

# African American Women Executives, Underrepresentation in Leadership

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**Abstract:** Despite increased awareness of the persistent underrepresentation of African American women in senior executive roles, systemic barriers continue to hinder equitable career advancement for this group. This is important because recognizing the problem is the first step toward addressing systemic inequalities. The purpose of this modified Delphi study was to measure consensus among HR industry experts on how organizations can mitigate the underrepresentation of African American women in executive leadership positions through organizational mentorship, networking, and career advancement. Following the conceptual foundations of intersectionality theory, social cognitive career theory, and the glass ceiling theory, the research questions for the study examined what policies and programs are currently in place within organizations and how effective HR experts perceive them to be, potential ways to address the systemic issues that contribute to the lack of African American women in senior executive roles, and actionable guidance on how targeted mentorship and sponsorship programs can serve as a catalysts for change to develop further and improve the representation of African American women in leadership. The study employed a manual constant comparative analysis, measurement of median scores, and ranking measurements to analyze data collected through a three-round modified-Delphi study of human resource and diversity experts. Cronbach's alpha was measured to determine study reliability. Based on eight items with consensus, the expert panelist further conceded on the two top recommendations. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) practices and offers practical suggestions to foster equitable pathways for underrepresented women in technology leadership.

**Keywords:** African American women, executives, underrepresentation, modified delphi.

## INTRODUCTION

The ongoing underrepresentation of African American women in executive leadership highlights persistent barriers to diversity and has broader consequences for community resilience. When African American women are not represented in leadership, communities lose vital role models, mentors, and advocates, impacting social capital and opportunities for future generations.

As the American workforce grew and diversified, minority representation also improved (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Even with the increase of minorities in the workforce, the underrepresentation of African American/Black women in executive leadership remained unchanged (Pogrebna *et al.*, 2024). Our nation has made significant progress in terms of gender and racial equality, but there are still very few African American women in senior leadership positions (Showunmi, 2023). The data is compelling and, in some ways, disheartening because, despite legislation and the extensive efforts made by the legal profession in general and by law firms in particular to address the lack of women and underrepresented groups in senior positions, the results remain disappointing (Cecchi-Dimeglio, 2021).

The disparities within the technology sector reveal a significant lack of diversity, underscoring longstanding inequities that persist at all levels. In the technology sector, disparities are glaring, as the demographic makeup of the technology workforce reveals a widely recognized phenomenon: the U.S. technology workforce is predominantly male, White, and increasingly Asian (Neely *et al.*, 2023). Disclosing such facts about the lack of diversity in the tech sector raises concern. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, 2009) examined employment trends in the tech sector and identified several concerning patterns. Compared to overall private industry, the high-tech sector employed a larger share of Whites (63.5% to 68.5%), Asian Americans (5.8% to 14%), and men (52% to 64%), and a smaller share of African Americans (14.4% to 7.4%), Hispanics (13.9% to 8%), and women (48% to 36%). Workforce demographics and labor statistics show that rather than being an unusual occurrence, women's underrepresentation, particularly in IT, is widespread, complex, and persistent. A report by the National Science Foundation (2022) revealed that women represented 27% of the U.S. IT workforce in 2022, with 3%, 7%, and 2% identifying as African American, Asian American, and Hispanic American/Latina, respectively. In 2022, women held 57% of all professional occupations, yet they occupied only 27% of all

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computing occupations (National Center for Women & Information Technology [NCWIT], 2020).

The underrepresentation of women of color in the technology sector highlighted a severe equity gap, with data that showed very low participation in key roles. Obielodan (2020) reported that Latinas and Black women held only 1% and 3% of these jobs, respectively. As a result, fewer women were present in software development, technology leadership, or other critical roles, which significantly limited potential for future innovation, Soda (2023) noted. The National Science Foundation (2022) emphasized that there needed to be more women in senior IT executive positions. However, A. Smith (2021) noted that women of color remained notably underrepresented in executive IT roles.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that the lack of structured mentorship programs specifically designed for African American women within organizations not only leads to a diminished sense of belonging and career advancement but also perpetuates broader societal inequities. By limiting opportunities at the organizational level, we reinforce systemic disadvantages that affect economic stability and community empowerment. This underrepresentation results in fewer role models for African American youth, contributes to economic disparities within these communities, and weakens overall community empowerment. Artenant (2025) noted that, "Additional research focusing on mentorship, networking, and career advancement for underrepresented minority women in STEM is essential for creating more inclusive and supportive systems" (p. 101). African American women frequently encounter workplaces devoid of essential support and mentorship programs, thus constraining their career progression and diminishing their overall job happiness. Murrell *et al.* (2021) explained the importance of peer monitoring, identity work, and holding environments. Their research on the absence of belonging and effective mentorship frameworks concluded that this absence could create barriers to personal and professional growth, particularly for underrepresented groups.

These findings underscored the urgent need for research exploring these dynamics in leadership development. Furthermore, K. M. Thomas and Johnson (2022) revealed a gap in mentorship opportunities and called for more research on how mentorship could

specifically benefit African American women in advancing their careers. While mentorship is recognized as a source of support against workplace barriers for marginalized individuals (Murphy & Kram, 2022) and as a moderator of career advancement (M. T. Smith & Chen, 2023). A. M. Gonzalez and Huber (2022) argued that further research was needed to understand how mentorship specifically supports individuals who identify as an intersection of marginalized populations, such as Black women.

Addressing the underrepresentation of minority women in the technology sector was essential for promoting equity and fostering creativity. Kuknor and Bhattacharya (2022) believed that the long-lasting effects of racial and gender biases, which stemmed from the persistent absence of minority women in leadership roles, severely hindered progress. Pogrebna *et al.* (2024) explored the enduring impacts of these biases, emphasizing how they reinforced stereotypes and behaviors that perpetuated prejudiced outcomes. Kuknor and Bhattacharya further highlighted that the combined effect of these biases blocked the advancement of minority female leaders by maintaining stereotypical patterns, resulting in continued inequality. Consequently, they argued there was a critical need to create more significant opportunities for African American women to ascend into higher-level managerial positions within information technology.

Despite some progress in racial and gender equity, as well as increased education and graduation rates among women, African American women remained underrepresented in management and executive roles. Bowleg *et al.* (2023) found that a lack of mentoring and professional development opportunities often hindered their advancement to higher-paid positions, as noted by Cook and Glass (2018). Currently, there are a record 37 women leading Fortune 500 companies—a slight increase from last year's record of 33. Still, only three of these leaders were women of color, with none being African American, as reported by Shierholz (2020). The most effective industry practices to address the underrepresentation of African American women had not yet been identified, indicating a significant gap in strategic efforts to promote equity at the highest levels.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative modified-Delphi research study was to measure the consensus among HR industry experts regarding how organizations could mitigate the underrepresentation of African American

women in executive leadership positions through organizational mentorship, networking, and career advancement. The objective of this study was to provide a ranked list of consensus items from the experts for use in industry. The study occurred in California with HR managers who serve as industry experts, some of whom have diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) experience in their respective organizations. Data was collected using SurveyMonkey, an online tool, in three iterative rounds. Round 1 included an online questionnaire, Round 2 used a 5-point Likert-type questionnaire, and Round 3 was a ranking questionnaire.

### Research Questions

**RQ1:** What is the level of consensus among key HR experts related to current policies and procedures for mentorship, networking, and career advancement programs that leadership might use to mitigate the underrepresentation of African American women in senior executive roles?

**RQ2:** What organizational mentorship, networking, and career advancement, policies and procedures must be addressed or further developed to increase the mitigating of the underrepresentation of African American women in senior executive roles?

### Significance of the Study

A modified-Delphi research design was used for this study. The modified-Delphi research design approach was employed to gather expert opinions on measures for reducing the underrepresentation of African American women in executive leadership roles., the modified-Delphi technique was employed to facilitate expert consensus. As Hsu and Sandford (2021) described, the features of the modified-Delphi, such as remote expert convening, anonymous participation, and round-by-round questioning, made it an ideal methodological choice for gaining an in-depth understanding of the research topic.

The proposed sample for this study was 14 HR experts from across the country. Participants were recruited through LinkedIn, utilizing the researchers' professional networking. The snowball sampling method was employed to encourage initial participants to refer others to the study. Robles *et al.* (2020) described snowball sampling as a nonprobability method that involves recruiting current participants through their contacts.

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study illustrated the relationships between three prominent theories. It provided a foundation for understanding how multiple social identities and contextual factors influence career development, advancement opportunities, and barriers faced by African American women. Throughout the study, this framework guided data analysis and interpretation. In this study, the conceptual framework included intersectional theory, as discussed by Crenshaw (1989) and Hankivsky (2022), as well as social cognitive career theory (SCCT), developed by Lent *et al.* (1994) and further expanded by Mena (2021), and glass ceiling theory, as outlined by Kauffman (2021) and Morrison *et al.* (1987).

The intersectionality theory framework was critical for analyzing how these identities shaped individual experiences, especially in relation to systems of oppression, privilege, and discrimination. Intersectional theory served as a lens to examine how overlapping identities, such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation, interacted to create unique experiences and challenges for individuals within marginalized groups (Bowleg *et al.*, 2023; Hankivsky, 2022). Acknowledging these intersections, this research aimed to highlight the diverse pathways to achieving professional success and the challenges that individuals with multiple marginalized identities may encounter.

Likewise, the Social Cognitive Career (SCCT) framework emphasized the role of personal agency, self-efficacy, and contextual factors in shaping career-related interests, choices, and performance (McKenzie & Bennett, 2022). This theory emphasized the importance of understanding how individual beliefs, perceptions, and environmental factors intersect to shape career trajectories. Wang *et al.* (2022) argued that SCCT provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the influence of personal beliefs, contextual circumstances, and behavioral outcomes on career development. By integrating SCCT, the study aimed to explore a crucial aspect of varied experiences within different identity groups that impact individuals' confidence and decisions in pursuing career opportunities.

The glass ceiling theory highlighted the systemic barriers that often impede the advancement of individuals from underrepresented groups within organizational hierarchies (Singh *et al.*, 2023).

Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) posited that the glass ceiling effect encompasses the exclusion of African American women from leadership positions in technology organizations and the career barriers faced by women in STEM fields. Edwards (2020) noted that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a landmark piece of legislation that aimed to dismantle discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. While the legislation opened doors for African American women, it did not eliminate all barriers to leadership roles. This framework was employed to analyze the cultural and institutional factors that contribute to the persistence of the glass ceiling while it also examined how these barriers manifest differently across various identity groups.

### **Community Relevance of Organizational Inclusion**

Organizational inclusiveness transcends beyond corporate measurements; it functions as a catalyst for societal reform. When African American women attain leadership roles, their distinct viewpoints contribute to community development programs. Mentorship ecosystems that offer younger generations vital support and direction are fostered by this greater representation. Furthermore, diverse leadership in corporations encourages Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives that are more sensitive to community needs, which results in focused investments in African American communities' economic development, healthcare, and education.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this qualitative modified-Delphi research study was to assess the consensus among HR industry experts on how organizations could mitigate the underrepresentation of African American women in executive leadership positions in IT through organizational mentoring programs. These programs foster a supportive environment that enhances job satisfaction and creates pathways for career advancement. This study aimed to provide a ranked list of consensus items from the experts for industry use. Recruitment began by identifying a pool of 84 human resource experts with experience in DEIB. The modified-Delphi study method involved a series of three iterative questionnaires with open-ended questions, where each round informed the development of the subsequent questionnaire. Ultimately, a suitable level of consensus was established among the study participants.

The modified-Delphi was an iterative process involving multiple rounds of questionnaires aimed at collecting data and reaching a consensus (Ab-Latif *et al.*, 2017). Typically conducted over three rounds, this method's advantages included eliminating biases through participant anonymity, which helped preserve decision-making integrity, and enabling participants to make thoughtful decisions at their convenience, free from time constraints (Byerly *et al.*, 2022). Its design was appropriate because it allowed for successive rounds of inquiry based on field tests, questionnaires, and analysis, with the flexibility to adjust the research approach as needed. See Figure 1. Compared to other qualitative designs, such as phenomenology, which focuses on understanding lived experiences, or case studies, which offer current perspectives, the modified-Delphi method provided a future outlook (Davidson, 2013).

The purpose of this study was to measure the consensus of opinions among HR experts regarding strategies to mitigate the underrepresentation of African American women in executive leadership positions through fostering organizational belonging. The strength of this approach lies in its ability to offer a broad overview of the issues, thereby deepening the readers' understanding. Consequently, the research employed the modified-Delphi technique to assess expert consensus effectively.

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines and received approval from the University of Phoenix IRB (Approval Number: 2305782-2). All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study.

### **Participants Selection**

Understanding the expertise and experience of participants was essential for the credibility of this study. The study population consisted of HR professionals with significant knowledge in DEIB initiatives within the industry. These experts had the necessary knowledge, skills, and experience to identify and evaluate the challenges organizations faced in mitigation efforts and to provide insights into strategies that could address the underrepresentation of African American women in senior executive roles. As noted by scholars emphasizing the importance of participant familiarity, it was crucial to involve individuals deeply familiar with their organizations' unique contexts, histories, and needs to ensure relevant and informed perspectives.

The participant selection process was integral to ensuring the relevance and credibility of this modified-Delphi study. The researcher compiled a list of potential HR professionals, including presidents, CEOs, recruitment specialists, and generalists, who met the selection criteria outlined below to facilitate the recruitment process. The study involved 11 HR experts with experience or knowledge in creating, implementing, or evaluating DEIB initiatives within their organizations, each having worked in the industry for at least 5 years. Akute (2022) and Coresignal (2024) reported that the DEIB expert population in U.S.-based organizations increased from 35,246 in 2022 to 42,986 in 2024, representing a 20.7% growth. The researcher selected the first 14 individuals from this compiled list who met the criteria and accepted the invitation. The targeted population and sample were aimed to be representative of organizations across the United States. The study conducted three rounds of questionnaires with open-ended questions, with the goal of reaching a consensus based on the participants' expert opinions at each stage.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

The criteria for selection included the following:

- HR professional, HR manager, or CEO/COO with 5 or more years of experience in either position;
- Directly managing or consulting on DEIB programs, or;
- General HR management, including recruitment, training, and employee engagement with demonstrated commitment to DEIB principles, or;
- Hands-on experience or substantial knowledge in creating, implementing, or evaluating DEIB initiatives or policies within their organization;
- Currently residing in the United States;
- Bachelor's degree in HR, business, or a related field preferred;
- Must be 21 years of age or older;
- Must be able to provide a personal email address for study communications.

The SurveyMonkey digital internet-based tool was used to store, organize, categorize, and analyze data.

The following detailed steps were conducted, and the data obtained were observed and recorded:

1. Researched DEIB professionals in the current LinkedIn network for recruitment and shared the criteria for participants. Panelists were selected through an anonymous survey profile.
2. Explained the study purpose and the modified-Delphi technique for data collection to panelists in the recruitment letter.
3. Developed and provided the open-ended questions to selected panelists
4. Once completed, accessed and conducted a manual comparative to identify themes.
5. Created a Likert-type questionnaire based on the developed themes from the Round 1 questionnaire responses.
6. Posted new Round 2 questionnaire in SurveyMonkey.
7. Experts evaluated the list of themes and ranked them using the Likert-type scale of 1-5. 1 *strongly disagree*, 2 *disagree*, 3 *neutral*, 4 *agree*, 5 *strongly agree*.
8. Collected Round 2 results, analyzed the developed themes, and determined the levels of consensus by calculating IQR for each item. Where there was 1 or less on a 5-point Likert-type scale.
9. Items with an IQR of .7 or .8 were considered a high level of consensus and were pulled forward to prepare the Round 3 questionnaire.
10. Developed Round 3 questionnaire listing those themes pulled forward and had participants rank from 1-10 in order of importance as experts in the field. This was their final opportunity for feedback and comments.
11. Collected and analyzed all data from Rounds 1-3 for final analysis and results based on consensus.

Facilitating effective participation and data collection was essential throughout each round of the Delphi process. In Round 1 and each subsequent iteration, participants received a personalized email invitation containing a link to the online survey and a deadline for

completion. Following the provided instructions, each expert panelist responded to 10 open-ended questions, drawing on their knowledge and experience (Nworie, 2011). The questionnaire served as the initial assessment of opinions. After collecting the responses, a manual, continual comparative analysis was performed to identify themes within the Round 1 data.

Round 2 focused on feedback and refinement, which was critical for building consensus among the expert panel. Each participant received a personalized email invitation that included a link to the online survey and a deadline for completion (Romano, 2010). The panelists clicked the link, accepted the survey instructions—detailing the completion process and time limit—and responded to a closed-ended, 5-point Likert-type questionnaire. The rating process involved a 5-point Likert-type scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree (Nworie, 2011; see Figure 1 for researcher-created sample survey). Following data collection, the researcher calculated the IQR, which is a statistical measure representing the spread of the middle 50% of values within the sample (Habibzadeh, 2017).

The third and final iteration of the modified-Delphi process involved ranking the identified ideas. Participants received a unique, secure SSL-encrypted link to the online questionnaire along with a deadline for completion (Chen *et al.*, 2025). Upon clicking the link, each expert was required to accept detailed instructions regarding the questionnaire completion process and submission timeline. Panelists were instructed to rank ideas that had received a median score of 3.5 or higher in the previous round, based on their assessment of each idea's relative importance. In this study, an IQR of 0.7 or 0.8 indicated a high level of unanimity. Items demonstrating substantial consensus were prioritized and rated on a scale of 1 to 10, reflecting their significance. A final questionnaire was then developed based on these ratings, enabling participants to prioritize the elements from most to least important. After the rankings were collected, the data were downloaded and analyzed, and the researcher emailed participants to inform them that the study was complete.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Three rounds of Delphi were implemented to ensure rigor and relevance of the study. Skulmoski *et al.* (2007) asserted that three rounds of Delphi are typically adequate for most studies. Therefore, this

study implemented a three-round modified-Delphi process. The study began with a field test of the Round 1 open-ended questions focused on organizational policies and processes addressing the underrepresentation of African American women in senior executive roles. The field test was conducted to ensure readability and face validity; any ambiguous items or those with limited relevance to the study outcomes were identified, modified, or removed, and necessary adjustments to the questionnaire were made accordingly.

Round 1 marked the initial phase of the modified-Delphi study. Participants engaged in this preliminary research by completing a standardized questionnaire designed to gather insights into the underrepresentation of African American women in senior executive positions from a DEIB perspective. The questionnaire consisted of a combination of open-ended questions designed to explore the obstacles faced by African American women in achieving senior leadership roles and identify potential solutions. The questionnaire was administered electronically through a secure online platform to ensure confidentiality and facilitate easy access.

The initial phase of data analysis employed comparative content analysis to examine the open-ended responses from the panelists. Vander Putten and Nolen (n.d.) described comparative content analysis as a method involving the examination, categorization, and grouping of data, concepts, and content variations. The process utilized a manual, four-step constant comparison approach—the first step involved comparing, condensing, and integrating responses to each question. The second step synthesized this condensed data across questions within each category, while the third phase involved further data reduction and the development of themes. The final step presented these themes to inform progression to Round 2 of the modified-Delphi study (Vander Putten & Nolen, n.d.). The researcher specifically employed manual constant comparative analysis, as described by Campbell *et al.* (2004), beginning with the categorization of responses to the 10 open-ended questions. The analysis aimed to identify recurring themes, trends, and approaches related to the underrepresentation of African American women, following methodologies outlined by Elo and Kyngäs (2008).

The development of Round 2 closed-ended questions was based on qualitative constant

comparative content analysis of the data collected in Round 1. Campbell *et al.* (2004) and Hsu and Sandford (2007) described this approach as a method for condensing data, concepts, content variations, and phenomena related to organizational policies and procedures aimed at reducing the underrepresentation of African American women in senior executive roles. Data points that were reiterated two or more times were articulated in statement format and incorporated into a 5-point Likert-type questionnaire for Round 2 (Clibbens *et al.*, 2012; Nworie, 2011; Vander Putten & Nolen, n.d.). The questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert-type scale, where a score of 1 indicated "strongly disagree" and a score of 5 indicated "strongly agree" (Bourgeois *et al.*, 2006; Romano, 2010; Stewart *et al.*, 2011). The expert panelists used this Likert-type scale questionnaire to evaluate their level of agreement with comments concerning organizational policies and procedures designed to address the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership, based on the condensed data from Round 1.

The analysis of Round 2 Likert-type scale questionnaire responses focused on organizational policies and procedures aimed at reducing the underrepresentation of African American women in senior executive roles. Skulmoski *et al.* (2007) described the use of quantitative descriptive statistics as essential for examining survey data in Delphi studies. The assessment involved analyzing the median and Cronbach's alpha to evaluate central tendency and reliability. The median was particularly useful in Delphi research because it mitigated the effects of skewed data (Gordon, 1994; Hsu & Sandford, 2007; Riggs, 1983). As recommended by Boyle (1988), the median is appropriate for evaluating interval data. A Cronbach's alpha of .70 or higher indicated the study's reliability and internal consistency (Moran, 2018). In this study, a Cronbach's alpha of .70 or above signified homogeneity and consensus among the expert panelists (Dechartres *et al.*, 2011). The median score was used to refine the data regarding strategies and processes organizations could implement to address the underrepresentation issue (Hsu & Sandford, 2007; Romano, 2010; Skulmoski *et al.*, 2007). Data points with a median of 3.5 or higher were advanced to Round 3 of the modified-Delphi, as this score represented the initial threshold of agreement on the 5-point Likert-type scale, anchored by strongly disagree and strongly agree.

The final phase of the modified-Delphi process involved qualitative evaluation of the panelists' ratings

and rankings from Round 3. As this was the concluding round, Round 3 began with participants receiving a summary of the results from Round 2, which highlighted concepts with median scores of 3.5 or higher (Hsu & Sandford, 2007; Romano, 2010). Participants were then instructed to prioritize their top two ideas from the remaining options, assigning a rank of 1 to the most important and a rank of 2 to the second most important (Romano, 2010). The rankings were calculated and analyzed based on the percentage of agreement, resulting in a final prioritized list of policies and procedures that organizations might implement to address the underrepresentation of African American women in senior executive roles (Day & Bobeva, 2005; Romano, 2010). Upon completing the study, each panelist was offered the option to receive the comprehensive study summary via email. This summary included the results from each round: content analysis from Round 1, median scores and Cronbach's alpha from Round 2, and the percentage agreement from Round 3, all of which were aligned with the study's mission statement. The purpose of the summary was to illustrate areas of unanimity or disagreement regarding the research questions. The study concluded with a thematic and ranking analysis for each research topic (Skulmoski *et al.*, 2007).

## RESULTS

This qualitative modified-Delphi study achieved consensus among HR industry experts regarding effective strategies and practices organizations can implement to mitigate the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership roles as shown in Table 1. Through multiple rounds of surveys and feedback, the panel identified key areas where organizations typically fall short, such as mentorship opportunities, inclusive policies, and unconscious bias training, and highlighted actionable solutions to address these gaps. The consensus underscored the importance of targeted initiatives, accountability measures, and organizational culture shifts that prioritize diversity and equity at all levels. The findings highlight the need to address systemic barriers in leadership pipelines. The underrepresentation of African American women in executive positions not only reflects organizational challenges but also perpetuates broader societal inequalities related to race and gender. These representation gaps reinforce negative cultural perceptions and limit opportunities for future generations of African American women.

**Table 1: Outlines the Consensus Items with an IQR of 1**

Theme	Sample Statement	IQR
Mentorship Programs	Organizations should establish structured mentorship programs for African American women	1
Structural and Systemic	Organizations should implement inclusive policies that promote equal opportunities for advancement.	1

### Community Relevance

The insights gleaned from this study extend beyond organizational improvements, offering valuable strategies for broader social transformation within African American communities. Here's how the findings are directly applicable to fostering more resilient, equitable, and empowered communities:

- **Empowering Youth through Role Models:** Visible African American women in executive leadership create tangible role models for young African American girls, inspiring them to pursue ambitious goals and demonstrating the potential for success against systemic odds.
- **Strengthening Mentorship Ecosystems:** Organizations that commit to diversity and inclusion initiatives are more likely to support mentorship programs that connect successful women with aspiring young leaders, enhancing social capital and providing critical career guidance.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Increased representation in corporate leadership translates into greater economic stability for African American communities. These leaders are more likely to drive corporate social responsibility efforts that address local needs, invest in community development, and promote fair hiring practices.
- **Advocating for Equitable Policies:** African American women in leadership positions often become advocates for policies that address disparities in education, healthcare, and economic opportunity, leveraging their influence to drive systemic change at the community level.

### CONCLUSION

The study results highlighted the diverse perspectives of HR experts across various industries and backgrounds who actively participated in the research. These viewpoints shed light on HR leaders'

opinions regarding the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership roles and underscore the importance of developing effective strategies, such as structured mentorship programs tailored specifically for African American women. Throughout the study, participants acknowledged the complex interplay of factors—such as implicit biases in hiring and promotion processes, limited access to influential networks, and the unique challenges faced by African American women due to the intersection of race and gender (Adeniyi *et al.*, 2024).

While these insights aimed to present an honest and comprehensive understanding, I recognize that perceptions about systemic issues can sometimes be influenced by varying experiences and interpretations. Developing solutions requires open, transparent dialogue and a commitment to addressing these deeply rooted barriers. In Round 1, participants identified key factors impacting policies, programs, and opportunities for African American women to advance. Through subsequent rounds, collective ratings and consensus reinforced the importance of collaborative efforts to effect meaningful change.

The themes derived from participant feedback emphasized the necessity for organizations to focus on creating structured programs that address systemic and structural barriers—facilitating access to influential networks, providing targeted skill development, and fostering a supportive environment for candid dialogues about race and gender challenges (Murray *et al.*, 2024). The consensus statements underscored that improving job satisfaction and career development for African American women aspiring to executive roles involves honest acknowledgment of existing disparities and an understanding that these gains translate into stronger, more empowered communities capable of addressing systemic inequalities.

Moving forward, policymakers should consider implementing policies that incentivize organizations to diversify their leadership teams. Educators should focus on developing curricula that promote inclusive leadership and challenge stereotypes. Community

leaders can establish mentoring programs that support and empower young African American women to pursue leadership roles.

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