exclusion from influential networks hinders advancement and creates professional isolation for Black women in leadership. Most participants (P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10, P11, P13) shared that despite their qualifications and tenure, they were rarely included in the informal or formal networks that drive decision-making and advancement in their organizations. These networks often shape promotions and stretch opportunities behind closed doors. Accordingly, P9 stated, “Being the only Black woman in leadership means there’s no one to advocate for you,” highlighting the isolation that occurs when professional circles lack representation and peer-level allies. This isolation, as described by participants, was not just social, it translated into missed opportunities, exclusion from conversations about growth, and limited visibility with senior leaders. Similarly, P8 added, “Organizations use our intellect to grow their companies or enhance the performance of those already in leadership, but they don’t allow us to take those seats.” This reflection reveals how Black women are often placed in support roles that contribute to institutional success, but they remain on the periphery of power.

Several participants also spoke to the performative nature of inclusion efforts. P10 recalled, “I participated in a women’s leadership program within a Fortune 500 company, but it felt like a checkbox exercise for diversity.” These experiences suggest that while organizations may create programs designed to enhance visibility, they often lack depth, access, or influence, therefore reinforcing symbolic inclusion rather than enabling upward mobility. This disconnect between surface-level inclusion and meaningful advancement leads directly into the next theme, where participants outline the specific structural changes needed to ensure that leadership opportunities for Black women are substantive, equitable, and lasting.

Lack of Mentorship and Sponsorship

In addition to network exclusion, many participants (P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11) emphasized the lack of mentorship and sponsorship as a critical barrier to leadership progression. While mentorship provides guidance and knowledge sharing, sponsorship involves advocacy and having someone in power actively endorsing and elevating a candidate. Most participants reported receiving neither P4 noted, “Even when I achieved success, I often felt isolated and unsupported by my peers and superiors,” revealing that promotion did not necessarily lead to support. For Black women, leadership roles were often accompanied by silence rather than guidance, leaving them to navigate complex environments alone. In line with this notion, P6 shared, “I had to switch companies’ multiple times to get promotions, while others advanced in place.” Her statement reflects the systemic issue that without internal advocacy, Black women

must seek opportunities externally, often sacrificing stability and continuity to gain recognition.

Accordingly, P10 stated, “Instead, others are chosen for these opportunities, and Black women are left in supporting roles without access to advancement.” These testimonies reflect an enduring pattern: those who fit dominant molds are nurtured and sponsored, while Black women are expected to rise without the institutional investment others receive. The absence of mentorship and sponsorship creates a cyclical disadvantage and without it, Black women lack the visibility and backing needed to ascend, reinforcing their underrepresentation at the top. These patterns not only stall careers but also deepen the emotional burden of navigating leadership alone.

Theme 3 reveals that without access to professional networks, mentorship, and sponsorship, Black women face compounded barriers to leadership that go beyond performance. Their isolation within organizational structures is not incidental but systemic, reflecting a pattern where support is unevenly distributed and often inaccessible to those who need it most. These findings underscore the need for intentional structures that go beyond surface-level inclusion to create real pathways for advancement. Participants suggested formal mentorship programs, transparent sponsorship pathways, and accountability metrics to ensure equitable development.

In the following theme, I explore recommendations made by participants to address these inequities including the implementation of mentorship and sponsorship initiatives, as well as blind evaluation processes to promote fairness in leadership selection.

Theme 4: Black Women Executives Recommend The Development Of Mentorship And Sponsorship Programs And Blind Evaluation Processes To Ensure Equitable Promotion Opportunities For Black Women In Leadership

This theme captures participants' recommendations for dismantling exclusionary leadership pipelines and establishing fairer systems of advancement. While prior themes revealed the systemic and emotional barriers Black women face, this section focuses on their solutions. Many participants advocated for structured mentorship and sponsorship initiatives that directly address racial and gender disparities in leadership development. Others emphasized the importance of creating transparent, bias-resistant evaluation practices to ensure equitable promotion based on performance, not proximity or perception. These recommendations reflect a shift from describing barriers to outlining actionable strategies that participants believe will create more equitable pathways to leadership.

Develop Structured Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs Targeting Black Women for Leadership Training

Most participants (including P2, P4, P7, and P10) emphasized the lack of formal support systems and called for intentional mentorship and sponsorship models specifically designed to guide Black women through leadership pathways. These participants shared that without structured programs, leadership often remains inaccessible, reinforcing cycles of exclusion.

P4 shared, "Finding someone to invest in me was a significant challenge. Although many leaders recognized my potential, I was often overlooked for opportunities

in favor of others based on ethnicity or gender.” This reflects the gap between recognition and action or acknowledgment without advocacy. Accordingly, P2 noted, “I’ve never experienced any support or initiatives aimed at addressing this issue. This absence makes me feel undervalued and question my efforts to prove my worth.” Similarly, P10 described participating in a leadership program that ultimately “felt like a checkbox exercise for diversity,” highlighting the need for mentorship to be meaningful rather than symbolic. These accounts underscore how structured programs, when tailored to the unique experiences of Black women, can provide guidance, affirmation, and strategic support, offering pathways that are currently missing or obstructed in traditional leadership development frameworks. While mentorship lays a foundation for development, several participants emphasized that true advancement also requires advocacy at the highest levels—particularly from those in positions of power.

Establish Formal Sponsorship Programs Where Executives Actively Advocate for Black Women in Leadership

Several participants, P3, P6, and P9, proposed the implementation of formal sponsorship programs where senior leaders take on an active role in promoting and championing Black women’s leadership potential. In support of this theme, P3 stated, “I’ve experienced being asked for my opinions or ideas to support leadership but not being considered for the roles myself.” This reflects a broader theme where Black women’s insights are valued but their leadership potential is overlooked. P6 highlighted, “Opportunities for leadership often go to those who are part of informal networks, leaving others excluded despite their qualifications.” Her observation emphasizes the role

sponsors can play in leveling the playing field, especially for those without legacy connections or insider status.

Without sponsorship, many Black women are left to advocate for themselves in environments that undervalue their contributions. Participants made it clear that sponsorship should not be passive and it must include public endorsement, nomination for stretch roles, and consistent advocacy in closed-door decision-making spaces. While mentorship and sponsorship address the development and visibility of talent, participants also called for systems-level reform in how promotions and leadership placements are evaluated.

Implement Structured Leadership Pathways and Blind Evaluation Processes to Ensure Equitable Promotion Opportunities

Most participants, P1, P5, P8, and P11, called for standardized leadership pathways and unbiased evaluation systems to dismantle favoritism, nepotism, and subjective performance reviews. Participants conveyed that systems and leaders should ensure that promotions are earned based on measurable criteria, not perception, familiarity, or proximity to power. Accordingly, P1 shared, “A lot of the challenges stemmed from systemic bias and nepotism. In one company, leadership roles were kept within family networks, leaving others with limited opportunities.” P5 added, “Organizations frequently overlook our loyalty and contributions, focusing instead on superficial factors like degrees or personal connections.” These statements reveal how informal practices and personal biases distort leadership selection. P8 noted, “We are

often denied professional development opportunities that could help us advance,” underscoring the importance of embedding equity into the leadership pipeline itself.

Participants emphasized the need for clear promotion criteria, external oversight of evaluation processes, and blind review practices to reduce the influence of unconscious bias. These structures, they suggested, would move organizations beyond performative DEI efforts and into meaningful accountability.

In Theme 4, Participants highlighted that equitable leadership outcomes require more than diversity statements and suggested that there be systems designed to identify, develop, and elevate Black women’s leadership. Through mentorship, sponsorship, and standardized evaluation structures, participants envision a workplace where advancement is earned, not inherited. These findings reflect a clear call for policy interventions that shift the burden from the individual to the institution. In the next theme, I examine participants’ recommendations for organizational accountability, including calls for cultural competency training, bias auditing, and transparent diversity metrics as tools to create more inclusive leadership environments.

Theme 5: Black Women Executives Recommend Cultural Competency Training For Leadership Teams And Diversity Hiring And Promotion Targets To Foster An Inclusive Work Environment For Black Women In Leadership

As revealed in the information shared by participants, Black women in leadership continue to encounter organizations that lack awareness of their lived experiences. Even as companies publicly promote diversity, inclusion, and belonging, few make meaningful investments to understand or support the unique challenges faced by Black women. This

theme explores participant recommendations to improve equity and representation—specifically the need for cultural competency training and measurable accountability through hiring and promotion targets. These strategies were proposed not only to foster inclusion but to dismantle the everyday barriers that perpetuate underrepresentation and emotional harm in leadership environments.

Across the dataset, participants P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, and P10 recommended initiatives involving cultural competency training or targeted DEI strategies. In addition, participants P1, P4, P5, P6, P8, and P10 described systemic breakdowns in leadership accountability and bias mitigation. These suggestions were not abstract ideals but grounded in the experiences of being overlooked, invalidated, or underestimated often regardless of performance.

Cultural competency training for leadership teams to foster an inclusive environment

Several participants, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, described recurring breakdowns in communication and inclusion resulting from leadership’s lack of cultural awareness. Their experiences highlighted that professional development programs rarely include content specific to the lived realities of Black women. P5 observed, “Companies provide general training, but nothing specifically aimed at helping Black women move into leadership roles.” Participants shared that even highly competent Black women were often required to suppress their communication styles to avoid backlash. P3 stated, “Leadership expects us to conform to a particular communication style, and any deviation is seen as a problem.” Similarly, P4 added, “Leadership must become culturally aware and understand that effective management requires adapting to diverse individuals.”

These reflections underscore that inclusive leadership is not instinctive; it must be taught, supported, and measured.

Without such training, implicit biases go unchecked. P2 noted, “Leadership often assumes we don’t have the necessary skills, even when we exceed performance expectations.” These assumptions contribute to a workplace environment where Black women are micromanaged, misjudged, or denied autonomy, regardless of their proven track record.

Require leadership teams to set and track diversity hiring and promotion targets

Participants P1, P4, P5, P6, P8, and P10 emphasized the need for measurable benchmarks in hiring and promotions to ensure organizations remain accountable to equity goals.

Without formal systems in place, they explained, DEI statements often result in performative gestures rather than meaningful change. P1 expressed, “Companies say they value diversity but don’t always take meaningful action to retain Black employees.”

Others described how bias continues to shape advancement decisions. P8 stated, “Despite hard work, we’re often held back due to systemic biases. If my skin color were different, I’d likely advance faster.” P6 shared, “There’s little room for error as a Black woman in leadership. A single mistake can set us back significantly.” These accounts point to the need for data-driven evaluations that recognize contributions and reduce subjectivity in promotion pathways.

Participants proposed that progress toward equity should be tracked and publicly reported. P10 emphasized, “Employers should value employees based on work ethic and contributions rather than personal relationships or appearances.” This statement calls

attention to the informal networks that often dictate advancement and the exclusion they perpetuate. Finally, P4 noted the importance of transparent and inclusive feedback mechanisms: “Lack of communication and follow-through from leadership. When I raise concerns or suggest improvements, there’s no team discussion or resolution.” Her reflection reinforces that structural change must include accountability loops and not just visibility so that Black women’s insights are not only heard but acted upon.

Theme 5 illustrates that Black women in leadership are not only identifying the problems they face they are articulating clear and practical solutions. They recommended cultural competency training to improve communication, reduce stereotyping, and cultivate leadership awareness of diverse team dynamics. In addition, they proposed measurable hiring and promotion goals that hold institutions accountable for progress. These recommendations are essential for organizations striving to move beyond symbolic diversity toward authentic inclusion. In the final chapter, I discuss how these findings inform organizational practice and contribute to a growing call for evidence-based leadership reform.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research requires rigorous attention to the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the data and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To uphold the integrity of this basic qualitative study and ensure that participants’ perceptions and experiences were authentically represented, I implemented multiple strategies at each stage of the research process.

Credibility

Credibility was enhanced through several approaches. First, I engaged in prolonged interaction with the data by reading transcripts multiple times and immersing myself in participants' narratives before and during coding. Second, member checking was conducted with all participants who were given the opportunity to review key excerpts attributed to them to confirm accuracy and intent. Third, triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing participant responses with coded categories to ensure that themes reflect shared experiences rather than isolated comments.

Transferability

Transferability was strengthened by providing thick, rich descriptions of participant demographics, organizational roles, and the sociocultural dynamics influencing their experiences. Although in this study, I focused on a specific demographic, Black female executives in the United States, the narratives offer insight into broader systemic challenges that may be relevant in other professional contexts where racial and gender inequities exist.

Dependability

Dependability was addressed by creating a comprehensive audit trail. All transcripts, initial open codes, pattern coding tables, and analytic memos were documented and stored in a secure digital folder. A uniform coding protocol was applied across all interviews, and I revisited earlier coded data when new themes emerged to verify consistency. Peer debriefing with committee members also supported dependability by ensuring that coding decisions and category development were

consistent and transparent. This process allowed for a systematic and traceable record of the analytical decisions made throughout the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability was established through reflexivity and bracketing. As a Black woman with professional experience in healthcare leadership, I acknowledged my own positionality and kept reflective notes to separate personal bias from interpretation. Direct participant quotes were used extensively in the findings to anchor interpretations in participants' actual words. Themes were not assumed or imposed but emerged through careful review of patterns across multiple voices, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in the data and not influenced by researcher expectation. Together, these strategies ensured that the research process and resulting findings are trustworthy, rigorous, and reflective of the complexity and depth of the participants lived experiences.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the results of the study, including a detailed description of the setting, participant demographics, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Findings were organized into five themes that captured both the barriers encountered by Black women executives and their recommendations for dismantling systemic inequities in leadership access. To ensure the quality of these findings, I demonstrated evidence of trustworthiness by addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability through multiple strategies such as member checking, triangulation, reflexive journaling, and maintenance of an audit trail.

The findings revealed that while participants had successfully navigated into executive roles, their pathways were marked by persistent workplace bias, microaggressions, exclusion from networks, and lack of mentorship and sponsorship. At the same time, participants offered actionable solutions including structured mentorship and sponsorship programs, blind evaluation processes, cultural competency training, and measurable hiring and promotion goals, to create more equitable leadership environments. In the next chapter, I provide an interpretation of these results, connect them to existing literature and conceptual frameworks, and offer implications for organizational leadership, social change, and future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Black women executives regarding the challenges they face in attaining executive leadership roles and their recommendations for addressing their continued underrepresentation. I used a basic qualitative study design to explore the phenomenon of the underrepresentation of Black women in executive positions and to examine the challenges they face in attaining these roles. I used BFT and CRT as the conceptual frameworks to investigate the perceptions of 13 Black women executives and to ground the study. I incorporated CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) and BFT (Hill Collins, 2000) as the conceptual frameworks that facilitated the exploration of systemic racism, and the intersection of hidden barriers and the experiences of Black women pursuing advanced career opportunities. In the following section, I describe the findings and interpret the findings based on the semi-structured interview data and the themes that emerged from the data analysis process. I provide a detailed analysis of the study findings in relation to the literature and to the conceptual frameworks.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this basic qualitative study, I explored the perceptions and experiences of Black women executive regarding their underrepresentation of in executive leadership roles. In this study, I sought to understand the perceptions and experiences of Black women as it pertained to their journey in securing an executive leadership position in the workforce. In this study, I addressed two central research questions: RQ1, which examined how Black women perceive and experience barriers to attaining and sustaining executive

leadership roles, and RQ2, which explored participants' recommendations for dismantling those barriers and creating more equitable leadership pathways. I incorporated CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) BFT (Hill Collins, 2000) as the conceptual frameworks that facilitated the exploration of systemic racism, and the intersection of hidden barriers and the experiences of Black women pursuing advanced career opportunities. In the next section, I describe the findings related to the literature for RQ1 and RQ2.

RQ1

I used the findings from Themes 1 through 3 to address Research Question 1 and aligned them with the existing literature on the challenges Black female executives perceive, specifically workplace bias, discrimination, microaggressions, and the lack of mentorship programs and supports for attaining executive leadership roles. Participants emphasized the effects of microaggressions as influencing their perceptions of their psychological safety and well-being. All 13 executives described persistent racialized and gendered discrimination that shaped how their leadership potential and professional behaviors were interpreted, often resulting in exclusion from decision-making roles despite strong qualifications and documented performance. Participants described needing to be "overqualified" to receive partial recognition or being overlooked for promotions while less-qualified peers advanced. These findings align with scholarship that highlights how Black women leaders face compounded racial and gender bias in evaluation and advancement (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Moreover, these findings

mirror existing research on the emotional toll of microaggressions (M. Holder et al., 2022; Sue et al., 2019).

Most participants reported frequent microaggressions, including questioning of their competence, tone policing, or the need to code-switch to appear “safe.” Several described the emotional labor required to navigate stereotypes while maintaining professional composure and credibility. The psychological burden described underscores the costs of surviving leadership spaces that were not built with Black women’s safety or authenticity in mind.

Many participants reported difficulty accessing informal networks where advocacy, sponsorship, and advancement decisions occur. While some had mentors, few had sponsors with the power to advocate for promotions or resource allocation. These findings have been corroborated by researchers’ findings that Black women are often denied access to critical sponsorship and networks that accelerate advancement (Ibarra et al., 2013). Thus, participants conveyed how subtle, yet persistent forms of racism and sexism created psychologically unsafe work environments. The reported experiences also extend work by Wingfield (2021), who described how isolation in elite networks perpetuates leadership inequity even when women demonstrate excellence. I used Themes 4 and 5 to address Research Question 2.

RQ2

I used the findings from Themes 4 through 5 to address Research Question 2 and aligned them with the existing literature regarding the recommendations to address the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles. Participants

recommended sponsorship programs, blind evaluations processes, competency training, and hiring and promotion targets to foster an inclusive work environment for Black women in leadership. participants' calls for systemic reform to counteract inequitable promotion and evaluation processes. Several executives recommended blind review systems, bias-resistant rubrics, and formal accountability measures to reduce subjectivity in performance evaluation and advancement. They critiqued current DEI efforts as largely performative without enforceable structures. These findings echo Roberson's (2006) argument that equity initiatives must include measurable goals and accountability systems to disrupt bias.

All participants emphasized the need for cultural competency training, racial literacy, and measurable leadership accountability. Participants recommended that leaders of organizations should train executives in understanding and supporting diverse talent, linking such training to performance evaluations and promotion criteria. Many participants described how symbolic diversity statements lacked impact without concrete leadership development and metrics.

These findings also align with contemporary scholarship on DEI effectiveness, which highlight the importance of leadership accountability and culturally responsive professional development (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Roberson, 2019). By calling for measurable reform, participants demonstrated a praxis-oriented approach, moving from survival in inequitable spaces to shaping structures that enable authentic inclusion. In the next section, I discuss how the study's findings relate to the conceptual frameworks.

Findings Related to the Conceptual Frameworks

The findings of this study strongly aligned with the guiding conceptual frameworks of CRT and BFT. Both frameworks provided interpretive lenses through which the participants lived experiences could be examined, highlighting how systems of race, gender, and power intersect to shape their leadership journeys.

Theme 1 was related to workplace bias and discrimination. This finding illustrates how participants perceived racism and sexism were embedded in the organizational cultures participants that they were required to navigate. Closely related to Theme 1 was Theme 2 that reflected the perceptions of microaggressions and the resulting psychological and well-being burdens. These findings support the core constructs of CRT that racism is normalized and embedded in institutional practices (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Furthermore, the findings align with Bell's research that racism is systemic and is by nature hidden beneath meritocratic rhetoric (Bell et al., 2021; A. Holder et al., 2015). By describing inequitable scrutiny and blocked advancement, participants echoed elements of BFT by emphasizing Black women's experiential knowledge of intersecting oppression (Hill Collins, 2000) and the need to challenge leadership narratives that ignore systemic exclusion. These findings reinforce the constructs of CRT that racism is systemic and often hidden behind seemingly neutral organizational norms (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Furthermore, these findings underscore BFT's recognition of the "double bind" faced by Black women leaders who must manage intersecting identities under scrutiny (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000). Theme 3 related to the absence of sponsorship, mentorship and exclusion from professional networks that specifically

address how structural exclusion from influential relationships limits leadership mobility. This finding aligns with the constructs of CRT, which focus on structural barriers beyond individual effort (Bell et al., 2021), and with the tenets of BFT, that provide insight that Black women's exclusion from power spaces sustains inequity (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000).

Participants made clear recommendations regarding structural reform and evaluation equity to address the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership positions. Specifically, Theme 4 and 5 pertained to recommendations by participants regarding critical reforms needed to address workplace bias and discrimination. This finding illustrates how participants perceived racism and sexism were embedded in the organizational cultures participants that they were required to navigate. These findings support the praxis orientation of CRT praxis that moves beyond documenting racism to dismantling its institutional roots (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). From a BFT perspective, these recommendations align with the framework's emphasis on transforming systems to empower future generations of Black women leaders (Hill Collins, 2000). All participants conveyed that organizations must move beyond performative diversity initiatives toward measurable, enforceable accountability structures that ensure equitable access to advancement. In Theme 5, participants recommended that leadership teams receive diversity training and that there be specific promotion targets to support the hiring of Black women in leadership, thereby fostering a more inclusive environment. These recommendations reinforce CRT's demand for systemic intervention over symbolic inclusion (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) and BFT's

call for collective strategies to challenge marginalization and foster resilience (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000). Overall, the findings provide robust support for both CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) and BFT (Hill Collins, 2000). The participants' perceptions and recommendations based on interview data confirm the tenet of CRT that racism is systemic, normalized, and sustained through policies and practices that appear neutral but disadvantage marginalized groups (Bell et al., 2021; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). The findings also affirm the core constructs of BFT, emphasizing that Black women's knowledge emerges from navigating intersecting oppressions and resisting exclusion while fostering resilience and advocacy (Hill Collins, 2000). Importantly, the recommendations in Themes 4 and 5 extend these frameworks by offering practical strategies for organizational reform, illustrating how counter-storytelling can inform action. Through the voices of Black women executives, these study findings align with recent scholarship on the persistent, systemic barriers to leadership faced by women of color (Wingfield, 2021) and challenge dominant leadership narratives that continue to frame advancement as meritocratic and race-neutral (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000). The findings expose enduring organizational and structural inequities while offering actionable recommendations to create more equitable pathways toward executive leadership.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this basic qualitative study. First, the study relied on a small, purposive sample of 13 Black women executives. While this sample size is consistent with recommendations for

phenomenological and basic qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017), it necessarily limits the breadth of perspectives captured. The participants represented a range of industries, but their experiences may not fully reflect the diversity of Black women executives in other sectors, geographic regions, or organizational types. Readers should therefore exercise caution when applying these findings beyond contexts similar to those represented by the participants.

Second, participation was voluntary and self-selected. Those who agreed to be interviewed may have been especially motivated to share experiences of bias, exclusion, or advocacy, which could result in an overrepresentation of certain perspectives compared with Black women executives who have different or less explicitly articulated views (Patton et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2018). Although the study sought to recruit participants from multiple professional networks to enhance diversity, the sample may still reflect self-selection bias.

Third, the study design was cross-sectional and retrospective. Data were collected at a single point in time and relied on participants' reflections about their leadership journeys. As with all retrospective accounts, there is potential for recall bias or reinterpretation of events based on participants' current perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Varpio et al., 2021). Additionally, this design limits understanding of how barriers and coping strategies might change over time or in response to evolving organizational policies and DEI initiatives.

Fourth, the researcher's positionality as a Black woman with professional leadership experience may have influenced data collection and interpretation despite

efforts to remain reflexive and bracket personal assumptions (Berger, 2015). A reflective journal, member checking, and use of direct quotations were employed to mitigate this influence; however, complete elimination of researcher perspective is not possible in qualitative inquiry.

Finally, because the study focused on U.S.-based organizations, its findings may not transfer seamlessly to international contexts where racial dynamics, gender norms, and leadership structures differ (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). The study provides rich, thick description to support transferability, but readers must determine relevance to their own settings.

Despite these limitations, the study's rigorous methods including iterative coding, member checking, triangulation with conceptual frameworks, and maintenance of an audit trails support the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of its findings (Nowell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2020).

Recommendations

The findings of this study point to actionable strategies for dismantling systemic barriers that limit Black women's access to and advancement within executive leadership. The recommendations presented here are derived directly from participants lived experiences and supported by existing scholarship on organizational equity and leadership development. They are presented in two parts: recommendations for practice and recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for Practice

Formalize Mentorship And Sponsorship Programs For Black Women In Leadership Pipelines

Participants consistently described a lack of meaningful mentorship and, critically, sponsorship, the active advocacy of senior leaders who use their influence to open doors. While mentorship provides guidance and skill development, sponsorship directly impacts access to high-visibility assignments and promotions (Ibarra et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2022). Organizations should design structured, measurable mentorship and sponsorship initiatives that intentionally pair Black women with senior leaders who have the authority to recommend and promote them. Programs should include training for sponsors on the specific barriers Black women face, ensuring that advocacy is intentional rather than symbolic.

Implement Bias-Resistant, Transparent Evaluation And Promotion Systems

Subjective, informal performance reviews and promotion practices were cited as a primary barrier to advancement. To address this, organizations should adopt blind or partially anonymized review processes, clearly defined promotion rubrics, and external oversight to reduce favoritism, nepotism, and unconscious bias (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Roberson, 2019). These systems should prioritize measurable outcomes and documented competencies over proximity to existing power networks. Promotion committees should receive equity-focused training to disrupt stereotypes that often penalize Black women for leadership behaviors such as assertiveness or innovation.

Require Cultural Competency and Racial Equity Training for Leadership Team

Participants emphasized that leadership often lacked awareness of the lived realities of Black women, resulting in communication breakdowns and stereotyping. Organizations should require cultural competency training tailored to race and gender in leadership contexts, including modules on intersectionality, microaggressions, and racialized communication bias (A. Holder et al., 2022; Roberts & Mayo, 2019; Sue et al., 2019). Training should be outcomes-based, evaluated not merely by participation but by demonstrated improvements in inclusive management practices and overall team climate.

Establish Measurable DEI Accountability Metrics Tied to Leadership Performance

Diversity statements alone were described as performative without systems of accountability. Organizations should publicly report leadership demographics, hiring, and promotion metrics, and link progress on equity goals to executive performance reviews and compensation (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Nishii & Leroy, 2022; Roberson, 2019). Transparent data reporting fosters accountability and disrupts informal, exclusionary promotion pipelines. Progress should be reviewed annually and benchmarked against industry standards to ensure measurable advancement.

Prioritize Psychological Safety and Well-Being for Underrepresented Leaders

The emotional toll of navigating bias, microaggressions, and exclusion was a recurring theme. Organizations should create safe spaces and affinity groups where Black women leaders can connect, share experiences, and build support networks (Edmondson, 2018; Joseph et al., 2021). In addition, access to culturally responsive mental health resources and leadership coaching should be integrated into executive development

programs. Policies should explicitly address retaliation concerns when leaders speak about bias, reinforcing a culture of safety and inclusion.

Recommendations for Future Research

Conduct Longitudinal Studies to Examine Leadership Trajectories Over Time

This study captured participants' experiences retrospectively. Future research should track Black women's leadership journeys longitudinally to understand how barriers, coping strategies, and organizational responses evolve. Such studies could reveal whether current DEI and equity initiatives meaningfully impact advancement.

Explore Sector-Specific and Regional Differences

While this study included participants across several industries, sector-specific research could deepen understanding of unique barriers within fields such as healthcare, finance, technology, and higher education. Additionally, examining regional cultural norms and organizational climates could illuminate how geographic context influences leadership experiences.

Investigate the Role of Allyship and Cross-Racial Sponsorship

Participants noted the lack of advocates within their organizations. Future research should examine how cross-racial mentorship and sponsorship, particularly from influential white or male leaders, can support Black women's advancement (Ibarra et al., 2013; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Such studies could inform best practices for designing inclusive sponsorship programs.

Examine the Impact of HBCU Alumni Networks and Culturally Grounded Leadership

Development

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) play a critical role in preparing Black leaders (Gasman & Commodore, 2014). Future research could explore how HBCU alumni networks influence career resilience, access to mentorship, and navigation of executive barriers.

Study Organizational Interventions That Integrate Mental Health and Leadership

Development

Given the psychological burden described by participants, future research should evaluate leadership programs that combine career development with mental health support. Such studies could identify effective strategies for reducing burnout and sustaining Black women leaders over time. By adopting these recommendations, organizations can move beyond symbolic inclusion toward systemic change, building leadership pathways that are equitable, transparent, and supportive of the unique challenges Black women face. Continued research will further refine these strategies, contributing to a body of evidence-based practices aimed at dismantling persistent barriers to executive leadership.

Implications

The findings of this study carry meaningful implications for advancing equity in executive leadership, both within organizations and in broader societal and academic contexts. By centering the voices of Black women executives, the study provides empirical, evidence-based insight into how intersecting systems of racism, sexism, and

institutional exclusion continue to shape leadership access and experience. The recommendations derived from participants' lived experiences offer practical, data-informed strategies for dismantling inequities and creating environments where diverse leadership can thrive. These implications span social impact, theoretical and methodological advancement, and policy and organizational reform.

At the societal level, this study reinforces that diversity and inclusion in leadership are not merely ethical imperatives but strategic assets. Organizations with representative leadership demonstrate stronger innovation, decision-making, and financial performance (Hewlett et al., 2013; Hunt et al., 2018). However, these benefits can only be realized when inclusion extends beyond representation to authentic empowerment. By amplifying Black women's narratives, this study contributes to the growing call for transformational change that values lived experience as a source of organizational intelligence (Roberts & Mayo, 2019)

Within academic and professional practice, the findings underscore the necessity of examining leadership through intersectional and critical theoretical lenses. Traditional leadership theories, often grounded in Eurocentric and male-dominated paradigms, fail to account for the layered realities of Black women executives. Integrating CRT and BFT into leadership and organizational research challenges dominant frameworks and expands the methodological understanding of power, resistance, and resilience (Wingfield, 2021). This study demonstrates how counter-storytelling and qualitative inquiry can serve as tools of empowerment, validating marginalized voices as legitimate sites of scholarly and organizational knowledge.

For organizational and policy reform, the study's implications are both urgent and actionable. Institutions should embed equity goals into strategic planning, performance evaluation systems, and leadership accountability structures to ensure sustained progress (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Nishii & Leroy, 2022). Policies must go beyond symbolic gestures such as diversity pledges and translate into measurable, resourced commitments to hiring, mentorship, sponsorship, and psychological safety. The findings emphasize that fostering inclusive leadership requires continuous equity audits, transparent reporting, and leadership accountability mechanisms that link DEI outcomes to compensation and advancement.

In summary, this study contributes to ongoing scholarly and professional discourse by bridging critical theory and practice to illuminate both the structural barriers and the transformative potential of equity-driven leadership. The implications extend beyond the experiences of Black women to inform broader efforts to create workplaces that are not only diverse in composition but just and equitable in practice.

Positive Social Change

This study contributes to positive social change by amplifying the lived experiences of Black women executives, a group historically excluded from leadership discourse and decision-making power. By documenting the systemic barriers they face, including bias in promotion, exclusion from professional networks, microaggressions, and psychological burden, the study disrupts dominant narratives of meritocracy and individualism that often obscure structural inequities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Roberts & Mayo, 2019). This research validates the reality that inequity is not the result

of individual shortcomings but the manifestation of entrenched institutional practices that restrict access to power and opportunity (Wingfield, 2021).

When organizations apply these findings, the benefits extend beyond representation to measurable organizational performance and social progress. Companies that invest in equity and inclusion demonstrate higher levels of employee engagement, innovation, and financial return (Hewlett et al., 2013; Hunt et al., 2018). Supporting Black women in leadership roles therefore represents not only a moral obligation but a strategic imperative that advances economic, cultural, and civic outcomes.

Furthermore, this study underscores that authentic social change requires transformation at both structural and cultural levels. Representation alone is insufficient; true progress requires dismantling hidden barriers, cultivating psychological safety, and embedding measurable accountability systems that sustain equity over time (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Nishii & Leroy, 2022). When these shifts occur, they create ripple effects, inspiring younger generations, normalizing diverse leadership models, and promoting intergenerational pathways toward justice and empowerment.

By positioning the lived experiences of Black women executives as sources of organizational intelligence and catalysts for reform, this study bridges academic insight with practical impact. In doing so, it advances Walden University's mission of fostering positive social change through scholarship that empowers marginalized communities and challenges systemic inequity.

Theoretical and Methodological Implications

This research advances both Critical Race Theory CRT and BFT by applying them in the context of executive leadership, a domain where their combined use remains limited but increasingly necessary. CRT emphasizes that racism is systemic, normalized, and sustained by institutional structures that appear neutral yet disadvantage marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). BFT highlights the intersectional knowledge that Black women generate through navigating and resisting oppression (Hill Collins, 2000). The study's findings validate these frameworks by demonstrating how race and gender jointly shape leadership access, visibility, and experience, while also extending their utility to organizational leadership and workplace equity research.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the evolution of CRT and BFT by illustrating how they can be operationalized beyond education and social justice contexts to interrogate systemic inequities in corporate and institutional leadership. The intersectional patterns identified, such as microaggressions, exclusion from mentorship, and performative inclusion, illustrate how racialized gender dynamics persist even at the highest levels of professional advancement (Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Wingfield, 2021). These findings reinforce the need to employ CRT and BFT not only as interpretive frameworks but also as instruments for organizational transformation, aligning theory with praxis.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of integrating a Priori coding with inductive thematic analysis to examine intersectional experiences in leadership research. Combining CRT and BFT informed codes with open descriptive coding enabled

a nuanced understanding of both barriers and solutions, balancing theoretical rigor with participants lived realities Huberman and Miles (2002). The use of counter-storytelling and direct participant quotations further strengthened the study's ability to challenge dominant leadership narratives and restore epistemic authority to Black women's voices (Roberts & Mayo, 2019).

In doing so, the study contributes to methodological innovation within qualitative research by demonstrating how critical and phenomenological approaches can coexist productively. This fusion ensured that systemic analysis did not overshadow the depth of personal experience, maintaining both conceptual integrity and narrative authenticity (Nowell et al., 2017).

Future research can build on this design by conducting longitudinal qualitative studies that observe how Black women's leadership journeys evolve over time and how structural changes influence their advancement. Integrating mixed methods designs, incorporating both narrative inquiry and quantitative outcome measures, would provide richer insight into how interventions such as sponsorship programs or DEI accountability systems affect measurable equity outcomes (Edmondson & Lei, 2021; Poth & Munce, 2020). Such studies would further advance CRT and BFT as applied frameworks for diagnosing and dismantling inequities within organizational systems.

Policy and Organizational Culture

For meaningful and sustainable change, organizations must move beyond symbolic diversity statements toward measurable, systemic reform. The findings of this study suggest several critical policy and cultural implications that directly align with the

lived experiences of Black women executives. These implications emphasize that diversity without accountability reinforces inequity, and that intentional structural design is essential for long-term inclusion and representation (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Wingfield, 2021).

Embed Equity Into Leadership Performance Metrics

Executive performance reviews and compensation systems should be explicitly tied to measurable DEI outcomes, including the advancement, promotion, and retention of Black women in leadership roles (Nishii & Leroy, 2022; Roberson, 2019). Embedding these measures into accountability systems ensures that equity is treated as a strategic objective rather than a voluntary initiative.

Standardize Transparent Evaluation And Promotion Systems

Policies should require bias-resistant review processes, including blind or partially anonymized evaluation practices, to minimize subjectivity, favoritism, and proximity bias (Castilla & Benard, 2010). These processes should be regularly audited to confirm equitable outcomes and fairness across race and gender lines.

Institutionalize Mentorship And Sponsorship Structures

Mentorship and sponsorship programs should be codified into organizational policy rather than left to informal relationships. Formal programs create sustainable, equitable access to leadership guidance and advocacy, particularly for Black women, who are often excluded from informal professional networks (Roberts & Mayo, 2019; Thomas et al., 2022).

Invest in Cultural Competency at the Executive Level

Leadership development should include mandatory, evidence-based training on racial equity, intersectionality, and inclusive communication strategies (Roberts & Mayo, 2019; Sue et al., 2019). Training should be outcome-oriented, with periodic evaluations to measure behavioral change and team climate improvement.

Create Safe Reporting And Psychological Support Mechanisms

Policies must protect leaders who challenge bias and discrimination, offering confidential reporting pathways and ensuring freedom from retaliation. Organizations should also invest in culturally competent mental health support and executive coaching resources to sustain psychological safety for underrepresented leaders (Edmondson, 2018; Hewlett et al., 2013).

By adopting these policies and cultural approaches, organizations can move from performative inclusion to structural transformation. These strategies advance both moral and business imperatives by ensuring that leadership environments are equitable, innovative, and psychologically safe. When equity is institutionalized, rather than episodic, it strengthens organizational effectiveness, enhances decision-making, and builds a culture where diverse leadership can thrive and drive sustainable change.

Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm that Black women executives continue to navigate leadership environments shaped by intersecting barriers of race, gender, and systemic bias. Despite these challenges, the participants demonstrated resilience, strategic adaptability, and a collective commitment to equity that redefines what effective leadership looks like. Through the integration of CRT and BFT, this study illuminated

how organizational structures perpetuate inequities while also revealing how Black women resist, reform, and reimagine those same systems.

The study extends current scholarship by centering the voices of Black women in executive roles, voices too often excluded from leadership research, and grounding their lived experiences within theoretical and practical frameworks for systemic change. The five themes that emerged from the data, bias, and discrimination, microaggressions and psychological burden, lack of mentorship and sponsorship, structural reform, and cultural competency, provide a holistic view of both the obstacles and the opportunities that define Black women's professional journeys.

Collectively, these findings call for a shift from performative diversity efforts to structural transformation grounded in accountability, transparency, and cultural humility. Organizations that adopt the recommendations outlined in this chapter, formal mentorship and sponsorship programs, bias-resistant evaluation systems, measurable DEI metrics, and psychologically safe workplaces, will not only advance equity but also enhance innovation, retention, and organizational performance (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Rosette & Livingston, 2012).

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of combining a Priori coding with inductive thematic analysis to explore intersectional leadership experiences. The integration of counter-storytelling and reflexivity ensured that participants' narratives were preserved as authentic knowledge rather than filtered through dominant norms. Future researchers are encouraged to extend this approach through longitudinal and

mixed methods designs that track leadership trajectories and measure organizational impact over time.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of work that challenges traditional notions of leadership by affirming that equity is not a peripheral goal but a fundamental measure of organizational excellence. Through the voices of Black women executives, it presents both a mirror and a mandate, reflecting the inequities that persist and calling on institutions to act with courage, consistency, and accountability. In doing so, the research fulfills Walden University's mission of promoting positive social change through scholarship that uplifts marginalized communities and transforms systems toward justice.

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