

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thrive As They Lead

*Advancing the Infrastructure to Support
Black Women Leaders in the
D.C. Metro Area Nonprofit Sector*

Introduction



Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders continue to be at the forefront of innovation, movement-building, bold leadership, and strategy across the Washington D.C. metropolitan area and the country. Yet at the same time, Black women leaders are operating in *unprecedented* times with mounting barriers and challenges to their leadership – driven by systemic inequities deeply embedded in sectors and systems.

Prompted by the ongoing national dialogue around Black women’s leadership and the unsettling stories about the sector’s failure to adequately support Black women as they lead across the city and surrounding counties, Washington Area Women’s Foundation stepped in to fill this gap and bolster the leadership of Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders in the region. The Foundation commissioned a landscape analysis squarely focused on both examining and assessing the experiences and needs of Black women leaders across the public and nonprofit sectors but also their solutions for the infrastructure that is needed to support their leadership. The findings, themes, and learnings from this analysis are anchored in the core question:

What measures must be taken to provide Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders with the support, resources, and infrastructure they need to *thrive as they lead*?

This report features the voices, visions, and solutions articulated by 36 Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders – including a range of leadership tenures in the sector – with most leading for at least five years, and many leading for up to three decades. All participants are at the helm of various organizations and initiatives across Washington, D.C. and surrounding areas including Arlington County, Virginia; and Prince George’s and Montgomery Counties in Maryland. Participants were all current or former (within the past three years) Presidents, CEOs, or Executive Directors of their respective organizations across the public and nonprofit sectors.

This report was designed by Elayna Speight of Inked Designs, a Black woman-owned graphic design and art studio based in the Washington, D.C. Metro Area.

Themes



This report distills ten core themes that emerged in speaking to Black women and gender-expansive leaders. These themes are meant to point to common sources of barriers and challenges – towards building stronger infrastructure so Black women nonprofit leaders in the D.C. metro area can thrive.

The first theme, cutting across the entirety of the themes presented in this report, is the ***fundamental absence of trust in their leadership***. Black women leaders shared experiences with deep skepticism surrounding their capabilities in effectively managing organizational budgets, initiating new projects, proposing organizational policies, and securing trust from funders to deliver the outcomes they consistently achieve. The remaining ten themes are below:

- 1. LEADERSHIP** Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders face relentless scrutiny, challenges, and undermining of their leadership. Their capacity to exhibit innovation and ambition is simultaneously expected and suppressed, constrained by societal expectations that limit their departure from conventional forms of leadership. They are unable to lead as their authentic selves.
- 2. SUPPORT** Mentorship, community, and support networks play crucial roles in facilitating, strengthening, and sustaining the leadership of Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders.

- 3. EXPECTATIONS** Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders in the workplace encounter daunting obstacles, including navigating unrealistic expectations, microaggressions, and unacknowledged efforts, as they take on significant responsibilities without receiving proper recognition, rewards, or promotions for their contributions.
- 4. VULNERABILITY** Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders encounter limited opportunities to seek support or display vulnerability in their workplaces without their leadership authority being undermined, as there are few available resources or individuals they can turn to.
- 5. RESISTING SCARCITY** The current D.C. nonprofit sector environment produces a scarcity mindset, causing Black women-led organizations to feel like they need to prioritize siloed and isolated work to drive innovative strategies that will attract funding, over collaborative work and partnership that they would otherwise desire to do.
- 6. BOARDS** Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders experience varying levels of support from their boards, with a significant number facing obstacles such as a lack of trust in their leadership, inadequate board governance capabilities, and misalignment with their organizational vision.
- 7. COMPENSATION** Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders experience persistent underpayment and undervaluation, despite their significant contributions to their organizations, with some increasing their organizations' budgets substantially during their tenure.
- 8. FUNDING** Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders encounter distinctive obstacles in accessing adequate funding for their organizations, including navigating complex application and reporting requirements, as well as the added burden of proving their worthiness as responsible stewards of funders' money.
- 9. DONOR RELATIONSHIPS** Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders highlight the existence of entrenched power dynamics in their relationships with donors, facing challenges in finding common ground and maintaining authenticity while navigating the unwritten rules and expectations of donor interactions. They also point out that the donor base and predominantly white, affluent communities have established relationships that make it exclusive and difficult for Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders to gain entry.
- 10. WELLNESS** Black women leaders express profound exhaustion in their roles, with many contemplating or actively planning to leave their positions citing few opportunities for uninterrupted rest and inadequate infrastructure to support their well-being. They emphasize the importance of sabbaticals as sacred moments for restoration, while also advocating for integrating wellness practices into organizational cultures as a comprehensive system rather than being limited to isolated activities.



The quotes below offer a glimpse into the discussions we had with Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders:

- ▶ “If I could talk directly to funders and board members, simply put, you need to trust Black women. You need to trust Black women to do the work because we’ve always done the work.”
- ▶ “I think part of building the infrastructure to support Black women leaders is finding ways not to make Black women feel bad for showing up and being who they are.”
- ▶ “It’s exhausting seeing the double standard for Black women. Especially when you see your white peers getting rewarded for half the effort you put in.”
- ▶ “I would say, unfortunately, it is my perception that I’ve never had radical support. I would like to see a day where I don’t have to prove my worth in every space. And to reprove it the next day. And the next day. And the next day. The space to make mistakes.”
- ▶ “Board support looks like going from “you go girl” to tangible things. It’s saying these are the connections we’re going to make and these are the conversations we’re going to have on your behalf. These are the rooms I’m going to be in and I’m going to mention your name. This is real support – putting my name in rooms that I have not been privy to.”

The Path Forward



When asked about the infrastructure required to better support their leadership, Black women leaders offered a range of solutions centered on the following key principles:

- 1. Spaces curated specifically for and by Black women:** Black women expressed a strong desire for spaces where they could be listened to, acknowledged, and empathized with along with a place where they can grow their network and skills with an intergenerational group of Black women in the region.
- 2. Trust & Autonomy:** Black women articulated a need for trust to access dollars to self-build additional infrastructure supports including trainings, retreats, and opportunities for rest and wellness.
- 3. Adaptability:** Recognizing the diverse nature of their support requirements, Black women leaders emphasized that the infrastructure should be versatile, catering to the needs of Black women leaders in different phases of their careers.
- 4. Cross-Sector Partners:** While initiative elements for Black women leaders should be driven by Black women, a broad set of partners will need to drive parts of this infrastructure, including the training and change needed across the philanthropic sector, and in board governance.

The call to action is clear – let the voices and leadership of the Black women and Black gender-expansive leaders articulated in this report guide the path to **accelerating the infrastructure to support their leadership**. This is a call to action for funders, philanthropic leaders, and community partners to amplify and validate the voices of Black women leaders, affirm and uplift their truths, stories, and experiences, and invest in their solutions so they can **thrive** as they lead.

Published 2023

For more information on the full report, head to:
<https://thewomensfoundation.org/black-women-and-gender-expansive-leadership-project/>