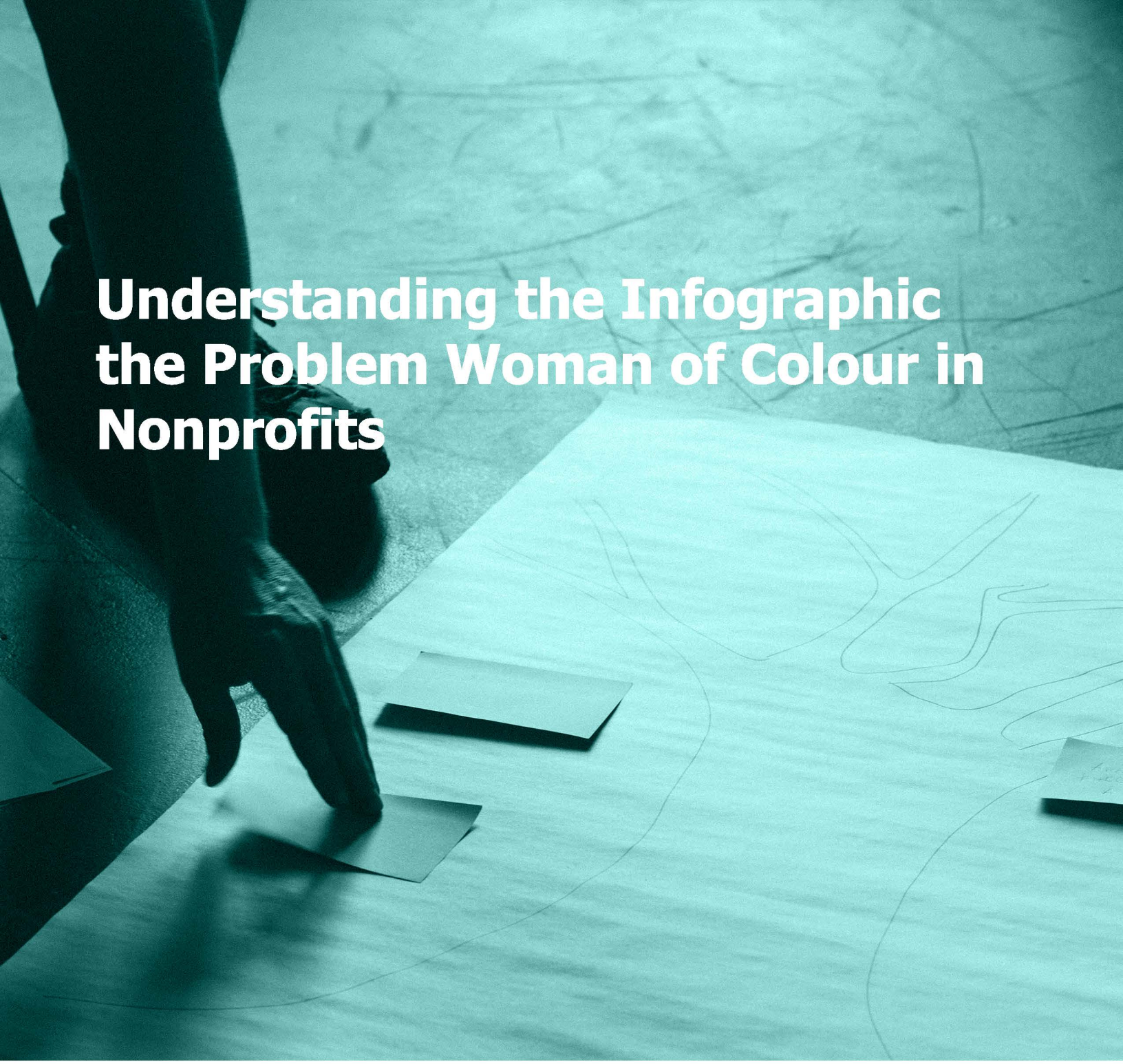


Understanding the Infographic the Problem Woman of Colour in Nonprofits

Diversité d'Abord: Racism in the nonprofit sector in Quebec
A research project by the Centre for Community Organizations (COCo)

Date of publication: July 2024

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To access the full report, please click here: https://coco-net.org/diversite-dabord/

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Diversité d’Abord is a research project conducted by the Centre for Community Organizations (COCo) between 2016 and 2024. The presented data was collected from 252 people via two online surveys for Quebec-based community sector workers of all racial backgrounds, and 5 focus groups with racialized community sector workers. A portion of our findings are detailed in three introductions and two chapters. We outline our choice of terminology when discussing racism in the Quebec community sector context, present the infographic "The ‘Problem’ Woman of Colour in the Workplace," and detail our analysis of the specific experiences of racialized women in the Quebec community sector.

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Introduction

Racialized women live unique and heightened experiences of oppression in the workplace. Over the years, staff at the Centre for Community Organizations have repeatedly heard variations of the following trajectory: I entered an organization; I was welcomed and told to be myself and to speak up. They told me that they wanted my ideas and to hear my experiences. But when I did, I was met with anger, denial, retaliation, and condescension. Eventually, it was so bad that I had to leave. I couldn't take it anymore. Maybe my contract was not renewed, maybe I was fired.

This was a pattern that we were all too familiar with. Our team was acquainted with a tool from 2008, created by the Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Non-Violence (SPAN), called *A Chronicle of "The Problem Woman of Colour" in a Non-Profit*.[1] The diagram spoke to many of the stories that people employed in the nonprofit sector had told us about their own experiences. It also spoke to the experiences that several racialized women had within our own organization. The fact that the narrative it outlined was still so common and resonated so viscerally with the people we shared it with compelled us to ask SPAN whether we could breathe some new life into their original infographic.

The "Problem" Woman of Colour in the Workplace became the first piece of the *Diversité d'Abord* research to be released, and has become a mainstay in our training and facilitation work. In 2018, it went viral on social media, with thousands of shares, and has continued to be shared widely across industries and in different places around the world. We released a video adaptation of the tool, "Walk with Me: A Woman of Colour's Journey in Nonprofit Organizations, in the Fall of 2020.

This chapter is meant to dive deeper into the infographic, using existing research as well as some of our own. While the simplicity of the infographic is part of what makes it powerful, the texture and detail of the experiences people shared with us are also important to understand for people and organizations who are working with the tool. The last section of this document explains the changes we made in adapting the infographic.

[1.] Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence. "A Chronicle of 'The Problem Woman of Colour' in a Non-Profit." In *Building a Multi-Ethnic, Inclusive & Antiracist Organization: Tools for Liberation Packet for Anti-Racist Activists, Allies, & Critical Thinkers*. 2008.

The "Problem" Woman of Colour in the Workplace

the woman of colour enters the organization



white leadership



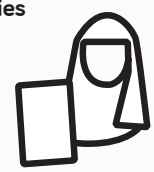
honeymoon

- the woman of colour feels welcomed, needed, and happy

tokenized hire

reality

- the woman of colour points out issues within the organization
- she tries to work within the organization's structure and policies
- she pushes for accountability



repetitive injury & microaggressions



retaliation

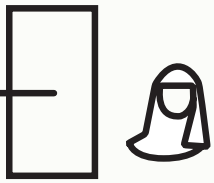
- the organization decides that the woman of colour is the problem and targets her
- the organization labels the conflict as a "communication issue" or claims that she is "not qualified" or "not a good fit"

response

- the organization denies, ignores, and blames
- the responsibility of fixing the problem is placed on the woman of colour
- people of colour are pitted against one another

denial of racism

target & attack



the woman of colour exits the organization

Adapted from "The Chronicle of the Problem Woman of Color in a Non-Profit" by the Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence
www.coco-net.org

Moving Through the Tool

Some women and femmes of colour experience all of this story; others, only parts. It is a composite of many people's experiences.

Honeymoon Period

The racialized woman or femme enters an organization, which has an all or predominantly white team and leadership. She/they[2] is excited to explore the new position and feels welcomed and hopeful. At times, in this period, organizations are upfront that they are seeking to diversify their team and to welcome new voices and perspectives. The tool calls this the honeymoon period.

Tokenism

After this period, she/they might begin to feel that her/their hiring was tokenistic. She/they is there symbolically: to make the organization seem more diverse; to allow the organization to connect with communities; to allow them to feel that their organization is "not racist." Her/their presence becomes proof of the organization's progress.

> *It is strange to think that the reason I was hired was because I was a person of colour. And then there was the assumption that I would be a "trouble case," and that I would fail at the job when I'm a super hard worker. I've had conversations with people who say, you were only hired because you're a person of colour."*
>
> — **Kara**, Focus Group Participant[3]

[2] We explain our use of she/they throughout this section on page 13.

[3] All of our focus group participants were racialized. We will specify their racial identity when appropriate. All of their names have been changed. If an extra layer of anonymity was required, we may refer to them simply as "Focus Group Participant."

Slowly, she/they is asked to take on the task of diversifying the organization and reaching clients of colour, on top of her/their regular tasks. Maybe she/they is put front and centre at moments when the organization is concerned about its own image, or being asked to speak to how great the organization is in public. Even when a candidate is hired for her/their skills and abilities, other colleagues will often perceive her/them as a "diversity hire." The ways that her/their skills are called on will be intimately tied to her/their race.

One of the clearest and most incisive descriptions of tokenism we have found comes from Ruth King:

> *A culture change is required to ensure inclusion and belonging, and that culture change requires skill, willingness, and time for process, not just the completion of tasks. To have diversity on the team without a process for team reflection and cultural learning is tokenism. Tokenism is a form of window dressing in which whites appoint people of colour and make assumptions about who people are and what is important to them. Commonly, whites blindly assume that whoever is hired or joins their team is happy to be there, wants to be like them, and will go with the flow - but they are wrong."*[4]

4. King, Ruth. "Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out." *Sounds True*, 2018.

One of our focus group participants described this dynamic very clearly:

> *I was seeing bias in hiring and was aware that I was hired for this contract because they wanted to work with a woman of colour, and then they didn't support any of the work that I was doing. It was a 6-month contract and I realized at some point that they didn't care about any of the work. I got paid to do work that was never used and then, my name was used on something that I never agreed to.*"
>
> — **Ananas**, Focus Group Participant

Repetitive Injury and Microaggressions

After a period of time, the reality of working in a white-dominant space becomes clear. There are frequent microaggressions, including being ignored in meetings, having one's ideas only heard if repeated and voiced by white colleagues, discriminatory comments and jokes, and condescension and rudeness. Casual conversations and team meetings frequently involve ignorant, offensive, or stereotypical assumptions about communities and people of colour. This is called repetitive injury.

> *I arrived at the office - where one of my colleagues, a man of Haitian descent, was working. And another colleague came in and said - "Hey! So, this is the Cultural Communities Office!*"
>
> — **Étoile**, Focus Group Participant

Policies, structures and expectations are impossible, unclear, or exclusionary.

Denial

At this point in the story, many women and femmes tell us that they reminded themselves of the welcome they received early on, and decided to address the issue directly. For example, maybe she/they has a conversation with her manager, addresses a hurtful comment in an email, points out the discrepancies in how clients are treated, or brings it up in a staff meeting. The first response we often heard of was that the organization would tell the racialized femme or woman to address and fix the problem single-handedly. "*Make a training! Create a policy! Regardless of your role, training, capacity, or responsibility: go fix it yourself!*" There is the expectation that organizational change comes from the people suffering most from the issue.

> *A white coworker mentioned that she took issue with my saying that there are certain things that I didn't feel comfortable sharing with her and would rather discuss with other women of colour. She said it was my responsibility to share things and educate her.*"
>
> — **Jennifer**, Focus Group Participant

Denial also comes quickly. "You must have imagined that... He would never... You're exaggerating... You're willfully misinterpreting."

> *I talked about how it's important to have a person of colour as an outreach person if we want more people of colour at our events. She said that we are a feminist organisation, not a person of colour organization.*
> *I cried after that meeting. It's not possible for women of colour to separate our gender identity from our racial background – all these experiences are intertwined.*"
>
> — **Asma**, Focus Group Participant

Retaliation

It starts to become personal. Colleagues discuss amongst themselves that maybe this person was a "bad" hire, that she/they is aggressive and rude. They start to watch her/them more. There is a heightened surveillance of how the racialized woman or femme works and engages within the organization, what time she/they comes into work, how she/they dresses. Complaints are made, write ups are given; everything is documented or recorded. The racialized woman or femme becomes the problem: She/they is viewed as "not qualified" or no longer being "a good fit." The organization points to other people of colour in the organization who disagree with her/them. To them, it is not an issue of race, but an issue with this specific racialized woman or femme of colour.

> *You get read as angry before you say anything, you are perceived as angry, dangerous, and aggressive. I have often been in situations where I am so wary of being seen as angry, that I overcompensate to a point where I undermine what I am trying to accomplish or communicate*."
>
> — **Tricia**, Focus Group Participant

The retaliation begins. She/they is targeted and attacked by the organization. Formal reprimands are made. Coworkers make rude comments and cut her/them out of important decisions. People undermine her/their work.

Weaponized Bureaucracy

We start to see what we call **weaponized bureaucracy**: when the policies and procedures of an organization are used strategically and violently against certain people and not others. In this context, women and femmes are those who are targeted. We define this in more detail later in this chapter.

Exiting the Organization

The end of the tool shows the racialized woman or femme exiting the organization. In a best-case scenario, she/they can leave with a new job in hand or return to school. In other scenarios, she/they is fired or goes on sick leave. More often than not, she/they leaves silenced, without her/their truth fully heard or honoured, only disclosing to her/their closest peers her/their true motivations. The organization can sit in comfort that "Oh, she left because she got a better job" or "they went back to school." The sanitized narrative of departure, often facilitated by mandated confidentiality, obscures the true motivations and prevents them from being seen or understood by the organization.

Both past research and our own findings demonstrate that racialized women tend to be hired into short-term, part-time contracts.[5] Their precarity is further entrenched by the structure of these term positions and they may not have access to unions, benefits, pensions or other aspects of security associated with permanent roles.

> *"I've just resigned from my job to save my mental health. The conditions of my resignation reflected the lack of consideration or recognition I have received in the last few years in this job. I chose to go into academia because I feel it is more diverse and respectful of differences."*
>
> — Arab Woman Survey Respondent

[5] Lacharité, B., et al. "Facteurs favorisant l'embauche et le maintien en emploi des femmes des communautés culturelles et immigrantes dans les groupes de femmes de Montréal." Montreal: Tables des Groupes des Femmes de Montréal, 2010.

Alternate Endings

Since we published the tool, we have heard more variations about how this story can end.

One person has spoken to us about how although she could see the pattern occurring, she couldn't leave: her immigration status was tied to working for this particular employer for the next several years. Instead, she has stayed, reliving parts of the cycle on repeat.

Writing about the end of the diagram, scholar Rachel Zellars notes that for Black women, the violence they experience in these organizations moves with them, past the time they exit the workplace. Their organizations make efforts to sully their names, halt their careers, spread misleading and dishonest information about their work and their management, and seek an even wider, harsher, punishment for them.[6]

We received an email from Vernellia R. Randall, Professor Emerita of Law at Dayton University, with another set of modifications to the end of the infographic. In it, she notes that "the woman of colour might stay in the job, but mentally disengage; might become physically and mentally depleted. She might die from the stress."[7]

> *A huge takeaway in terms of my survival, is that it's a marathon, not a sprint. It's so real, because we don't have time to go slowly but we often have no choice but to move at this turtle-like pace. Really, we should be sprinting to be fixing all this shit. The people with the power are not willing or ready. Those who are sprinting are burning out."*
>
> — **Bitter**, Black woman

6. Zellars, Rachel. "The Glass Cliff: Tamara Thermitus and Quebec's Human Rights Commission." Montreal: *Ricochet*, 2018.

7. Randall, Vernellia. Personal communication. Racism.org, October 26, 2019.



When we turned the infographic into a video[8] we worked with participants to talk about hopeful alternative endings to this story, whether real or imaginary. In those stories, organisations had taken the time to examine their own practices and intentionally foster welcoming spaces for women and femmes of colour: where their lived experiences were honoured and appreciated; where other team members are capable and skilled in working on anti-racism and with communities of colour; where issues that are named are addressed without retaliation; and where all employees are compensated fairly.

Adapting the Infographic

Islamophobia and Anti-Blackness

One of the changes we made to the original infographic was to have the racialized woman be represented as wearing a hijab. In the video adaptation, the protagonist is both Muslim and Black. While we understand that women who wear hijab can have many different racial backgrounds, we felt that this image allows us to make an explicit connection between racism and Islamophobia in Quebec. Quebec's legal history of discrimination against Muslim women (such as Bill 21,[9] the Charter of Values, and the "reasonable accommodation" legislation), social violence (including a mass shooting in 2017 by an avowed white supremacist),[10] and the omnipresence of hate crimes against Muslim women (66% of Muslim in Quebec report having experienced or witnessed a hate crime)[11] form the backdrop for our own interpretation of this infographic.

Scholar Délice Mugabo tells us that the experience of Black Muslim women deserves particular attention. Her scholarship traces the history of anti-Blackness within the same movements that purport to challenge Islamophobia in Quebec, showing us how both the proponents of Islamaphobic legislation and the opponents of that same legislation imagine a "future society that retained key elements of the antiblackness of the present."[12] Writing about her own experiences in leftist organizing spaces in Quebec, Mugabo writes:

8. Centre for Community Organizations. Video: Women and Femmes of Colour in Community Organizations. September 9, 2020

9. Bodnaruk, Candice "Muslim Women Most Impacted by Quebec's Secularism Laws." The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, 2022. (pp. 48-51)

10. Zine, Jasmine. "Remembering the Québec City mosque attack: Islamophobia and Canada's national amnesia." *The Conversation*. 2021.

11. "Muslim women in Montreal North victims of hate incidents." *CityNews Montreal*, October 24, 2022.

12. Mugabo, Délice. "On Rocks and Hard Places: A Reflection on Antiblackness in Organizing against Islamophobia." *Critical Ethnic Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2. University of Minnesota Press, 2016. (p. 159-183).

> *My race, gender, and religious identity converged in a very specific way in that moment. In many ways, because so much of the discourse on Islamophobia centers around the bodies of non-Black Muslim women, I could not be Muslim because I am Black, but also because I am a Black woman. The Arab, Asian, and Persian femininity that Islamophobes and their counterparts swear to defend and promote is the same femininity that Black women have not possessed ever since slavery."*[13]

Gender

Another change that we integrated over time was that when we talk or write about the tool now, we say "women and femmes." We use "femmes" to refer to a broad range of queer femininities. The addition of femmes allows us to explicitly include the experiences of queer, trans and non-binary people who may not identify as women but whose femininity means that they are treated in similar ways. After the tool went viral, we heard from racialized femmes and nonbinary people who saw their stories in the tool as well. For the same reason, in this story, we use "she/they" to encompass a wider range of gender identities.

Femininity is not the only factor here: butch and/or masculine women's experiences may be different from those with more feminine or femme presentation. They may still be expected to perform "feminine" labour, and experience different kinds of gendered micro or macro aggressions that would push them out of an organization in similar ways. These additions follow the concept of intersectionality offered in the initial diagram and advance this work by highlighting the complexities within the experiences of racialized femmes and women.

Please note that we have not made the same changes around the term "femmes" in the French version of the tool. As the English term is borrowed from the French, a similar term is not yet widely accepted (although "Fèm" has been proposed and used by artist Kama La Mackerel).[14]

13. Mugabo, Délice. "On Rocks and Hard Places: A Reflection on Antiblackness in Organizing against Islamophobia." *Critical Ethnic Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2. University of Minnesota Press, 2016. (p. 159-183.)

14. La Mackerel, Kama. "ZOM-FAM." Metonymy Press, 2021.

Understanding Weaponized Bureaucracy

Following a workshop delivered by Emily Yee Clare and Robyn Maynard in 2017, titled “From Hiring to Firing: Women of Colour in Organizations,” we started to use the term *weaponized bureaucracy* to describe how the policies and procedural technicalities of an organization are used strategically and violently against certain people and not others. Although the term appears in research investigating the use of weaponized bureaucracies by states against people, our intention is to use this term to talk about the harm that occurs in the workplace, especially against women and femmes of colour.

One of the central themes in our research of how racism played out in organizations was how people of colour were disproportionately scrutinized and monitored by their co-workers and superiors. For example, several respondents discussed having superiors constantly remark on their facial expressions or whether they were on time, in a way that they did not do with white coworkers. One focus group participant describes how Black women are often perceived as being as hostile to non-Black people, without any words even being spoken:

> *One of the things that I notice: I have really bad posture, and am not always conscious of body language – and I often doodle to help me focus. So, I have to snap out of it and need to sit and watch my body posture. My long arms often end up crossed. So, people are looking at me, the Black girl and think, "Why is she mad?" Even though I’m thinking of Netflix, or listening, but consciously having to be conscious of my body.”*
>
> — **Bitter**, Focus Group Participant

This heightened surveillance enabled disciplinary action to be taken against racialized women. Often, organizations would create a paper trail of these "transgressions" as part of a strategy to push an employee of colour out of the organization.

Another example of weaponized bureaucracy that came up often was the use of dress codes that were applied only to racialized women. Indeed, one of the key findings of our quantitative research was that 71% of racialized women respondents reported being expected to minimize “aspects of my race or culture, such as clothes and ways of interacting, in order to ‘fit in.’"[15]

This also played out in terms of additional scrutiny of their work performance or getting “marked harder.” Respondents spoke about disengaging emotionally from the organization because of the racism they experienced, and then being disciplined for not “being a team player.”

It is also worth noting that these measures are often disproportionately taken against racialized people, without any action being taken to address racist or otherwise inappropriate behaviour from white people in the same organization. Weaponized bureaucracy creates cycles or layers of workplace violence. On the one hand, racialized employees experience increased surveillance, micro-management, distrust, microaggressions or harassment. In parallel, the very people and systems creating an inhospitable environment receive impunity. This double standard compounds the experience of racial violence, and further isolates, undermines, and silences racialized employees.

Misogynoir and Weaponized Bureaucracy

Content Warning: *The following section explores examples of misogynoir.*

Many of our Black women respondents reported experiencing high amounts of weaponized bureaucracy and other forms of racial violence. The specific intersection of anti-Black racism and misogyny is also known as “misogynoir.”[16]

15. See our chapter “Racialized Women in Nonprofit Organizations” for more of this data.

16. The definition of the term misogynoir is defined in our “Word Use & Methodology” chapter.

In response to a question about barriers to addressing systemic racism, a survey respondent said that they had experienced:

> *"Persistent unwillingness of supervisors to trust their Black employees with dossiers clearly theirs to manage. White men in power in "collective" orgs feeling justified in literally yelling at Women of colour behind closed doors."*
>
> — Black Survey Respondent

The quote speaks to the heightened violence and racism experienced by Black community sector workers, and in particular Black women. These themes have been explored in the literature on Black women in leadership, such as a 2010 study with Black professionals that documented how white employees could express annoyance or anger—even to supervisors—without significant consequences, whereas similar displays would result in "punishment" for Black workers.[17]

In our research, Black women reported being subjected to higher levels of surveillance by their co-workers and superiors, both with respect to their work and their interpersonal interactions. Ananas, a Black woman and focus group participant described the backlash that her colleague, another Black woman, experienced after asserting boundaries in the workplace. She had decided to not give hugs to clients and in response was called a b****.

In the words of scholar Rachel Zellars, "We must remain attentive to the special kind of violence reserved for Black people in Quebec and the special violence reserved for Black women." She writes about what she terms the "disciplinary violence reserved specifically for Black women who refuse to turn a blind eye and go away quietly."[18]

Weaponized policies and procedures also allow the organization to inoculate itself from any wrong-doing or reproach, and to frame the narrative around the departure of racialized employees in ways that are advantageous to them. These histories of former racialized staff are mobilized to resist future change relating to racial violence in the workplace or used as an argument against hiring more racialized employees. It can be used to socialize future racialized employees. For example, "Oh her? She's no longer with us... but it wasn't a good fit... She was too political, and she didn't get along with her colleagues." This signals to future employees that they should keep quiet and keep pleasant, or else.

17. Biu, Ofronama. "Race to Lead: Women of Color in the Nonprofit Sector." The Building Movement Project, 2019.

18. Zellars, Rachel. "The glass cliff: Tamara Thermitus and Quebec's Human Rights Commission". Montreal: *Ricochet*. December 14th, 2018.

> *I couldn't separate my activism from my work, and I couldn't separate what I knew about these people from what I do at work*."
>
> — **Samah**, Black Focus Group Participant

Our research scratched only the surface of this topic and its complexity. In addition to the other researchers cited in this section, we also recommend the various works by Alexandra Pierre, and in particular her chapter *Lutte antiraciste et mouvement communautaire in 11 brefs essais contre le racisme: Pour une lutte systémique*.

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Since 2016, the Centre for Community Organizations (COCo) has been engaged in Diversité d'Abord, a research and education project that examines how racism operates in the nonprofit sector in Quebec. Everything you need to know about Diversité d'Abord can be found at: https://coco-net.org/diversite-dabord/.
You can reach COCo over email at: info@coco-net.org or explore our website at: https://coco-net.org.
You can easily connect with COCo by following us on Facebook, X/Twitter, or LinkedIn.
We update these platforms regularly with resources, news, and updates on topics related to community groups.


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