

**A Qualitative Phenomenological Research Study on the Underrepresentation of Black
Women in the C-suite of Fortune 500 Companies**

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Abstract

Black women remain significantly underrepresented in executive leadership roles within Fortune 500 companies despite increased participation in the professional workforce and attainment of advanced education. This persistent disparity reflects a critical organizational and social problem that disproportionately impacts Black women professionals, corporations, and broader economic stakeholders by limiting diverse leadership perspectives and equitable access to power. The problem addressed in this study is the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore how sponsorship and direct advocacy affect Black women's ability to obtain c-suite leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies, guided by the matrix of domination framework, which examines the interconnected effects of race, gender, and class on access to power and opportunity.

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to depict the lived experiences of Black women who have worked in Fortune 500 companies and attained middle management roles but did not reach the c-suite. A purposive sample of participants engaged in in-depth interviews. Data were collected through recorded interviews.

Findings revealed that limited access to influential sponsors, inconsistent direct advocacy from senior leaders, and exclusion from high-visibility networks significantly constrained participants' advancement to executive leadership roles. The study concludes that organizational leadership practices must move beyond symbolic diversity efforts to implement intentional sponsorship structures and accountability mechanisms that address systemic inequities. Implications include the need for formalized sponsorship initiatives and leadership development strategies tailored to Black women. Future research should examine organizational implementation models and longitudinal outcomes related to sponsorship and direct advocacy interventions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies continue to be notably underrepresented (Erskine et al., 2021). One of the main roles in the c-suite is that of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Although there has been a rise of female CEOs over the last two decades, the number of Black women CEOs remains disproportionately low at two (Hinchliffe & Abrams, 2023). As of October 2023, the two black women CEOs of Fortune 500 companies were Toni Townes-Whitley, CEO of Science Applications International Corp. (SAIC), and Thasunda Brown Duckett, CEO of Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America (TIAA; Hinchliffe & Abrams, 2023). The data shows stark disparities in representation of Black women CEOs in the c-suite compared to their white counterparts (LeanIn.Org, 2020). White men hold 68% of these c-suite roles (LeanIn.Org, 2020). In contrast, White women hold 18% of these c-suite roles, while Black women hold only 4% of these c-suite roles (LeanIn.Org, 2020).

While the literature discussing executive leadership experiences through the lenses of race, gender, and class is plentiful, research specifically focused on the intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite remains limited (Sims & Carter, 2019). The underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite is the result of a complex interplay of systemic and individual factors (LeanIn.Org, 2020). At the systemic level, Black women face cultural biases, exclusion from social networks and career-advancing opportunities, and a lack of sponsorship (Spriggs, 2020). Even when Black women advance to the executive level, they may encounter a "black ceiling" or "concrete wall" that prevents them from reaching the highest echelons of leadership (Erskine et al., 2021).

Black women's underrepresentation in corporate America's c-suites stems from the intersectional impact of racism, classism, and gender discrimination, which have their origins in the legacy of United States slavery (Collins, 2002). Historically, the relationship between Black women and White people has been fraught with complexities and tensions (Beckwith et al., 2016). Since the first enslaved African women were brought to America as property in 1619, the institution of slavery has contributed to the establishment of a racial hierarchy and oppressive power structures that have systematically denied Black individuals their fundamental human rights (DuBois, 2013). Black women endured the most profound consequences of slavery due to their subordination to White men, White women, and Black men (Collins, 2002). Slavery's legacy has contributed to Black women's struggle with the dual influences of anti-Blackness and anti-female stereotypes, which impact how they are perceived as hireable, successful, retainable, and promotable in their work environments (Beckwith et al., 2016).

While sponsorship alone does not guarantee Black women's entry into the c-suite, prior research has identified it as a crucial factor that can facilitate their career mobility and ascension to the highest corporate positions (Smith, 2021). A recent year-long study by Stephanie Bradley Smith (2021) revealed that only one-third of the sponsors for Black women were White men, while the majority (57%) of their sponsors were Black and nearly one-third were women. The breakdown is stark, given that White men are firmly entrenched in the top leadership ranks of corporate America and hold the decision-making power regarding promotions to c-suite positions (Smith, 2021). It suggests that the value of sponsorship is likely to be restricted unless an individual of the same race or same sex sits atop the corporate hierarchy (Smith, 2021).

Improving our understanding of how sponsorship can help increase the representation of Black women in the c-suite remains an important area for further research (Smith, 2021). Further

research is needed to understand how more sponsorship can be given to Black women in corporate America (Hewlett & Ihezie, 2022). Given this gap, there is a need for more research on how Black women leverage sponsorship that supports their ascension to and sustainment in c-suite positions (Smith, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study is the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies. The United States Census Bureau (2023) shows Black women make up 7.1% of the United States population, however, they only hold only 4% of c-suite roles (LeanIn.Org, 2020). More Black women can step into c-suite roles if they are sponsored into positions that have a clear path to the top position, coupled with support and direct advocacy (Smith, 2021). Sponsorship is defined as the act of using one's social capital to drive forward the career advancement of an individual who is commonly referred to as a protégé (Smith, 2021). Sponsorship is highly visible, provides exposure, and experience through opportunity for protégés (Smith, 2021). Ninety-one percent of Black women want the ability to flourish at work and obtain a prestigious title such as CEO (Hewlett & Green, 2015). Lyness and Thompson (2000) showed that sponsorship is a way to be promoted to CEO positions.

According to Debra Lee, former CEO of Black Entertainment Television (BET), Black women should be in c-suite roles to accurately reflect the diversity of the world and to allow businesses to properly address real world issues (Richard-Craven, 2023). Black consumers have major purchasing power (Richard-Craven, 2023). If Black women are not in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies, an entire sector of consumers is not considered, which will negatively impact their bottom line (Richard-Craven, 2023).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore how sponsorship and direct advocacy affect Black women's ability to obtain c-suite leadership roles within corporate America. A phenomenological qualitative study design was used in which narrative data were collected through in-depth interviews. The qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study because it allowed an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by Black women (Kuswemi et al., 2020).

The population for this research study were Black women who have worked in Fortune 500 companies but did not make it to the c-suite. The target population for this study was Black women who have worked for the same company for over twenty years, have reached middle management positions, but have not reached the c-suite within that company. The researcher took a purposive sample of participants. Purposive sampling is needed as it allows the researcher to selectively choose participants based on predetermined criteria (Memon et al., 2020).

Common types of interview questions asked during an interview are typically open-ended questions that allow participants to share their personal experiences, perspectives, and reflections in a narrative format (Qualitative Research, 2026). These questions aim to elicit detailed accounts of the participants lived experiences, challenges, and coping strategies as Black women leaders. After the interview data was collected, recorded, and transcribed, the researcher used thematic analysis to identify key themes emerging from the participants' narratives. All interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom. Triangulation from multiple participant sources helped ensure trustworthiness of the findings.

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

The matrix of domination theory is the theoretical framework of which this research study is based. Dr. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) studied the culture of Black women and developed the matrix of domination theory. The matrix of domination theory reveals issues of oppression in the economic position of Black women based on gender, class, and race (Collins et al., 2021). This theory indicates that race, class, and gender are inextricably linked, creating a complex web of marginalization and discrimination that Black women must navigate in their pursuit of leadership roles (Moorosi et al., 2018).

Collins et al.'s (2021) theory highlighted how intersectionality shapes the complex dynamics of advantage and disadvantage facing Black women. Intersectionality encompasses the overlapping social aspect of race, gender, and class in which people have created systems that have discriminated against or created a disadvantaged outcome for a group (Jackson et al., 2021). The intersectionality framework guides this research study to explore what Black women encounter when trying to obtain c-suite positions.

Despite their proximity to positions of power, Black women are often relegated to the margins of organizational activity, their experiences and perspectives excluded from mainstream discourse (Proudford & Thomas, 1999). This "outsider within" status (Proudford & Thomas, 1999) is compounded by the historical legacy of slavery and systemic racism in America, which has denied Black women access to the same educational and career opportunities afforded to their white counterparts (Maziyya & Udasmoro, 2022). As a result, Black women face significant barriers and obstacles in their efforts to ascend to the highest echelons of corporate leadership (LeanIn.Org, 2020).

The literature on Black women's leadership advancement reveals the existence of a "black ceiling," a set of structural and cultural barriers that impede their ability to reach the upper echelons of corporate America (Erskine et al., 2021). These barriers include the perpetuation of patriarchal norms, the dominance of white supremacy in organizational culture, and the lack of mentorship and sponsorship opportunities for Black women (Erskine et al., 2021; Proudford & Thomas, 1999).

Some Black women have overcome these obstacles by developing a range of individual, relational, and organizational strategies (Proudford & Thomas, 1999). They may leverage their unique positionally to forge coalitions, challenge dominant narratives, and initiate new dialogues that reshape the landscape of corporate leadership (Erskine et al., 2021). By acknowledging the intersectional nature of their experiences and disrupting the matrix of domination, Black women continue to strive to pave the way for more equitable and inclusive pathways to the c-suite (Erskine et al., 2021).

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)

The underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of corporate America is the focus of this research study. Narrative research is a qualitative method that emphasizes the lived experiences of individuals (Josselson, 2010). The unique experiences and perspectives of Black women can be better understood through in-depth, contextual approaches like interviews (Slatton & Richard, 2020). Qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences and perspectives of the individuals affected (Sales et al., 2019).

Qualitative research also offers the potential to uncover the nuances and intersections of race, gender, and class that contribute to the systemic barriers faced by Black women (Johnson, 2019). Research has shown that the intersection of race, gender, and class results in Black

women being overlooked, undervalued, marginalized, and unappreciated in their roles as leaders, due to their multiple minority identities (Sales et al., 2019). A qualitative research approach can also provide valuable insights into the intersections of race and gender, and how these interconnected factors influence the leadership development and career paths of Black women. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, can uncover the unique challenges and barriers these women face, as well as the strategies they employ to navigate and overcome them (Davis & Maldonado, 2017).

Narrative research method was the research method used in this study. This approach is well-suited to examine the lived experiences of Black women as they navigate the corporate landscape, highlighting any of the challenges they may have experienced in reaching the highest levels of leadership in Fortune 500 companies (Erskine et al., 2021). Narrative research allows for an in-depth exploration of individual perspectives, stories, and meanings which can provide nuanced insights into the complex issue of Black women's underrepresentation in the c-suite (Iheduru-Anderson & Shingles, 2023; Proudford & Thomas, 1999; Sales et al., 2019). Ultimately, the narrative research approach can serve as a powerful tool in the quest to understand and address the longstanding issue of the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies (Sales et al., 2019; Hill-Jackson, 2020).

Research Questions

RQ1

How does sponsorship affect Black women's ability to obtain c-suite roles in Fortune 500 companies?

RQ2

How does direct advocacy affect a Black women's ability to obtain c-suite roles in Fortune 500 companies?

Significance of the Study

The underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies is a critical research topic that can make significant contributions to the field of organizational leadership. Despite the increasing representation of Black women in management positions, persistent inequalities remain, with women accounting for only 4% of c-suite roles (LeanIn.Org, 2020). The disparity is even more pronounced for Black women, who held only 2.7% of corporate board seats in 2020, a slight increase from 1.9% in 2010 (Spriggs, 2020).

Exploring the factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite can advance the matrix of domination theory, which examines how various forms of oppression, such as race and gender, intersect to create unique experiences for individuals (Collins et al., 2021). By investigating the role of sponsorship and direct advocacy in Black women's ability to obtain c-suite leadership roles, this research can shed light on the complex dynamics that hinder their career advancement, ultimately informing strategies to address these systemic barriers.

Addressing the research problem of the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies can yield significant benefits. First, it can help organizations identify and dismantle the invisible systemic barriers that impede the advancement of Black women, fostering a more inclusive and equitable workplace. Second, the findings can inform leadership development programs and mentorship initiatives specifically tailored to the needs of

Black women, empowering them to navigate the challenges they face in their pursuit of c-suite positions (Dickens et al., 2018).

Lastly, answering the research questions of this study, which focus on how sponsorship and direct advocacy affect Black women's ability to obtain c-suite roles, can provide valuable insights that can guide organizations in implementing effective strategies to support the career advancement of Black women. By addressing this research problem, organizations can unlock the untapped potential of Black women (Pace, 2018). Unlocking the untapped potential of Black women may lead to enhanced organizational performance, increased diversity in corporate leadership, and a more equitable representation of marginalized groups in the upper echelons of the business world (Pace, 2018).

Definitions of Key Terms

Black ceiling

Being defined as a set of structural and cultural barriers that impede a Black women's ability to reach the upper echelons of corporate America (Erskine et al., 2021).

Black women

Being defined as women of African or Black origin; these terms are used interchangeably ("Black Women", 2024).

C-suite

Being defined as the executive-level managers within a company commonly including chief executive officer (CEO), chief financial officer (CFO), chief operating officer (COO), and chief information officer (CIO) (Bloomenthal, 2025).

Direct Advocacy

Being defined as the act of directly trying to influence policymakers (Advocacy evaluation, 2026).

Fortune 500

Being defined as an annual list compiled and published by Fortune magazine that ranks 500 of the largest United States corporations by total revenue for their respective fiscal years (Fortune 500, 2026).

Intersectionality

Being defined as the overlapping social aspect of race, gender, and class in which people have created systems that have discriminated against or created a disadvantaged outcome for a group (Jackson et al., 2021).

Middle Management

Being defined as the level of management that is right below the executive or senior management level of management in a hierarchical organization (Middle Management, 2026).

Sponsorship

Being defined as the act of using one's social capital to drive forward the career advancement of an individual who is commonly referred to as a protégé (Smith, 2021).

Summary

The underrepresentation of Black women in the upper echelons of corporate America, specifically within the c-suites of Fortune 500 companies, is a pressing issue that warranted in-depth examination and research. Despite the increasing representation of Black women in management positions, persistent inequalities remain, with Black women accounting for only 4% of c-suite roles (LeanIn.Org, 2020). At the systemic level, Black women face cultural biases,

exclusion from social networks and career-advancing opportunities, and a lack of sponsorship (Spriggs, 2020).

Existing research indicates that while sponsorship alone does not ensure Black women's access to the c-suite, it has been identified as a crucial element that can enable their career progression and advancement to the uppermost corporate leadership roles (Smith, 2021). More Black women can step into c-suite roles if they are sponsored into positions that have a clear path to the top position, coupled with support and direct advocacy (Smith, 2021). Direct advocacy from current c-suite leaders can help break down the barriers Black women face in reaching the highest levels of corporate leadership (Glass & Cook, 2015).

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore how sponsorship and direct advocacy affect Black women's ability to obtain c-suite leadership roles within corporate America. The qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study because it allowed an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by Black women (Kuswemi et al., 2020). The population for this research study was Black women who have worked in Fortune 500 companies but have not made it to the c-suite.

The matrix of domination theory is the theoretical framework of which this research study is based. The matrix of domination theory claims that the intersections of race, gender, and class create a complex system of marginalization and discrimination that Black women must navigate as they strive to attain leadership positions (Moorosi et al., 2018). The findings of this research provide insights into the unique barriers and facilitators that Black women encounter as they seek to advance to the highest levels of corporate leadership, ultimately informing organizational practices and policies that can foster greater representation and equity for this underserved group.

Answering the research questions of this study, which focus on how sponsorship and direct advocacy affect Black women's ability to obtain c-suite roles, yield valuable insights to guide organizations in developing and implementing effective strategies that support the career advancement of Black women. By addressing this research problem, by leveraging the untapped potential of Black women, organizations can achieve enhanced organizational performance, foster greater diversity in corporate leadership, and promote more equitable representation of marginalized groups at the highest levels of the business world (Pace, 2018).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore how sponsorship and direct advocacy affect Black women's ability to obtain c-suite leadership roles within corporate America. The problem to be addressed in this study was the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies. Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies continue to be notably underrepresented (Erskine et al., 2021). One of the main roles in the c-suite is that of the chief executive officer (CEO). Although there has been a rise of female CEOs over the last two decades, the number of Black women CEOs remains disproportionately low (Hinchliffe & Abrams, 2023).

Even though there is a growing body of literature examining executive leadership through the prism of race, gender, and class, there is not enough research that is specifically focused on the intersectional underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite (Hinchliffe & Abrams, 2023). This underrepresentation is caused by a complex interplay of systemic and individual factors (LeanIn.Org, 2020), including cultural biases, exclusion from social networks and career-advancing opportunities, and a lack of sponsorship (Spriggs, 2020).

Black women in leadership positions, particularly as CEOs, continue to be notably underrepresented across several industries. According to Roper (2020), one percent of all CEOs of Fortune 500 companies are Black. Although there has been a rise of female CEOs over the last two decades, the number of Black women CEOs remains disproportionately low (Roper, 2020). In 1995, there were no women CEOs at Fortune 500 companies (Pew Research Center, 2024). By 2020, that number increased to 37 women, however, none of them were Black women (Pew Research Center, 2024). Although women in general face barriers that prevent them from

holding top level leadership positions, Black women face additional challenges due to intersecting systems of oppression such as sexism and racism.

This literature review explores the critical issue of the underrepresentation of Black women in c-suite executive leadership positions within corporate America, focusing specifically on the impact of sponsorship and direct advocacy. The review is organized into several key areas which include the theoretical foundation based on Dr. Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) matrix of domination, the historical and current leadership roles of Black women, the characteristics and demographics of executive leadership, and the systemic barriers, including gender and racial bias, that Black women face. Other topics such as the "Black ceiling," lack of sponsorship, bias in leadership perception, psychological safety, microaggressions, and organizational culture are thoroughly examined. The review also discusses the necessity for comprehensive organizational change to dismantle structural inequities and emphasizes the importance of equitable and inclusive practices to support Black women's advancement into c-suite roles.

Theoretical Framework

The matrix of domination theory is the theoretical framework of which this research study is based. Dr. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) studied the culture of Black women and developed the matrix of domination theory. The matrix of domination theory revealed issues of oppression in the economic position of Black women based on race, gender, and class (Collins et al., 2021). The matrix of domination theory claims that the intersections of race, gender, and class create a complex system of marginalization and discrimination that Black women must navigate as they strive to attain leadership positions (Collins et al., 2021).

The matrix of domination is a key idea in Black feminist scholarship and critical theory. Pioneered by the scholar Dr. Patricia Hill Collins in her 1990 book *Black Feminist Thought*, the

theory examines how interconnected systems of oppression like race, class, gender, and sexuality shape the lived experiences of marginalized people (Collins, 2002). In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins introduced the idea of the matrix of domination. This theory suggests that different forms of oppression, like those based on race, gender, and class, are interconnected and feed off each other. According to Collins, Black women face a unique "matrix" of marginalization due to the intersection of their race, gender, and other social identities. The matrix of domination was a way for Collins to address the shortcomings of previous feminist and racial theories that tended to focus on just one aspect of identity and experience.

The matrix of domination main arguments indicate that oppression is systemic and that everyone is impacted differently by it based on their location inside the matrix. Understanding this matrix requires realizing that oppression exists on several levels, including the personal, the structural, and the cultural. On a personal level, prejudice and stereotypes affect people's interactions and self-perception. Oppression takes the shape of institutional policies and practices that systemically discriminate against marginalized groups at the structural level. At the cultural level, dominant ideologies and narratives reinforce and legitimize power imbalances. Furthermore, the matrix of domination presents the significance of solidarity and collective action in the fight against oppression. Collins contends that to dismantle the interlocking systems of power, people from various backgrounds must recognize their shared interests and collaborate.

Intersectionality, which examines how various forms of discrimination and oppression intersect to impact individuals and groups, is closely related to the matrix of domination (Anderson, 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2024). Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989 to describe how racism and sexism influence Black women at the same time (Sullivan,

2019). Ever since the nineteenth century, Black women's writings have been concerned with the experience of numerous interconnected forms of oppression (Sullivan, 2019).

Intersectionality is the idea that various forms of oppression, such as sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, religious bigotry, and classism, have cumulative and interwoven effects (Aguayo-Romero, 2020). The concepts of intersectionality and matrices of domination have evolved since their introduction. These ideas were formed from the earlier thinkings of Angela Davis, Bell Hooks, Audre Lorde and Sojourner Truth. Although the term "matrix of domination" was not used by these thinkers, they laid the groundwork by addressing the complex ways race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect. Lorde's quote, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives," (Bennett, 2023, p. 138) exemplifies the spirit of the matrix of domination theory.

Current literature has applied the matrix of domination theory to research the complexities of social inequality, while also providing a framework for understanding the experiences of those navigating intersecting systems of privilege and oppression at the individual level (Aguayo-Romero, 2020; Foley, 2019). Scholars have applied this approach to dimensions beyond the original emphases on race, ethnicity, gender, and class to incorporate citizenship, sexuality, religion, age, and other dimensions of subordination, across many different social settings (Bose, 2012). This theory suggests that race, class, and gender are inextricably linked, creating a complex web of marginalization and discrimination that Black women must navigate in their pursuit of leadership roles (Moorosi et al., 2018).

Intersectionality encompasses the overlapping social aspect of race, gender, and class in which people have created systems that have discriminated against or created a disadvantaged outcome for a group (Jackson et al., 2021). The underrepresentation of Black women in

corporate America's c-suites stems from the intersectional impact of racism, classism, and gender discrimination, which have their origins in the legacy of United States slavery (Proudford & Thomas, 1999). Historically, the relationship between Black women and White people has been problematically linked, creating a complex web of marginalization and discrimination that Black women must navigate in their pursuit of leadership roles (Proudford & Thomas, 1999).

Despite the increasing representation of Black women in management positions, persistent inequalities remain, with Black women accounting for only 4% of c-suite roles (LeanIn.Org, 2020). The disparity is even more pronounced for Black women, who held only 2.7% of corporate board seats in 2020, a slight increase from 1.9% in 2010 (Spriggs, 2020). The underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite is the result of a complex interplay of systemic and individual factors (LeanIn.org, 2020). These factors include limited access to equitable education and professional development opportunities, unconscious biases, and lack of sponsorship and mentorship (Erskine et al., 2021).

A previous study titled "The matrix of domination: The structuralized oppression of Black women in the US army and its affect on leadership development" explored the intersectional challenges that Black women in the United States Army face, delving into how military structures, gendered and racialized hierarchies, and invisible barriers hinder their leadership development (Boyd, 2023). This study highlighted the importance of intersectionality in understanding the unique challenges and barriers that Black women experience in leadership roles within the Army. The use of the fundamentals of the matrix of domination theory is displayed in this study to show how historically, Black women have been marginalized by both race and gender. Black women are frequently marginalized in organizational activities, and their opinions and experiences are frequently left out of mainstream conversations, despite their

proximity to positions of power (Proudfoot & Thomas, 1999). This "outsider within" status is made worse by the history of slavery and institutionalized racism in the United States, which has prevented Black women from having the same access to educational and professional opportunities as their white counterparts (Thomas et al., 1999).

The scarcity of Black women in leadership positions underscores the presence of a "black ceiling," which consists of cultural and structural obstacles that impede their ascent to the highest echelons of corporate America (Erskine et al., 2021). These obstacles include the continuation of patriarchal norms, the dominance of White men in positions of power, and the underestimation of Black women's skills and contributions (Maziyya & Udasmoro, 2022).

The matrix of domination theory was used in another existing research study to examine the experiences of Black women student leaders at predominantly White institutions, investigating the obstacles and difficulties they encounter because of the intersection of race and gender within these predominantly White educational settings (Bedell, 2025). The purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences of Black women student leaders and to bring attention to the ways in which intersectionality influenced their leadership roles. The experiences of these leaders shed light on the difficulties brought about by the intersection of gender and race in higher education.

In addition, these difficulties include a feeling of alienation, a lack of mentorship, and the weight of high expectations (Moorosi et al., 2018). The researcher employed a qualitative methodology using a phenomenological research design as most appropriate to understand the lived experiences of Black women in higher education leadership (Chance, 2021).

Phenomenology, as a qualitative research approach, is concerned with understanding and explaining the essence of lived experiences regarding a phenomenon (Jaggers, 2020).

Critical race theory is an alternative theoretical framework, which examines how laws and institutions in the United States perpetuate racism (Erskine et al., 2020). Another race based theoretical framework that is relevant is Black feminist thought, which offers a critical analysis of the gendered racial encounters and interactions of Black women (Jaggers, 2021). Critical race theory and black feminist thought theory are frameworks that examine race and gender in the United States. However, the matrix of domination theory is most appropriate for the basis of this research study because the theory focuses on the experiences of Black women which is the targeted population for this research study.

The matrix of domination theory is applicable because it provides a comprehensive lens through which to analyze the interlocking systems of oppression that affect Black women's access to leadership opportunities. This theory indicates that race, gender, and class are intertwined and mutually reinforcing systems of power and oppression, creating unique challenges for individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups (Kuswemi et al., 2020). The theory also incorporates the concept of intersectionality, which is used to analyze the experiences of Black women who face unique obstacles in their career progression. This theory guided the development of this study's problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions. The matrix of domination theory indicates that the intersections of race, class, and gender create a complex system of marginalization and discrimination (Moorosi et al., 2018). This theory is the framework to explore what Black women encounter as they navigate leadership.

The Historical Presence of Black Women in Leadership Roles

The historical presence of Black women in leadership roles, though often unacknowledged, demonstrates resilience and determination. Historically, Black women have

steadily been in leadership positions within the United States, ultimately resulting in changes that impact the world. For example, Black women such as Harriet Tubman, led the Underground Railroad suffrage movement (Schnall, 2020). Black women's effective leadership led to approximately one hundred thousand enslaved Black people becoming free between 1810 and 1850 (Brown, 2023).

Black women have proven that their leadership is forward-thinking, organized, efficient, and effective. Guiding or leading groups of individuals is a skillset Black women possess. This example of Black women's leadership resulting in change is also an example of Kotter's (1996) eight-step change theory in action.

Kotter identified eight actionable steps for implementing successful, transformational organizational change (Kotter, 1996). The Black women leaders of the suffrage movement had to convey the sense of urgency or need of freedom to the enslaved people. These leaders' guiding coalition, developed vision and strategy, their communication of how they envisioned the impact of the proposed change, and their empowering of that broad-based change is what initially led the suffrage change movement.

Another example of a Black woman's ability to lead others is seen through Rosa Parks, whose refusal to give up her seat on the bus to a White passenger in 1955 sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a crucial event in the Civil Rights Movement (Frohardt-Lane, 2020). Black women's leadership in the suffrage movement and the Civil Rights Movement has been crucial in driving transformative change in the United States. Black women have consistently demonstrated their ability to lead effectively, with leaders like Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks spearheading historic movements that led to significant progress. Their leadership has been marked by resilience, determination, and a commitment to advancing the cause of equity and

justice. Black women's leadership has been a driving force in shaping the course of history, and their contributions continue to be essential in the ongoing struggle for equality and inclusion (Pogrebna et al., 2024).

Black women have also been at the forefront of advocating for educational equity, with leaders such as Anna Julia Cooper championing access to education for Black women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Lee et al., 2022). Their efforts helped to break down barriers and create opportunities for Black women to pursue higher education and achieve their full potential. These historical figures not only challenged the status quo but also paved the way for future generations of Black women to ascend to leadership positions in various sectors, including corporate America (Pogrebna et al., 2024).

The former Vice President of the United States of America, Kamala Harris, is an example of a Black woman who benefited from the leadership efforts of other Black women who challenged the status quo in leadership (Yu, 2021). Kamala credits Shirley Chisholm as one of her biggest political and leadership influences. Shirley Chisholm was the first Black woman elected to Congress in 1968 (Chisholm, 2024). Shirley Chisholm's election to Congress paved the way for other Black women to pursue careers in politics and government, inspiring Kamala Harris and countless others to break down barriers and challenge the status quo.

Black women have historically taken on leadership roles that often go unacknowledged, demonstrating resilience and determination (Sales et al., 2019). This resilience is especially important given the challenges they encounter in the workplace (Black Women in Leadership, 2024). They navigate environments marked by inequities, negative assumptions, and constant pressure to prove themselves (Chance, 2021).

In numerous sectors, Black women continue to confront systemic barriers, including prejudice, gender discrimination, and underrepresentation, that impede their progress (Pogrebna et al., 2024). Black women have consistently been “change agents” in the workplace and in society at large, taking on leadership roles and advocating for equality and justice (Black Women in Leadership, 2024). The historical and contemporary experiences of Black women in leadership underscore the importance of addressing systemic barriers and creating more inclusive and equitable environments where all individuals can thrive. This history underscores the necessity of examining the specific obstacles encountered by Black women in their pursuit of executive positions within major corporations (Pogrebna et al., 2024).

Characteristics and Demographics of Executive Leadership

The concept of executive leadership is multifaceted, encompassing character, value, and style. According to Lee (2022), character is foundational for executive leaders and is demonstrated through trust-building, emotional restraint, humility, and authentic concern for others. Trust is not only maintained within organizations but also extended to the public (Tigre et al., 2022). Leaders must consistently act with credibility, doing what they promise (Tigre et al., 2022). Furthermore, Keck et al. (2020) emphasized that a leader’s character stems from their internal moral compass and personal convictions, which set the standard for leadership perceptions and behaviors.

Value, the second element of executive leadership, refers to the experiential wisdom that enables leaders to navigate complexity and communicate strategies clearly (Lee, 2022). During crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, effective executives demonstrated calmness, flexibility, analytical reasoning, and empathetic communication (Amooee et al., 2022; Couris, 2020). Gendered behaviors were observed during crises as female executives were noted for their

inclusivity and presence, while male executives were perceived as calm, restrained, and proactive (Couris, 2020).

Style, the third defining element, includes a leader's outward appearance. Style also includes a leader's professionalism, energy, and ability to manage conflict while maintaining emotional maturity (Lee, 2022). Style plays a crucial role in first impressions and ongoing executive effectiveness.

Perception significantly shapes the trajectory of aspiring executive leaders. Shepherd (2015) noted that executives perceived as organized, motivational, and inspirational were most sought after. Executives are responsible for significant financial oversight, including managing multimillion and multibillion dollar profit and loss portfolios (Rice & Day, 2022; Jancenelle, 2021). Financial leadership responsibilities also include capital project approvals, cost management, and stakeholder communication, requiring executives to be analytical, strategic, and results-driven (Rice & Day, 2022; Donatella & Tagesson, 2021).

Since 2000, there has been gradual diversification among Fortune 500 CEOs, although leadership remains predominantly White and male. Flory et al. (2021) and Young (2022) reported growth in CEO appointments among White women, Latinx, Asian Americans, and Black women, with White women seeing the most significant gains. Factors contributing to the success of White female CEOs included prestigious educational backgrounds and strong familial support structures (Young, 2022).

Nonetheless, executive leadership prototypes continue to reflect White male standards (Iseke & Pull, 2019; Petsko & Rosette, 2022). Preferences for White male leadership were observed across genders and were reinforced by long-standing societal and organizational biases.

Roberts et al. (2020) connected White male leadership privilege to religious imagery, arguing that the conceptualization of God as a White male has entrenched this leadership standard.

Even when performance metrics are comparable, non-White executives often fail to receive equivalent recognition or advancement (Elsbernd, 2020). Executive leadership is defined by character, value, and style, yet access to top leadership roles remains heavily influenced by race, gender, and societal biases. While diversification efforts have shown some progress, significant systemic barriers persist.

Barriers to Executive Leadership for Women

Despite progress in gender equality, women continue to face significant barriers in ascending to executive leadership positions. Research by Paulise (2021) highlights five major obstacles contributing to the slower career growth of women: gender bias, racial bias, higher performance standards, peer pressure, and lack of sponsorship. Gender bias, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, framed women utilizing flexible work plans as less committed and productive. Additionally, the burden of childcare fell disproportionately on women, intensifying the perception of decreased dedication. For Black working mothers, racial bias further compounded these challenges, resulting in significantly lower promotion rates compared to their White male counterparts. Only 58 Black women were promoted for every 100 White men (Paulise, 2021).

Women also faced higher performance expectations than men, absorbing greater blame during organizational failures and enduring intense peer pressure. Being the sole female representative on male-dominated leadership teams heightened scrutiny regarding both appearance and competence (Paulise, 2021). Furthermore, women often lacked managerial

sponsorship, a crucial factor for career advancement, due to fewer opportunities to build relationships with executive leaders (Paulise, 2021).

The organizational "rules of engagement" further marginalized women. According to Fournier et al. (2022), women were not perceived as tough, smart, or perceptive enough for key business decisions. Although senior leadership expressed interest in developing diverse leadership pipelines, middle management often resisted promoting Black women, significantly influencing the pace and success of their advancement (Fournier et al., 2022).

Elias (2018) provided insight into the unique challenges faced by Black women in leadership trajectories. Typically, Black women relied heavily on hard work to gain recognition without a clear understanding of the nuanced relationship-building required for promotions. Since leadership decisions were often made within exclusive circles that historically excluded Black women, performance alone was insufficient. Black women were expected to exceed performance goals established for their non-Black peers (Elias, 2018).

Phipps and Prieto (2021) expanded on this dynamic, revealing that Black women's focus on superior performance often came at the expense of relationship-building. However, relationships with influential leaders played a pivotal role in securing executive promotions. Those who successfully penetrated leadership networks not only demonstrated consistent excellence but also cultivated trust and credibility among key decision-makers (Phipps & Prieto, 2021). Literature consistently underscores that barriers to executive leadership for women, and particularly Black women, stem from systemic biases, unequal performance expectations, lack of sponsorship, and insufficient access to influential relationship networks.

Black Women's Barriers to C-Suite Access

Despite their demonstrated capabilities, Black women face significant barriers that impede their advancement to the c-suite, highlighting the intersectional challenges they encounter. These barriers include gender and racial prejudice, the glass ceiling, lack of sponsorship, and limited access to networking opportunities (Pogrebna et al., 2024). An example of gender and racial prejudice can be seen in the study done by Ella Bell Smith and Stella Nkomo when they wrote the book, "Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity." In their book, they detail that Black women often feel that they are on the outside of the company looking in, whereas white women are more likely to feel like they are on the inside, looking out (Smith et al., 2019). This example shows how the intersection of race and gender creates unique challenges for Black women in the workplace. Furthermore, the study points out that there are both similarities and differences in the experiences of Black and White women, which supports the idea that gender discrimination still exists in the workplace and patriarchy remains a part of managerial careers (Putnam, 2002).

Additionally, research indicates that Black women often face microaggressions in the workplace. Microaggressions are subtle, but pervasive, forms of discrimination that can negatively impact their engagement and sense of belonging (Sims et al., 2021). The concept of the glass ceiling, a metaphor for the invisible barriers preventing women and minorities from ascending to top leadership positions, is particularly salient in the context of Black women in the c-suite (Erskine et al., 2020).

Despite increasing demands for diversity in career paths, gender discrimination in leadership persists, resulting in different career challenges for Black women (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). This ceiling is composed of a complex web of factors, including stereotypes,

biases, and exclusionary practices that disproportionately affect Black women. The concept of the "glass cliff" further illustrates the precarious position Black women sometimes find themselves in once they break through the glass ceiling (Girardone et al., 2021).

Black women may be appointed to leadership roles when organizations are facing crises or are in decline, increasing the risk of failure and potentially hindering their future career prospects (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Moreover, the glass staircase concept describes the obstacles that exist throughout a Black woman's career as they ascend to top management positions (Evans, 2014). The glass staircase shows that even when Black women excel in middle management, they may still be overlooked for promotions to executive positions due to systemic biases and stereotypes (Evans, 2014).

Sponsorship, which goes beyond mentorship to include active advocacy and support for career advancement, is often lacking for Black women in corporate settings (Smith, 2021). Without strong sponsors who can champion their qualifications and open doors to new opportunities, Black women may find it difficult to navigate the complex social networks and power structures that influence c-suite appointments (Smith, 2021). Furthermore, the scarcity of Black women in leadership positions can create a self-perpetuating cycle, as there are fewer role models and mentors available to guide and support aspiring Black female executives (Smith, 2021). This leads to a lack of diversity in leadership that can hinder innovation and limit the organization's ability to effectively serve diverse customer bases (Lee & Waddell, 2021). Organizations need to initiate a cultural transformation that fosters positive experiences for minority leaders to combat racial and gender bias (Pogrebna et al., 2024).

Lack of Diversity

Currently, there remain significant obstacles to reaching workforce diversity, let alone gender equity in corporate America. The consensus across multiple sources is that diverse teams are further productive and innovative in cultures that value diversity (Adams, 2023). However, with this known information, equitable opportunities for greater diversity in c-suite positions within Fortune 500 companies have yet to be realized.

Addressing the issue of a lack of Black women in the c-suite within Fortune 500 companies is a reality that will take more than acknowledging it as an issue derived from the absence of diversity (Smith, 2021). Arguably, when women are in top leadership positions in organizations, the discussions among leaders are richer, the decision-making process is of higher quality, and the organization is stronger (Ely & Thomas, 2020). Recent statements by CEOs from around the world articulate a need for hiring more women or people of color. By tapping into their identity-related experiences and knowledge, organizations learn how their core work could be performed better. Research has shown that when businesses take this approach, the organization is more effective than diverse teams that don't learn from their members' differences (Ely & Thomas, 2020).

After the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 began, there was a lot of attention placed on efforts of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in corporate America and beyond for Black women. However, years later, the enthusiasm for DEI work within organizations has dwindled (Ruggs & Holmes, 2024). Some studies suggest that women are more proficient at managing multi-dimensional diversity than men (Sueda et al., 2020).

Globalization, at its accelerated growth rate, requires collaboration in groups of people characterized by multi-dimensional diversity. These leaders must have the competencies in

management and leadership to manage and lead a global, diverse workforce. A leadership and governance team that reflects the ethnic and racial composition of the community or the workforce it serves should include both women and men to reduce disparities (Birk, 2014).

Performing superbly, working much harder than their counterparts, and with consistence is often what is required for Black women to stand out in their roles to perhaps have a chance to become CEO of a company (Black Women in Leadership, 2024).

Recently, the Society for Human Resource Management, a prominent professional association for HR practitioners, decided to discontinue the use of the acronym "IE&D," which stood for "inclusion, equity, and diversity,"(Ruggs & Holmes, 2024). The discontinuing of the acronym "IE&D" was in favor of using the acronym "I&D," which omits the "equity" component. This decision represents a concerning shift that undermines the well-established importance of equity as a crucial aspect of diversity and inclusion efforts in the workplace, contradicting decades of research on the subject (Ruggs & Holmes, 2024).

This decision undermines the well-established importance of equity as a crucial aspect of diversity and inclusion efforts in the workplace, contradicting decades of research on the subject. By omitting the "equity" component, this decision sets a concerning precedent that disregards the necessity of equity in creating a thriving workplace for all employees. While diversity pertains to the presence of individuals from various demographic backgrounds, equity extends beyond that to ensure fair treatment, access to opportunities, and the removal of systemic barriers that may hinder certain groups (Sun et al., 2024).

The potential shift away from emphasizing equity may stem from varying interpretations of the concept among individuals. At its essence, equity denotes fairness and impartiality (Ruggs

& Holmes, 2024). Fair processes often lead to a redistribution of outcomes, as they enable more individuals to access opportunities for advancement and success (Ruggs & Holmes, 2024).

Equity necessitates addressing the disparities in opportunities and resources experienced by marginalized employees compared to their advantaged counterparts. This may involve implementing differential approaches that account for the unique challenges faced by underrepresented groups, which can initially appear unconventional. However, the purpose of such differentiated support is to ensure equitable access to advancement and success by modifying organizational structures, policies, and processes to provide marginalized employees the same level of opportunities and resources as their peers from privileged backgrounds. In essence, equity addresses the existence of imbalanced systems and actively seeks to rectify them.

True equity goes beyond mere representation; it seeks to create an environment where every individual, regardless of their background, experiences a level playing field, fair opportunities, and a sense of belonging (Sun et al., 2024). Organizations must recognize that diversity alone is insufficient; it is the combination of diversity, equity, and inclusion that fuels innovation, enhances employee engagement, and drives organizational success (Sengstock, 2024). Equity acknowledges that individuals may start from different points and require varied levels of support to achieve equal outcomes (Summers & Smith, 2014). This may involve targeted interventions, mentorship programs, or adjustments to policies and procedures to eliminate systemic barriers.

The absence of Black women from these executive leadership roles perpetuates systemic inequalities and reinforces a lack of diverse perspectives at the highest decision-making levels. Addressing this disparity is crucial for promoting fairness, equity, and inclusivity within organizations and for unlocking the untapped potential of talented Black women (Lee &

Waddell, 2021). Black women need to be afforded the same opportunities and resources as their counterparts to succeed and advance within organizations (Davis & Yeung, 2022; Defining Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, 2023). Without the support of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs in organizations, Black women will continue to be underrepresented in c-suite executive leadership roles (Smith, 2021).

Lack of Sponsorship and Direct Advocacy

Sponsorship and direct advocacy play a pivotal role in career advancement, particularly for individuals from underrepresented groups. Sponsorship is defined as the act of using one's social capital to drive forward the career advancement of an individual who is commonly referred to as a protégé (Smith, 2021). Moreover, it entails actively promoting and advocating for the protégé's visibility, credibility, and access to crucial opportunities (Cabrera-Muffly, 2021).

Studies show sponsorship is a crucial factor that can facilitate career mobility and ascension to the highest corporate positions (Randel et al., 2020). Mentoring and sponsorship are crucial for the career advancement of Black women to executive roles because it helps to disrupt isolation (Iheduru-Anderson & Shingles, 2023). Isolation in the workplace often impacts the ability for Black women to network and make connections (Pogrebna et al., 2024). Effective sponsors have access to networks and provide unequivocal support when promoting protégés (Titanji et al., 2022).

Not having effective sponsors can lead to isolation and lack of access to influential networks and resources that would facilitate their advancement to the c-suite. Sponsors can provide essential support, visibility, and advocacy to help Black women overcome these barriers and ascend to the highest levels of leadership. Effective sponsorship can open doors, create opportunities, and position Black women for success in the c-suite. Ninety-one percent of Black

women want the ability to flourish at work and obtain a prestigious title such as CEO (Erskine et al., 2020). When sponsors advocate for their protégés, they enhance their visibility, credibility, and access to key networks and resources (Lee & Waddell, 2021).

Moreover, sponsors can play a crucial role in advocating for the promotion and advancement of Black women within organizations, ensuring that their contributions are recognized and valued (Smith, 2021). Sponsorship goes beyond mentorship by actively using one's influence and network to create opportunities for the protégé, such as recommending them for high-profile projects, advocating for their promotion, and connecting them with influential leaders within the organization (Ibarra, 2022). For Black women, who often face systemic barriers and biases in the workplace, sponsorship can be particularly impactful in leveling the playing field and facilitating their career advancement (Dusenbury et al., 2023).

Successful sponsorship relationships are based on trust, respect, mutual benefits, and understanding potential risks (Cabrera-Muffly, 2021). Sponsorship is highly visible, provides exposure, and experience through opportunity for protégés. Sponsors are champions who advocate on behalf of their protégés and help them advance in their careers. To facilitate career advancement for Black women into c-suite positions, having senior leaders proactively influence career opportunities is critical.

Corporate directives like sponsorship have contributed to growing women leaders in organizations (Maher & Hastings, 2023). Historically, informal approaches such as over-reliance on experience rather than capability or potential, have informed decisions regarding changes in the c-suite (Whysall & Bruce, 2023). The lack of Black women in c-suite positions suggests that this group of women continue to face substantial challenges in achieving access to and support of obtaining these senior-level leadership roles (Smith, 2021).

More Black women can step into the position as chief executive officer of corporations if they are sponsored into positions that have a clear path to the top position, coupled with support and direct advocacy. Organizational leadership is notably targeted towards individuals already working in leadership positions (Pasmore, 2024). Yet, women are still an underrepresented population with no access to promotions and therefore cannot rise to any level of leadership within the organization (Schultheiss, 2021).

Direct advocacy involves actively supporting and championing the cause of Black women's advancement within organizations (Pogrebna et al., 2024). This may include advocating for fair treatment, equal opportunities, and inclusive policies that address the unique challenges they face in the workplace (Purushothaman, 2022). Black females' educational attainment and performance attributed to personal capability, along with sponsor desire to mitigate workplace bias, are key factors underlying the sponsor-protégé relationship (Randel et al., 2020).

The “Black Ceiling”

Although some Black women obtain support through direct advocacy and sponsorship, they nevertheless continue to face a "black ceiling", which is a set of structural and cultural barriers that impede their advancement to the highest levels of leadership within organizations (Erskine et al., 2021). While the term “glass ceiling” has traditionally been used to describe the invisible barriers preventing women from reaching executive roles, the “Black ceiling” emphasizes the compounded impact of both gender and racial discrimination on Black women, especially in their pursuit of c-suite positions in Fortune 500 companies.

The "black ceiling" represents the unique challenges and obstacles that Black women must overcome to reach the c-suite, even with the support of sponsorship and direct advocacy (Erskine et al., 2021). Despite educational attainment and personal capability, Black women still

encounter systemic biases and discrimination (Pogrebna et al., 2024). Systemic biases and discrimination can hinder Black women's career progression and limit their access to senior-level positions (Pogrebna et al., 2024).

Black women remain grossly underrepresented in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies. As of 2023, only two Black women held CEO positions among the Fortune 500, a statistic that highlights persistent inequities (Catalyst, 2023). This lack of representation is not reflective of capability or ambition, but rather systemic barriers embedded within hiring, promotion, and sponsorship practices (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality is frequently cited in analyses of these systemic barriers. Crenshaw's (1989) theory articulates how Black women face unique forms of discrimination that are not merely the sum of racism and sexism but a distinct phenomenon. This intersectional discrimination leads to reduced access to mentorship, sponsorship, and high-visibility assignments which are key components for executive advancement (Parker, 2021).

Dismantling of the "black ceiling" requires comprehensive, organization-wide efforts to identify and dismantle the deeply entrenched barriers that perpetuate the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite. Organizations need to proactively implement inclusive policies, provide equitable opportunities, and foster a culture of diversity and inclusion that values the contributions of all employees, regardless of race or gender (Pogrebna et al., 2024).

Bias in Leadership Perception

One major contributor to the "black ceiling" is the implicit bias that shapes perceptions of leadership. Leadership traits are often coded as "white" and "male," creating a bias against Black women who do not fit that stereotype (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Studies have shown that Black women are less likely to be seen as "executive material" due to stereotypes that portray

them as either too assertive or not assertive enough, a double bind that white men and women often do not face (Bates, 2020).

Moreover, performance evaluations often reflect race-based and gendered expectations. Research indicates that Black women receive less favorable evaluations even when their performance matches or exceeds that of their peers (Thomas, 2021). This bias feeds into slower promotion rates (Thomas, 2021). This bias also contributes to attrition, which perpetuates Black women's underrepresentation in c-suite roles.

Organizational Culture and Psychological Safety

The lack of psychological safety in corporate environments further alienates Black women from leadership pipelines. In many organizations, Black women report feeling pressure to conform to white norms of professionalism, often described as code-switching or downplaying aspects of their identity (Wingfield, 2019). This cultural tax creates additional emotional and cognitive burdens that are not experienced by their white or male peers.

Additionally, many Black women report a lack of role models and sponsors who can advocate for their advancement, which are critical components of reaching the c-suite (Lean In & McKinsey & Company, 2020). This absence is partly due to the lack of Black executives in senior roles, resulting in a vicious cycle of exclusion. Research suggests that meaningful progress requires intentional structural change. Organizations must go beyond performative diversity initiatives and implement measurable accountability strategies that dismantle systemic barriers. These include transparent succession planning, anti-bias training tailored to intersectional identities, and equity audits to identify and correct disparities in promotion and pay (Catalyst, 2023; Livingston et al., 2020).

The “black ceiling” is a significant barrier rooted in the intersectionality of racism and sexism. Black women’s underrepresentation in the c-suite is not due to a lack of talent or ambition but rather to institutionalized inequities that shape hiring, promotion, and leadership development practices (Makinde, 2024). To dismantle the “black ceiling”, organizations must commit to transformative change that centers intersectionality, equity, and accountability.

Unique Experiences of Black Women Executives

While there is substantial research on retaining top talent and motivating employees within organizations, as well as strategies for retaining women, there is significantly less academic literature focused specifically on retention strategies for Black women. The existing research fails to adequately address this. The multifaceted and intersectional challenges stemming from the compounded biases of gender and race that Black women face requires more academic research.

The study by Earle (2003) primarily focused on examining how the work environment influenced employees' job performance and overall well-being. The study acknowledged the greater demand for talent and reduced resume pools due to the shift to a knowledge-based economy, but it failed to examine the specific impact on Black women in corporate roles. The study did not explore how the lack of attention to the underrepresentation of Black women could negatively affect the talent supply or influence Black women's decisions to leave their corporate career trajectories. Additional research is needed to determine if the work environment is a key factor in Black women executives' decisions to exit the corporate pipeline, given the compounded biases of race and gender as articulated in the intersectionality literature (Earle, 2003).

Crenshaw's (1989) work highlighted the conceptualization of intersectionality by clarifying the marginalized experiences of Black women stemming from the combined biases of race and gender. A survey of 1,735 Black women in 30 Fortune 1000 companies identified four key obstacles that Black women executives face, contributing to the complexities of their career advancement (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002, p. 110). These four key obstacles were the absence of high-visibility assignments, limited informal networking with influential colleagues, a lack of influential sponsors, and a dearth of Black women role models within the organization (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002, p. 110).

The documented challenges faced by Black women executives align with the broader research on obstacles encountered by women in corporate leadership roles (Horowitz et al., 2003; LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, 2019; Messmer, 2006). However, these challenges become more intricate and complex when examined through the lens of the combined biases stemming from both race and gender. These challenges often compel Black women to approach their corporate careers with a mindset focused on surviving, enduring, and coping, rather than thriving while advancing to leadership roles (Erskine et al., 2020).

Black women often face a "double outsider" status, reporting exclusion from informal organizational networks as a significant barrier and challenge. This exclusion can lead to reduced visibility and fewer promotional opportunities (Anderson, 2011; Smith, 2021). Considering the prevailing statistics, workplace barriers, and male-dominated corporate culture, Black women executives and aspiring leaders in major organizations may often feel isolated in their roles. This isolation could potentially lead them to opt out of the corporate pipeline well before being considered for the c-suite.

According to a report by McKinsey & Company, another significant factor is the "broken rung" at the first critical step up to manager. The report found that for every 100 men promoted to manager, only 58 Black women are promoted, even though Black women request promotions at the same rate as men (LeanIn.Org, 2020, p. 6). This dynamic perpetuates the downward spiral of underrepresentation of Black women in the pipeline for c-suite roles within the business.

Consistent with findings for all women, there are fewer Black women promoted at each successive career stage, widening the representation gap over time (LeanIn.Org, 2020, p. 6). Black women report experiencing more challenges and less favorable workplace experiences compared to their male and white female counterparts (LeanIn.org, 2020). Notably, Black women report the most negative experiences among all groups studied. (LeanIn.Org, 2020, p. 3). The study highlighted several factors contributing to the negative workplace experiences of Black women, including encountering microaggressions, being the sole Black woman or person of color in their immediate work environment, the lack of recognition for the distinct challenges stemming from the compounded biases of gender and race, and the absence of influential sponsorship within the organization. (LeanIn.Org, 2020).

Microaggressions

Encountering microaggressions in the workplace, which encompass subtle comments and actions that implicitly demean or disregard individuals based on their gender, ethnicity, or identity, is a common experience for women (LeanIn.Org, 2020). Moreover, Black women endure a compounded experience of racial and gender-based discrimination, rendering them disproportionately vulnerable to microaggressions compared to other demographic groups (LeanIn.Org, 2020). Black women are more likely to have their expertise questioned and be asked to provide additional evidence of their competence (LeanIn.Org, 2020).

Furthermore, Black women are nearly twice as likely as White women, and more than three times as likely as men, to have someone in their workplace express surprise about their communication skills or other capabilities (LeanIn.Org, 2020, p. 14). These persistent microaggressions can engender feelings of exhaustion (Cirincione-Ulezi, 2020). These persistent microaggressions also can engender feelings of demoralization and disengagement among Black women, thereby impairing their capacity to thrive and advance in their professional trajectories (Cirincione-Ulezi, 2020).

Viewed as isolated incidents, microaggressions may seem trivial. Cumulatively, these microaggressions that occur routinely have a significant impact on employees. These subtle insults and dismissals, whether intentional or not, convey a message of disrespect. When workers are repeatedly undervalued and unfairly treated, it hinders their ability to perform optimally. Ultimately, women subjected to microaggressions are significantly more inclined to contemplate leaving their organizational roles compared to those who do not experience such treatment (LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, 2015; LeanIn.Org, 2020). Experiencing racial microaggressions has been associated with perceptions of workplace discrimination and is linked to adverse mental health outcomes (Pitcan et al., 2018).

Being the Only Black Women in Corporate Leadership Roles

Black women in corporate leadership roles frequently find themselves as the sole Black woman at that organizational level within their firm (Beckwith et al., 2016; Lanier, 2005; LeanIn.Org, 2020; Linnabery, 2014; Meuser et al., 2016). Being the sole representative of one's demographic group in a position can contribute to feelings of isolation. Given that Black women may be the sole representatives of their demographic group at a particular organizational level, it

is probable that other members of the organization are unaware of or lack an understanding of the unique challenges they face (Beckwith et al., 2016).

At the same time, it can result in being perceived as the representative of all Black women, magnifying one's successes and failures and placing immense pressure on the individual to perform. Additionally, Black women often report being excluded from informal organizational networks, which can limit their visibility and reduce their promotional opportunities (Anderson 2011). This exclusion can negatively impact their job performance and diminish their desire to remain within the organization (Anderson, 2011).

This is also indicative of the distinct demands faced by Black women within the workplace culture (Linnabery et al., 2014). According to the theory of demand-control, the lack of organizational experiences and career development opportunities are associated with environmental factors that constrain job autonomy, consequently leading to heightened psychological stress (Linnabery et al., 2014, p. 54). Maintaining internal and external social support structures is crucial for the well-being and upward mobility of Black women in organizations. This social support network is essential not only for their overall well-being, but also for navigating the political landscape and achieving advancement, particularly in senior leadership positions. Coping strategies employed by Black women are also closely tied to their experiences and outcomes within the workplace. Implementing and sustaining these support systems is critical to address the isolation that Black women can face in corporate environments (Smith, 2021).

Organizational sponsorship and advocacy are essential for individuals to successfully ascend to higher levels of leadership (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; LeanIn.Org and McKinsey &

Company, 2020). Influential sponsorship of Black women throughout the organization is critical to advocate on their behalf during strategic human resource discussions. Given the nature of corporate culture, it can be challenging for leaders to identify with and be willing to sponsor Black women. Nevertheless, securing an internal sponsor is essential for Black women to advance to senior leadership positions within the corporate structure (Smith, 2021).

Sponsorship holds greater influence and impact on a protégé's career progression compared to mentorship, due to the sponsor's extensive organizational connections and resources. However, Black women encounter challenges in securing such sponsorship, with only 24% reporting access to the sponsorship required to advance their careers, in contrast to 33% of their White male counterparts (LeanIn.Org, 2020). Until the lack of sponsorship for Black women is resolved, their increased representation in the c-suite will remain constrained.

Addressing the Underrepresentation of the Black Woman in Leadership

The research highlighted above underscores the importance of understanding the challenges faced by Black women in the workplace environment. Existing studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between firm performance and diversity in leadership roles, particularly in terms of gender and racial representation (Richard et al., 2007). Empirical evidence suggests that organizations experience performance benefits from having diverse leadership, with studies demonstrating that increased female representation in senior management is associated with improved firm performance (Dezo & Ross, 2012, p. 1072). Therefore, it is critical to better comprehend the experiences of Black women in corporate roles and ascertain the factors that contribute to their decision to leave before attaining senior leadership positions.

Every organization must formulate and execute policies aimed at retaining, developing, and motivating top executive talent. However, the distinct and often overlooked challenges of retaining and motivating Black women executives in senior positions are not adequately addressed through these organizational policies (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). Existing research utilizing theories like trait theory, leadership attribution theory, and leadership and followership cognition has examined the processes that shape perceptions of women as leaders (Meuser et al., 2016).

Existing research on gender diversity has not yet extensively compared the leadership behaviors and effectiveness of women and men (Meuser et al., 2016). Research suggests that the leadership models employed by women may differ from those of their male counterparts, likely due to the impact of their social interactions with other executives, which can contribute to increased feelings of isolation. Furthermore, the leadership models of Black women have been examined to an even more limited extent than those of women in general (Meuser et al., 2016).

The research conducted by Davis (2016) utilized a phenomenological approach to investigate the leadership development experiences and elements of Black women executives in academic and corporate settings, challenging prevailing structural and normative assumptions. The findings revealed that the interplay of race and gender shaped the leadership development experiences of Black women executives in academic and corporate settings. Study participants recounted the detrimental impact of their race and gender on their careers, with some describing experiences of feeling invisible, silenced, discriminated against, isolated, undermined, treated unfairly, oppressed, challenged, and even demoted (Davis, 2016, p. 8). However, the Black women executives in the study demonstrated determination and perseverance; driven to achieve leadership roles with the support of mentorship and sponsorship (Davis, 2016).

Similarly, researchers have explored how Black women experience isolation in the workplace, finding that this isolation negatively impacted their job engagement, performance, and self-perception. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the study participants reported that workplace isolation influenced their decision to leave corporate America. Evidently, race plays a consequential role in organizational performance (Richard et al., 2007).

As the demographic landscape continues to evolve, organizations that proactively recognize, value, and leverage diversity will likely experience the greatest financial gains (Richard et al., 2007, p. 1229). Corporate leaders must intervene and address organizational culture to achieve genuine inclusion and equity. While Black women face the adverse effects of intersectional racial and gender barriers, strategies can be implemented to support their successful advancement in the corporate hierarchy (LeanIn.Org, 2020; Smith, 2021; Linnabery et al., 2014). Understanding Black women executives' experiences can help organizations retain more of them, boosting firm performance (Dezo & Ross, 2012).

The organizational culture plays a crucial role in how leaders address issues of isolation, which can either positively or negatively impact Black women executives' job performance and decisions to remain or depart from the company. This research aims to amplify the voices of Black women leaders and shed light on their lived experiences of isolation within the workplace environment. By acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges faced by Black women, organizations can foster a more equitable and inclusive environment where all employees, including Black women, can thrive and contribute to their fullest potential (Smith et al., 2019).

Summary

The persistent underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership is deeply rooted in systemic biases and structural inequities reinforced by the intersection of race and

gender discrimination. Through the lens of the matrix of domination, this chapter has examined the historical context, outlined present-day barriers, and highlighted essential interventions necessary to support Black women's leadership aspirations. The literature demonstrates that overcoming these obstacles requires more than mere diversity initiatives, it demands structural transformation at all organizational levels (Pogrebna et al., 2024). Sponsorship and direct advocacy play a crucial role in counteracting the effects of intersectional invisibility and breaking through the "black ceiling" that impedes Black women's advancement.

Intentional organizational change must include targeted leadership development programs, transparent sponsorship pathways, and the establishment of measurable equity goals (Onyeador et al., 2021). Equitable sponsorship and direct advocacy are crucial mechanisms for breaking cycles of exclusion and enabling Black women to access high-visibility roles critical for career advancement (O'Brien et al., 2023). Additionally, fostering inclusive workplace cultures that promote psychological safety and recognize the value of diverse leadership styles is vital (O'Brien et al., 2023).

Ultimately, progress depends on the active engagement of all organizational stakeholders to dismantle systemic barriers and foster equity. By transforming organizational cultures and structures, corporations can fully harness the untapped potential of Black women leaders, driving innovation, enhancing organizational performance, and promoting a more equitable society (Pogrebna et al., 2024).

The literature search strategy began with using National University Library's "NavigatorSearch" search tool. The most common search words or combination of search words used were diversity, c-suite, Black women, racial gaps, CEO, diversity in c-suite, leading change, organizational change, organizational change management, and resistance to organizational

change. The researcher performed an advanced search in the search tool to combine keywords to obtain specific search results. The researcher also filtered the search results to the previous three to five years to get the most recently published periodicals, journals, and case studies.

Future research should focus on developing evidence-based best practices for supporting Black women's leadership trajectories and evaluating the long-term outcomes of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Only through sustained commitment, active dismantling of systemic barriers, and intentional leadership accountability can organizations realize the full potential of Black women executives and achieve truly inclusive excellence in the c-suite (Sun et al., 2024). By addressing this research problem, leveraging the untapped potential of Black women, organizations can achieve enhanced organizational performance, foster greater diversity in corporate leadership, and promote more equitable representation of marginalized groups at the highest levels of the business world (Pace, 2018). The intersectional underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite highlights significant gaps within corporate diversity and inclusion efforts.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of corporate America is the focus of this research study. The problem addressed in this study is the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore how sponsorship and direct advocacy affect Black women's ability to obtain c-suite leadership roles within corporate America.

A phenomenological qualitative study design was used in which narrative data were collected through in-depth interviews. The goal of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to gain insights into the challenges and barriers that hinder the advancement of Black women, as well as the strategies and approaches that can be employed to address these issues (Yarberry, 2025). Studying organizational leadership may provide an understanding of the dynamics within organizations that perpetuate the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership.

Senior leaders are less likely to interact with and mentor Black women, creating a barrier to support and sponsorship (Smith, 2021). In the *State of Black Women in Corporate America* report, it disclosed that less than a quarter of Black women feel they have received the necessary sponsorship to advance their careers (Sanker, 2021). Black women may feel the lack of sponsorship causes them to be overlooked by senior leadership and impede their opportunities for advancement to c-suite positions (Yarberry, 2025).

Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)

The phenomenological qualitative methodology is appropriate for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by Black women (Kuswemi et al., 2020). Qualitative research enables researchers to contextualize

and apprehend the environment in which the participants are in (Adnan et al., 2022). Qualitative methods allow researchers to investigate phenomena that are difficult to measure or quantify, such as experiences, attitudes, and perceptions (Qualitative Research, 2026). Furthermore, qualitative data collection methods, such as in-depth interviews, allow participants to share their stories, perspectives, and insights in their own words, providing rich and contextualized data that can shed light on any complex social and organizational dynamics at play (Lim, 2024).

Qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences and perspectives of the individuals affected (Qualitative Research, 2026). Qualitative research also offers the potential to uncover the nuances and intersections of race, gender, and class that contribute to the systemic barriers faced by Black women (Pogrebna et al., 2024). Even with Black women leaders often embracing higher risks to counter intersectional invisibility compared to their White counterparts, their aspirations are not met and problems not solved generation after generation (Pogrebna et al., 2024). As a result, Black women leaders are facing the reality of intersectional invisibility for dozens, and sometimes hundreds, of years (Pogrebna et al., 2024).

A qualitative research approach can also provide valuable insights into the intersections of race and gender. The qualitative research approach can also demonstrate how these interconnected factors influence the leadership development and career paths of Black women. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and phenomenological research, can uncover the unique challenges and barriers these women face, as well as the strategies they employ to navigate and overcome them (Qualitative Research, 2026).

The case study qualitative research approach is an alternative research design method used in business research (National University, 2024). Case studies enable a deep, multi-

dimensional investigation of complex issues in their actual settings (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021). The case study approach is appropriate when the research question calls for examining individual or multiple instances within a specific context and population (National University, 2024). The case study research design is less appropriate to address the research questions of this study as it requires involvement an in-depth analysis of a specific situation or individual within a particular context, whereas phenomenology seeks to understand the universal, lived experiences of individuals regarding a particular phenomenon. Phenomenology places greater emphasis on the subjective meanings that participants attach to their experiences, rather than focusing on the specific details of a single case.

The ethnography qualitative research design is an additional research design method. Ethnography requires the researcher to deeply immerse oneself in the culture or community they are studying to observe and understand their behaviors and practices in their natural environment (Taheer, 2024). Ethnography was not the best type of design to address the research questions presented in this study because it does not focus on understanding individuals' experiences.

Population and Sample

The population for this research study were Black women who have worked in Fortune 500 companies in middle management but have not made it to the c-suite. Middle management is the level of management that is right below the executive or senior management level of management in a hierarchical organization (Middle Management, 2026). Black women who have worked for the same company and who have reached middle management positions, but have not reached the c-suite within that company, was the target population. Studying the lived experiences of Black women who have worked in Fortune 500 companies and in middle management but have not reached the c-suite was appropriate to gain insight into any

microaggressions they may have faced (Connley, 2020). Understanding the reasons for the lack of Black women in the c-suite can be obtained through interviewing the stated target population.

A purposive sample of the participants was taken. Purposive sampling is needed as it allows the researcher to selectively choose participants based on predetermined criteria (Memon et al., 2020). Purposive sampling allows the researcher to pick participants who have shared experiences that can help identify and confirm the reasons why more Black women are not in the c-suite. The participants were selected based on their race, if they have worked at a Fortune 500 company, their desire to reach the c-suite, and their current management level. Choosing participants based on these criteria was necessary to match the target population for this study.

Data from the participants was collected through voice recording and transcription of the interview of the participants. The voice recording and transcribing of the participant's interviews were important as it allowed the preservation and analysis of the data collected during research so that the researcher could report the data accurately (SailPoint, 2025). That collected data was then organized by themes that emerged from the data as it allowed the researcher the ability to identify trends, patterns, and underlying meanings within a dataset (Oberoi, 2025). Once there were no new information or themes gathered from the collected data (Guest et al., 2020), data saturation was reached (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024).

The researcher recruited the participants through LinkedIn, a professional networking website where all subscribers can post a message on the open forum board without obtaining permission from the owners of the site. The researcher posted a message on LinkedIn (Appendix A) indicating the need for study participants. The researcher also utilized existing professional contacts to try to recruit participants. These professional contacts were contacted through private text message and/or through private email, avoiding sampling bias as chosen participants had to

meet the research criteria of this study as indicated in Appendix A. All potential participants who responded had to complete a criteria questionnaire (Appendix B) that indicated if the criteria were met to participate in the study. The researcher then contacted the participants who met the criteria by email, which was obtained in the criteria questionnaire, to confirm the requirements to participate in the study were met.

Instrumentation

The researcher used a recruiting message (Appendix A) and criteria questionnaire (Appendix B) to recruit the participants of this research study. The researcher prepared the recruiting message utilizing National University's Recruitment Email/Letter Template as an outline for creating the recruiting message (Recruitment Email/Letter Template, 2025). The criteria questionnaire was prepared by the researcher via Survey Monkey, an online survey making tool. The researcher then obtained consent from the participants who met the criteria to be included in the research study. The researcher prepared the consent form utilizing National University's Consent Form Template (Appendix C) (Consent Form Template, 2025).

Zoom, a cloud-based video and audio-conferencing platform communication tool, was used to meet with the participants and interview them. The researcher prepared the research questions of this study that were asked to the study participants in the interview. The researcher ensured accurate reporting of the findings of the study through use of the member checking technique. Member checking technique is where participants of a study review and validate the researcher's analysis of their data to ensure the findings align with their viewpoints (National University, 2024).

Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was used to code the data collected in this research study. Inductive thematic analysis is a method of qualitative data analysis where patterns and themes appear directly from the data itself, without pre-defined categories (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025). First, the researcher became familiar with the data collected by reading the transcriptions of the participant's recorded interviews and noting initial ideas or themes that emerged from the data as it relates to the research questions. Next, the researcher coded the data using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program that generates codes and themes from the collected data (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025).

The researcher then looked for patterns in the coded data and grouped these similar codes together with the hope of potential themes being formed from these groups (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025). At this stage in the research process, identifying broader themes of the data as it relates to the research questions was important to ensure the themes were supported by the data (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025). Names were then assigned to each theme.

The researcher then took the final step of bringing all the themes together in a cohesive manner to explain how they fit together and related to the research questions and any existing theories. Bringing together the analytic narrative and data extracts was the final step, allowing the analysis to be presented in a clear and thoughtful way (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025). The researcher then explained how the themes were developed from the codes, how the themes were connected, and how they related to the research questions and any relevant theories (Naeem et al., 2023).

The researcher also discussed how the themes provided a thorough understanding of the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies. The researcher

also discussed how the themes contributed to existing findings on this subject in the field. This final step of synthesizing the emergent themes was crucial for effectively communicating the findings of this qualitative research study (Naeem et al., 2023).

Assumptions

An assumption in research is a statement or belief that is taken as true, even without direct proof or empirical evidence (Critical Thinking, 2025). It is what a researcher thinks without realizing it and serves as a foundation for the study (Critical Thinking, 2025). One's conclusions are often based on assumptions that have not been thought about critically, however, a critical thinker is attentive to these assumptions because they are sometimes incorrect or misguided (Critical Thinking, 2025).

The assumptions of this qualitative research study were as follows:

1. Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies continue to be notably underrepresented (Erskine et al., 2021).
2. Although there has been a rise of female CEOs over the past two decades, there are only two Black women CEOs in Fortune 500 companies (Hinchliffe & Abrams, 2023).
3. The underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite is the result of a complex interplay of systemic and individual factors such as cultural biases, exclusion from social networks and career-advancing opportunities, and a lack of sponsorship (LeanIn.Org, 2020; Spriggs, 2020).
4. Black women who are provided mentorship and sponsorship from CEOs already in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies are more likely to gain access to those roles.

Limitations

This research study has the following limitations:

1. Potential researcher bias as the researcher is a Black woman leader.
2. The collected data and viewpoints of the study's participants are coming from Black women leaders in Fortune 500 companies only.
3. The data collection instruments of surveys and interviews used contribute to the limits of the study.

Delimitations

The following are delimitations of this research study:

1. The target population of Black women only.
2. Participants must have held or currently hold middle management positions.
3. Participants must have worked or currently working within a Fortune 500 company.
4. Participants must have the desire or had the desire to reach the c-suite of a Fortune 500 company.

Ethical Assurances

Ethics in research involve guidelines and principles that make certain research is conducted responsibly and with integrity (Miteu, 2024). Ethical deliberations in research include, but not limited to, the responsible use of resources, respect for human rights, the management of data, honesty, integrity, and the treatment of human subjects (Miteu, 2024). Obtaining informed consent from study participants, maintaining confidentiality, avoiding bias or conflicts of interest are key ethical considerations in research ethics (Bhandari, 2024).

Prior to contacting any participants of this research study, the researcher received approval from National University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection. Confidentiality for the participants of the study were achieved by not using the participant's actual names when presenting the findings of the study and instead assigning pseudo names to

the participants. All research materials such as consent forms, completed surveys, interview transcripts, etc., were stored in a safe, locked place, accessible only by the researcher. This applies to electronic and paper research materials. Any digital data files were stored in an encrypted drive in a password protected folder only accessible by the researcher. All research material will be destroyed after three years as per federal regulations (Guidance for Confidentiality and Anonymity, 2025).

The role of the researcher in this study was to collect, analyze and interpret data, and report the findings accurately as presented. The researcher of this study is a Black woman who has held middle management roles in Fortune 500 companies. The researcher has also aspired to be in roles in the c-suite within Fortune 500 companies. The researcher prevented biases from the analysis and findings of the collected data through voice recordings and transcriptions of the interviews with the participants that were presented factually, honestly, and accurately. The researcher remained objective. The researcher also used prepared interview questions when interviewing each participant to standardize the interview.

Chapter 4: Findings

The problem addressed in this study was the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore how sponsorship and direct advocacy affect Black women's ability to obtain c-suite leadership roles within corporate America. The research questions addressed in this study were how does sponsorship affect Black women's ability to obtain c-suite roles in Fortune 500 companies and how does direct advocacy affect a Black women's ability to obtain c-suite roles in Fortune 500 companies?

Participants of this research study were selected based on predetermined criteria using purposive sampling. Ten Black women were contacted after they completed the criteria questionnaire and agreed to participate in this study. The interviews were conducted and transcribed over Zoom video recordings.

Trustworthiness of the Data

In qualitative research, particularly within phenomenological studies, establishing trustworthiness is paramount for ensuring the rigor and validity of the findings (Ahmed, 2024). This involves adhering to established criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which collectively guarantee that the research accurately reflects the lived experiences under investigation (Ahmed, 2024). These criteria provide a foundational framework for evaluating the methodological soundness and ethical integrity of qualitative inquiries (Ahmed, 2024).

Credibility

Credibility ensures that the findings genuinely represent the participants' experiences and perspectives (Kakar et al., 2023). Video recordings and transcripts of the interviews with the study participants were recorded through Zoom. Member checks were used as a critical strategy to enhance credibility by allowing participants to review transcripts and interpretations of their interviews, thus confirming the accuracy and truthfulness of the data (Dhlakama et al., 2023). This iterative process of participant verification ensures that the researcher's interpretations align with the lived experiences shared, minimizing potential misrepresentations (Ang et al., 2025).

Transferability

Transferability within qualitative research focuses on the extent to which findings can be generalized or applied to other similar contexts or populations (Doğan et al., 2024). To bolster transferability, researchers often provide a "thick description" of the research context, participants, and methodology, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to their own settings (Bam et al., 2024). The findings of this research study can be applied or generalized to other similar contexts or populations as detailed demographics of the participants were collected through the criteria questionnaire and through the interview process. This detailed context allows for an informed assessment of how well the study's conditions align with or apply to other research settings (Kakar et al., 2023).

Dependability

Dependability ensures the consistency and replicability of the research process and its findings (Kakar et al., 2023). The phenomenological qualitative methodology used in this study is thoroughly described in Chapter 3. A phenomenological qualitative study design was used in which narrative data was collected through in-depth interviews. The phenomenological

qualitative methodology is appropriate for this study because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by Black women (Kuswemi et al., 2020).

A purposive sample of the participants was taken. The participants were selected based on their race, if they have worked at a Fortune 500 company, their desire to reach the c-suite, and their current or previously held middle management level. Choosing participants based on these criteria was necessary to match the target population for this study.

Data from the participants was then collected through Zoom voice recording and transcription of the interview of the participants. The data was then organized by themes that emerged from the data. Once there were no new themes gathered from the collected data, data saturation was reached (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). This detailed account of the steps taken by the researcher in executing the research process enables future researchers the ability to repeat the methodological steps, thereby ensuring the consistency and replicability of the findings under similar contexts and conditions (Albina et al., 2021).

Conformability

Confirmability establishes the neutrality of the research findings, ensuring that they are solely derived from the participants' experiences rather than researcher biases or preconceptions (Thorne, 2024). The researcher prevented biases from the analysis and findings of the collected data through voice recordings and transcriptions of the interviews with the participants to present factual, honest, and accurate findings. The researcher remained objective. The researcher also used prepared interview questions when interviewing each participant to standardize the interview.

Results

This research study included ten participants who qualified for the study based on their responses from the criteria questionnaire they have completed. The selected participants identified as Black woman, aged 18 years old or older, who currently work or have worked at a Fortune 500 company. The participants currently hold or have held middle management role(s) in a Fortune 500 company but have not held c-suite role(s). The interview with each participant was conducted over Zoom. Table 1 below represents the participants demographic information collected from the criteria questionnaire each completed. Each participant was identified with a pseudo name to ensure no potentially identifying information was reported.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant's pseudo name	Gender	Race	Age	Current job level	Number of years of experience in middle management	Currently employed by a fortune 500 company	Aspire to be in c-suite at a fortune 500 company
Laila	Female	Black	45 to 54	Middle Management	5–10	No	Yes
Aaliyah	Female	Black	55 to 64	Middle Management	5–10	No	No
Brianna	Female	Black	55 to 64	Intermediate	5–10	Yes	No
Destiny	Female	Black	55 to 64	Middle Management	11–20	No	Yes
Jada	Female	Black	55 to 64	Middle Management	5–10	No	No
Nyla	Female	Black	55 to 64	Retired	5–10	No	No
Jasmine	Female	Black	25 to 34	Senior Management	5–10	No	No
Kiara	Female	Black	35 to 44	Middle Management	11–20	No	No
Latonya	Female	Black	35 to 44	Middle Management	5–10	No	No
Michelle	Female	Black	45 to 44	Senior Management	5–10	No	Yes

Inductive thematic analysis was used to code the data collected in this research study. Inductive thematic analysis is a method of qualitative data analysis where patterns and themes appear directly from the data itself, without pre-defined categories (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025). First, the researcher became familiar with the data collected by reading the transcriptions of the participant's recorded interviews and noting initial ideas or themes that emerged from the data as it relates to the research questions.

Next, the researcher coded the data using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program that generates codes and themes from the collected data (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025). The researcher then looked for patterns in the collected data and grouped these similar codes together to generate themes from these groups (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025). Names were then assigned to each theme. Finally, all the themes were brought together in a cohesive manner to explain how they fit together and relate to the research questions and any existing theories. The researcher then discussed how the themes provided a thorough understanding of the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies and how the themes contributed to existing findings on this subject in the field. This final step of synthesizing the emergent themes was crucial for effectively communicating the findings of this qualitative research study (Naeem et al., 2023).

Research Question 1

The first research question was, "How does sponsorship affect Black women's ability to obtain c-suite roles in Fortune 500 companies?". Table 2 presents the participants' quotes taken directly from their Zoom interviews. Table 2 also presents the themes generated to address Research Question 1 for this study.

Table 2*Significant Quotes and Identified Themes*

Theme	Quotes
Theme 1: Sponsorship as a Catalyst for Growth, Opportunity, and Visibility	<p data-bbox="824 415 1409 583">“Dr. Peterson...she’s kind of why I’m where I am today...she’s there and stays there consistently. I’ve also had other mentors who’ve been more like the advocate for me...the voice of and volunteering to continue helping me.” -Laila</p> <p data-bbox="824 617 1414 814">“She kinda actually spoke up and pushed for me to become a supervisor, you know, to go to the next level, even though I wouldn’t say I was ready, per se, myself. The knowledge was there. It definitely helped that somebody else believed in your work when they saw your work.” -Brianna</p> <p data-bbox="824 848 1344 919">“I did have a person that would help me and support me.” -Michelle</p> <p data-bbox="824 953 1382 1050">“I feel like I've had that (sponsor) experience at least once (someone who vouched for me).” - Jasmine</p> <p data-bbox="824 1083 1409 1155">“He nominated me for the role” and “took it upon himself to be that anchor.” -Jada</p>
Theme 2: Lack of Sponsorship	<p data-bbox="824 1218 1365 1289">“(Sponsor) No, only a manager to make sure I was doing it correctly.” -Nyla</p> <p data-bbox="824 1323 1409 1394">“(Sponsor) No, I have not. Sounds like something I wanna have, though.” -Kiara</p> <p data-bbox="824 1428 1382 1562">“I wish I had had one (sponsor), Rochelle. I’d probably be better off today. But no, I did not. I just kind of navigated through it on my own.” - Aaliyah</p>
Theme 3: Sponsorship and Trust as Emotional Anchors	<p data-bbox="824 1617 1409 1730">“Helped that somebody else believed in your work when they saw your work and advocated for you to do more.” -Brianna</p> <p data-bbox="824 1764 1360 1860">“He (sponsor) was very supportive of me. My sponsor’s support was rather welcoming.” -Destiny</p>

Research Question 2

The second research question was, “How does direct advocacy affect a Black women’s ability to obtain c-suite roles in Fortune 500 companies?”. Table 3 presents the participants’ quotes taken directly from their Zoom interviews. Table 3 also presents the themes generated to address Research Question 2 for this study.

Table 3

Significant Quotes and Identified Themes

Theme	Quotes
Theme 1: Advocacy Opens Access	<p>“She advocated for you to, you know, do more.” -Brianna</p> <p>“So he was, saying, okay, if you're... if you're gonna talk to Destiny that way, I'm gonna let her do project finance. He advocated for me to work on another project.” -Destiny</p> <p>“He nominated me for the role and helped me locate needs in the role.” -Jada</p> <p>“She (direct advocate) actually works with me, uplifting my skills for like even people in the community.” -Laila</p> <p>“Yes. A direct advocate. I was recommended for a role when my former director supervisor retired. When she retired, I found out she was strongly advocating for me.” -Latonya</p>
Theme 2: Sparse Advocacy from Leadership	<p>“Only one CEO wanted to see me do well and was actually genuinely interested in getting to know me.” -Kiara</p> <p>“My interactions with the those in the c-suite have largely been transactional, you doing all the work, and them signing off on it.” - Jasmine</p>

Theme	Quotes
Theme 3: Limited Advocacy Shifting Aspirations from the C-suite to Ownership	“They (those in the c-suite) tend to guard their position carefully and seem to see capable Black women as threats.” -Destiny
	“I received pushback from upper management when I tried to fix things, despite acknowledgment that change was needed.” - Brianna
	“I’m looking beyond the c-suite at this point, more like ownership of my own company.” -Jasmine
	“I’m aiming to work alongside the c-suite rather than within the c-suite.” -Kiara
	“I want my own company, to be the decision maker.” -Jada
	“So I’m a mental health provider and I’m also a founder, CEO and President of my own business. -Laila

Comparison of Results to the Literature Review

The first research question of this study was “How does sponsorship affect Black women’s ability to obtain c-suite roles in Fortune 500 companies?”. The results indicate that most participants had limited or no access to sponsorship, with several participants reporting they had never had a sponsor or had to navigate their careers independently (e.g., “I wish I had had one... But no, I did not. I just navigated through it on my own.” – Aaliyah). This aligns closely with the literature in Chapter 2, which identifies lack of sponsorship as a core structural barrier impeding Black women’s advancement (Smith, 2021; Spriggs, 2020).

The literature further states that Black women are less likely to receive sponsorship from senior leaders (Proudford & Thomas, 1999; Paulise, 2021). This is because these relationships depend on insider status within social networks from which Black women are historically excluded (Proudford & Thomas, 1999; Paulise, 2021). The participants' descriptions of navigating their careers without influential advocates are consistent with these findings.

Where sponsorship did occur, participants described sponsorship as deeply affirming and tied to emotional trust (e.g., "Helped that somebody else believed in your work... and advocated for you to do more." – Brianna). This pattern reflects the literature noting that sponsorship provides access to visibility, stretch assignments, and advancement opportunities that cannot be obtained through performance alone (Smith, 2021; Lyness & Thompson, 2000). The theme that sponsorship functioned as a "trust anchor" is also aligned with research documenting that Black women often rely heavily on relational validation because structural pathways to advancement are less accessible (Elias, 2018; Phipps & Prieto, 2021).

The findings also align with the matrix of domination framework used in the study. Participants' experiences of being overlooked for sponsorship, despite strong performance, correspond to the framework's assertion that race, gender, and class create interlocking systems that constrain opportunity (Collins et al., 2021). This is reflected in the participants' accounts of navigating corporate spaces where their value was recognized only once a sponsor actively intervened. Their narratives mirror the literature's depiction of Black women as "outsiders within" (Proudford & Thomas, 1999), which limits their access to key decision-makers who traditionally serve as sponsors. Overall, the results for the first research question are highly consistent with the existing literature showing Black women disproportionately lack sponsorship, and when sponsorship is present, it significantly shifts access to career-advancing opportunities. The

findings reinforce that sponsorship is a necessary but unevenly distributed mechanism for c-suite mobility.

The second research question of this study was “How does direct advocacy affect Black women’s ability to obtain c-suite roles in Fortune 500 companies?”. The results show that direct advocacy, defined by participants as leaders actively recommending or advocating for them, had a positive but inconsistent impact. Quotes illustrating direct advocacy (e.g., “He nominated me for the role” – Jada; “She advocated for you to do more” – Brianna) demonstrate that advocacy opened access to roles and responsibilities otherwise unavailable to participants. This supports Chapter 2 research indicating that advocacy can counter exclusionary practices and promote advancement into leadership (Glass & Cook, 2015; O’Brien et al., 2023).

However, participants overwhelmingly described sparse, inconsistent, or absent advocacy from c-suite leaders. Numerous quotes highlight that interactions with executives were transactional or even guarded (e.g., “My interactions with those in the c-suite have largely been transactional...” (Jasmine) and “They... see capable Black women as threats.” (Destiny). These findings are highly consistent with the literature documenting Black women’s exclusion from executive networks, as well as the “Black ceiling” and “glass staircase” concepts described in Chapter 2 (Erskine et al., 2021; Evans, 2014). The literature emphasizes that without senior leaders’ active advocacy, Black women’s chances of reaching the c-suite remain limited because sponsorship and advocacy are often prerequisites for major leadership opportunities (Smith, 2021; Spriggs, 2020).

The results also reveal that limited advocacy led several participants to shift their aspirations from the c-suite to entrepreneurship (e.g., “I’m looking beyond the c-suite... more like ownership of my own company.” – Jasmine). This trend aligns with Chapter 2 literature

indicating that when traditional organizations fail to provide equitable advancement, Black women often pursue leadership opportunities outside hierarchical corporate structures (Pogrebna et al., 2024; Sales et al., 2019). The literature frames this shift as a response to intersectional barriers inherent in the matrix of domination (Collins et al., 2021), which the study's findings clearly reflect.

Overall, the results for the second research question are also consistent with existing research and theory showing direct advocacy can facilitate career advancement. However, Black women rarely receive this critical support. The lack of direct advocacy perpetuates systemic inequities and reinforces the intersectional obstacles described in the guiding theoretical framework.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of this phenomenological study exploring how sponsorship and direct advocacy influence Black women's ability to obtain c-suite roles in Fortune 500 companies. The chapter began by restating the problem of the study which is the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to explore how sponsorship and direct advocacy affect Black women's ability to obtain c-suite leadership roles within corporate America.

Firstly, the procedures used to ensure trustworthiness was explained. Next, credibility through member checking, dependability through clear documentation of processes, transferability through detailed descriptions of participant experiences, and confirmability using transcripts and audit trails was explained. These steps were implemented to enhance rigor and ensure accurate representation of participant narratives.

The results were organized by research question. For the first research question regarding sponsorship, the findings revealed that most participants had limited or no access to sponsors during their corporate careers. Those who did experience sponsorship described it as affirming, supportive, and instrumental in gaining visibility. Lack of sponsorship emerged as a significant barrier, consistent with the broader pattern of exclusion from informal networks and limited access to senior leader advocacy.

For the second research question regarding direct advocacy, findings indicated that direct advocacy, when present, opened doors to new roles, responsibilities, and leadership opportunities. Participants described instances where managers or senior leaders recommended them for roles or supported their advancement. However, advocacy from c-suite leaders was generally sparse, inconsistent, or absent. Many participants described transactional relationships with executives and a perception that senior leaders guarded power closely, which limited advancement pathways. A significant number of participants indicated that the absence of advocacy contributed to shifting their aspirations away from c-suite roles and toward entrepreneurship or independent leadership.

Overall, this chapter highlighted consistent patterns of constrained access to sponsorship and advocacy, and showed how these constraints shaped participants' experiences, advancement opportunities, and long-term career decisions. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the major findings of this study, recommendations for practice and further research, and the summary of this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Study Summary

The problem addressed in this study was the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore how sponsorship and direct advocacy affect Black women's ability to obtain c-suite leadership roles within corporate America. This study used a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore how sponsorship and direct advocacy influence Black women's ability to obtain c-suite roles in Fortune 500 companies.

A phenomenological approach is appropriate because it centers the lived experiences of participants and allows for an in-depth examination of how Black women perceive and interpret systemic barriers within corporate leadership structures (Kuswemi et al., 2020). Data collection was conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected Black women who have middle management experience within corporate America's Fortune 500 companies yet have not attained c-suite positions. The study is guided by Dr. Patricia Hill Collins' matrix of domination as its theoretical framework, enabling analysis of how race, gender, and class intersect to shape leadership access and exclusion (Moorosi et al., 2018). Data analysis of the collected data followed an inductive thematic analysis process, supported by NVivo, the qualitative data analysis software program used to generate the codes and themes from the collected data (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025). Triangulation was used to enhance credibility and trustworthiness of the collected data.

The findings revealed that sponsorship and direct advocacy are critical but unevenly accessible means for career advancement. Participants' narratives highlight persistent systemic barriers, including exclusion from influential networks, biased leadership perceptions, limited access to high-visibility assignments, and the presence of a "black ceiling" that constrains

upward mobility even when performance and qualifications are strong (Erskine et al., 2021; Evans, 2014). While sponsorship and advocacy can facilitate exposure and opportunity (Smith, 2021), the results suggest their effectiveness is often constrained by organizational cultures dominated by white male leadership norms. Overall, the findings align with existing literature and emphasize the combined impact of intersectional oppression on Black women's leadership paths.

Key limitations of this study include the small, purposive sample size, which restricts generalizability, and reliance on self-reported data, which may be influenced by recall bias or personal interpretation. Additionally, the focus on Black women who did not reach the c-suite excludes comparative perspectives from those who successfully attained executive roles. The qualitative design prioritizes depth over breadth, limiting the ability to draw causal conclusions.

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings of this study, as they relate to the theoretical framework and existing literature presented in this study. Practical recommendations for organizations seeking to dismantle systemic barriers through intentional sponsorship and advocacy practices are outlined in this chapter, followed by recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a study summary that emphasizes the scholarly and practical contributions of the research and its implications for advancing equity in the c-suite of corporate leadership.

Discussion

A central finding of this study is that sponsorship is a critical but insufficient condition for Black women's advancement to the c-suite. Participants consistently described sponsorship as essential for gaining visibility, access to high-impact assignments, and credibility with decision-makers; however, sponsorship alone did not guarantee progression to executive roles (Collins et al., 2021). Many participants reported receiving sponsorship from individuals who lacked positional power or influence within the highest levels of corporate leadership, thereby limiting the sponsor's effectiveness. This finding directly addresses the study's purpose by demonstrating how sponsorship functions unevenly for Black women and supports the problem statement that structural inequities persist even when advancement means are present.

This result aligns with existing research indicating that sponsorship is most effective when it originates from individuals who hold dominant positions within organizational hierarchies, particularly white men who control promotion decisions (Smith, 2021). From the perspective of the matrix of domination theory, this finding illustrates how race, gender, and power intersect to constrain the benefits of sponsorship for Black women, reinforcing systemic inequities rather than dismantling them (Collins et al., 2021).

The findings of this study further revealed that direct advocacy by senior leaders was more influential than passive sponsorship in facilitating advancement. Participants emphasized that advocacy involving obvious promotion of their readiness for executive roles, protection during evaluative processes, and defense against biased perceptions significantly shaped leadership outcomes. In contrast, the absence of direct advocacy often resulted in stalled career progression, despite strong performance records.

This finding extends existing literature by clarifying how direct advocacy functions as a distinct and more powerful means than sponsorship alone. While prior studies acknowledge direct advocacy as important, this study contributes nuance by demonstrating that direct advocacy is particularly vital for Black women navigating intersecting systems of racialized and gendered bias. The finding is consistent with the matrix of domination theory, which emphasizes that marginalized individuals require intentional disruption of power structures, not merely access to them, to achieve equitable outcomes (Collins et al., 2021; Moorosi et al., 2018).

Another significant finding is the persistence of a “black ceiling” that limited participants’ access to the c-suite regardless of qualifications, tenure, or leadership competence (Erskine et al., 2021). Participants described repeated experiences of being overlooked for advancement, subjected to heightened scrutiny, or positioned as “almost ready” without clear pathways forward. These narratives demonstrate how structural and cultural barriers continue to operate even when Black women meet or exceed organizational expectations.

This finding is strongly consistent with prior research documenting intersectional barriers such as biased leadership prototypes, exclusion from informal networks, and racialized perceptions of executive readiness. The matrix of domination framework provides a strong explanation for this outcome, as it conceptualizes oppression as systemic, mutually reinforcing, and embedded across organizational, cultural, and interpersonal levels (Collins, 2000). The findings therefore confirm that the study effectively addressed the research problem by exposing how structural biases, not individual shortfalls, sustain Black women’s underrepresentation in the c-suite.

Several factors may have influenced interpretation of the findings. First, the reliance on self-reported narratives may reflect participants’ subjective interpretations of organizational

experiences. Second, the purposive sample focused exclusively on Black women who had not attained c-suite roles, which may increase barriers rather than capture contrasting success pathways. However, these factors are appropriate within a phenomenological design, as the goal was to understand the lived experiences of the participants rather than generalize outcomes.

The most significant societal implication of this study is the confirmation that equity in leadership representation cannot be achieved without structural accountability. Probable implications include improved leadership diversity and organizational performance if sponsorship and advocacy practices are formalized and tied to accountability measures. Unlikely implications would include rapid equality in representation without systemic change, as the findings indicate that informal or symbolic efforts are scarce.

Overall, the findings strongly reinforce the matrix of domination theory, demonstrating how intersecting systems of race, gender, and power shape leadership outcomes (Collins et al., 2021). The study contributes to existing research by empirically linking sponsorship, advocacy, and structural inequity within a single interpretive framework. The results affirm that the study successfully addressed its purpose and research questions by illuminating how Black women's leadership paths are constrained not by capability, but by embedded systems of domination that require intentional disruption to achieve equity.

Recommendations for Theory

The findings of this phenomenological study support the continued use of Dr. Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) matrix of domination theory as an appropriate and effective theoretical framework for examining the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies. Participants' narratives demonstrated that race, gender, and class operate as interlocking systems of power that shape access to leadership opportunities, consistent with

Collins' assertion that oppression functions simultaneously at structural, cultural, and interpersonal levels (Collins et al., 2021). The results suggest that the matrix of domination theory can be further refined in organizational leadership research by explicitly accounting for positional power within corporate hierarchies, particularly as it relates to sponsorship and promotion decision-making.

Findings related to sponsorship recommend that leadership theory conceptualize sponsorship as a power-dependent concept rather than a universally effective career intervention. Participants reported that sponsorship was meaningful only when sponsors possessed sufficient organizational authority to influence executive succession and advancement. This finding aligns with Smith (2021), who emphasized that sponsorship for Black women is often limited in effectiveness when sponsors lack proximity to dominant leadership networks. From a theoretical standpoint, this distinction reinforces Collins' argument that domination is sustained through institutional control rather than interpersonal intent, suggesting that sponsorship without power does little to disrupt existing hierarchies (Collins et al., 2021).

The findings further indicate that direct advocacy functions as an interruptive means within the matrix of domination theory, rather than as a passive form of support. Participants described advocacy as effective when senior leaders engaged in visible, explicit endorsement that challenged biased leadership perceptions and exclusionary norms. This supports prior scholarship asserting that marginalized groups require intentional disruption of dominant power structures to achieve equitable outcomes (Proudford & Thomas, 1999; Erskine et al., 2021). Theoretically, these findings support framing advocacy as an opposition to the existing status quo practice that temporarily destabilizes domination within organizational contexts, rather than as a neutral leadership behavior.

Additionally, the study's findings reinforce the conceptualization of the "black ceiling" as a structural manifestation of the matrix of domination theory. Participants' experiences revealed that barriers to advancement persisted even in the presence of sponsorship and advocacy, indicating that systems of domination adapt rather than dissolve when surface-level interventions are introduced. This finding is consistent with existing literature describing the "black ceiling" as the result of cultural norms, leadership bias, and exclusionary organizational practices (Erskine et al., 2021). Theoretically, this supports positioning the "black ceiling" not as an isolated barrier, but as an outcome produced by intersecting systems of race and gender oppression embedded within corporate leadership structures.

The findings also support the continued integration of intersectionality into leadership theory. Participants' experiences demonstrated that leadership evaluation, sponsorship access, and advancement pathways were shaped by race and gender simultaneously, rather than as separate or additive influences. This aligns with Crenshaw's (1989) foundational work on intersectionality and with leadership scholarship emphasizing the inadequacy of single-axis frameworks for explaining Black women's leadership experiences (Moorosi et al., 2018). The study therefore reinforces the theoretical necessity of intersectional approaches when examining leadership access and exclusion.

While the findings provide meaningful support for applying and refining the matrix of domination theory within corporate leadership research, their applicability should not be overstated. Given the study's phenomenological design and purposive sample, these theoretical implications are most appropriately applied to contexts in Fortune 500 corporate environments. The findings contribute to theory by deepening understanding of how domination operates within

executive leadership systems, rather than by offering broad generalizations across all organizational or leadership contexts.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study provide several opportunities for future researchers to build upon and extend the understanding of Black women's underrepresentation in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies. Guided by the matrix of domination framework (Collins, 2000), future research can deepen theoretical, methodological, and empirical insight into how intersecting systems of race, gender, and power shape leadership access. One avenue for future research involves expanding the participant population to include Black women who have successfully attained c-suite roles. This study focused on the lived experiences of Black women who sought but did not obtain c-suite positions, which was appropriate given the study's purpose and phenomenological design. However, including Black women who have reached the c-suite would allow future researchers to conduct comparative analyses between those who advanced and those who did not. Such research could illuminate whether sponsorship and advocacy function differently when combined with organizational context, timing, or positional opportunity, thereby strengthening theoretical applications of the matrix of domination theory.

Future researchers may also improve upon this study by employing mixed-methods or quantitative designs to complement qualitative findings. While the phenomenological approach was well suited for exploring lived experience and meaning, it limits generalizability. Quantitative studies could examine patterns related to sponsorship, advocacy, promotion rates, and leadership outcomes across larger samples, providing empirical support for trends identified in this study. This methodological extension would allow researchers to test the consistency of

intersectional barriers across industries and organizational structures while maintaining alignment with the framework.

Another important direction for future research is the examination of sponsorship and advocacy from the sponsor's perspective. Participants in this study described sponsorship as effective only when sponsors held positional power, suggesting that organizational hierarchies strongly influence outcomes. Future studies could explore how senior leaders understand, enact, or resist sponsorship and advocacy for Black women. This would provide insight into how domination operates at the institutional decision-making level and could refine the matrix of domination theory by incorporating perspectives from those embedded within dominant power structures.

Future researchers may also address a limitation of this study by exploring intersectional variation within the population of Black women. While this study centered race and gender, future research could examine how additional dimensions such as age, industry, educational background, or international corporate contexts interact with domination and leadership access. Such studies would remain theoretically consistent while acknowledging that domination operates differently across organizational and social locations.

The next logical step in this line of research could be the development of theory-informed intervention studies. Building on the findings that sponsorship and advocacy are insufficient without structural power, future researchers could examine organizational initiatives designed to formalize sponsorship pathways, embed accountability, or disrupt biased promotion practices. While this study did not evaluate interventions, its findings provide a strong conceptual foundation for future research that moves from description toward evaluation, while remaining cautious about causal claims.

Collectively, future research that expands samples, diversifies methods, incorporates multiple perspectives, and examines structural interventions will strengthen scholarly understanding of Black women's leadership paths. Such research can continue to refine the matrix of domination framework within organizational leadership studies as well. Such research can also contribute to more precise, evidence-based approaches to addressing persistent inequities in executive leadership.

Study Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore how sponsorship and direct advocacy affect Black women's ability to obtain c-suite leadership roles within Fortune 500 companies. The study addressed the persistent problem of Black women's underrepresentation in executive leadership despite their qualifications, tenure, and demonstrated leadership capability. Guided by Dr. Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) matrix of domination framework, the research examined how intersecting systems of race, gender, and power shape leadership access within corporate hierarchies.

The findings revealed that sponsorship and direct advocacy are necessary but insufficient mechanisms for advancement when they are not supported by positional power and structural accountability. Participants lived experiences demonstrated that sponsorship often lacked effectiveness when sponsors were unable to influence executive decision-making, and that direct advocacy was impactful only when it involved visible, authoritative endorsement capable of challenging biased leadership norms. The persistence of the "black ceiling," even in the presence of sponsorship and advocacy, highlighted how domination adapts within organizational systems rather than dissolving through surface-level interventions.

The importance of this study lies in its contribution to both theory and practice. The findings empirically reinforce the matrix of domination theory by demonstrating how structural, cultural, and interpersonal systems of oppression operate simultaneously within corporate leadership pipelines (Collins et al., 2021). By centering the voices of Black women who have sought but not attained c-suite roles, the study fills a gap in the literature and challenges narratives that attribute leadership underrepresentation to individual deficits rather than systemic inequities.

The findings of this study support the idea that increasing Black women's representation in the c-suite requires more than talent, mentorship, or symbolic sponsorship. Meaningful progress depends on intentional disruption of entrenched power structures, equitable access to influential sponsorship, and direct advocacy embedded within accountable organizational systems. Without addressing the structural dimensions of domination, efforts to diversify executive leadership will continue to fall short, perpetuating inequity at the highest levels of corporate America.

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Appendix A:
Post/Text/Email Message

My name is Rochelle Fields, and I am a doctoral student at National University. I am conducting a research study to address the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies.

I am recruiting individuals who meet all these criteria:

1. Are age 18 or older.
2. Identify as a Black women.
3. Have held/hold middle management role(s) in a Fortune 500 company but have not held c-suite role(s).

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Participate in a 45–60-minute interview in-person or over Zoom.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your age, race, gender, and length of time working in middle management role(s) in a Fortune 500 company.
- Your present job title.
- Your experience working in middle management role(s).
- If you had/have a professional sponsor and/or direct advocate.
- Your past experiences with co-workers in the c-suite.
- Your aspiration to be in the c-suite.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please provide your name and email address, and click this link to complete the Criteria Questionnaire:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/DG7KJLR>

If you have questions, please contact me via email at: R.Fields4340@o365.ncu.edu

Thank you for considering participating in this voluntary research!

Rochelle Fields

IRB approval letter

7/7/25, 5:35 PM

Mail - Rochelle Fields - Outlook

 Outlook

IRB-FY24-25-1111 - Initial: Exempt from Further Review

From do-not-reply@cayuse.com <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>

Date Mon 7/7/2025 1:52 PM

To Rochelle Fields <R.Fields4340@o365.ncu.edu>; wrangel@nu.edu <wrangel@nu.edu>



9388 Lightwave Ave.
San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

Notice of Exemption

July 7, 2025

To: Rochelle Fields

Project Title: A Qualitative Phenomenological Research Study on the Underrepresentation of Black Women in the C-suite of Fortune 500 Companies

NU IRB Number: IRB-FY24-25-1111

Determination: Exempt from further review 45 CFR 46.101 Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

Status: Active - Research activities may begin as of July 7, 2025

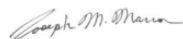
Dear Rochelle Fields:

The study referenced above has been reviewed by the National University IRB. The IRB has determined your research is exempt from further review under 45 CFR 46.104, which means you will not need to renew your study and may begin your study effective immediately. However, if you find the need to change your study in any way, you will need to submit a modification to the IRB prior to implementing the changes. This will allow the IRB to determine whether or not the study still meets exemption criteria.

Please review your Post Approval Responsibilities here: [Approved Documents Guidelines](#)

For any questions regarding your protocol, please reach out to the IRB at irb@nu.edu.

Sincerely,



Dr. Joseph Marron, IRB Chair



Dr. Brianna Mongeon, Director, HRPP & IRB



Jenessa Eberhardt, Associate Director, HRPP & IRB

Appendix B:
Criteria Questionnaire

Link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/DG7KJLR>

Criteria Questionnaire

1. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

2. Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one.)

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic
- White / Caucasian
- Multiple ethnicity / Other (please specify)

3. What is your age?

- 18 to 24
- 25 to 34
- 35 to 44
- 45 to 54
- 55 to 64
- 65 to 74
- 75 or older

4. Which of the following best describes your current job level?

- Owner/Executive/C-Level
- Senior Management
- Middle Management
- Intermediate
- Entry Level
- Other (please specify)

5. How many years of experience do you have in a middle management role(s) in a Fortune 500 company(ies)?

- 5 - 10 yrs.
- 11 - 20 yrs.
- 21 yrs. or more

6. Are you currently employed by a Fortune 500 company?

- Yes
- No

7. Do you aspire to be in the c-suite of a Fortune 500 company?

Yes

No

8. What is your name and email address?

Appendix C:
Consent Form

My name is Rochelle Fields, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU).

I'm asking you to take part in a research study about the underrepresentation of Black women in the c-suite of Fortune 500 companies. The name of this research is "A Qualitative Phenomenological Research Study on the Underrepresentation of Black Women in the C-suite of Fortune 500 Companies".

You may participate in this research if you meet all the following criteria:

1. Are age 18 or older.
2. Identify as a Black women.
3. Have held/hold middle management role(s) in a Fortune 500 company but have not held c-suite role(s).

I hope to include 10 to 20 people in this research.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What you will be asked to do: If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Participate in a 1:1 in-person or online interview over Zoom for 45-60 minutes.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your age, race, gender, and length of time working in middle management role(s) in a Fortune 500 company.
- Your present job title.
- Your experience working in middle management role(s).
- If you had/have a professional sponsor and/or direct advocate.
- Your past experiences with co-workers in the c-suite.
- Your aspiration to be in the c-suite.

Risks: There are minimal foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research. You can still skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participation at any time.

Benefits: If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This research may increase the body of knowledge in the subject area of this research.

Recording:

I would like to audio/video record your responses with Zoom during the interview. You can disable the video function of the online meeting platform at any time.

Confidentiality: I will keep the records of this study private and take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information. In any report I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Confidentiality for this study's participants will be achieved by not using the participant's actual names when presenting the findings of the study and instead assigning pseudo names to the participants. All research materials such as consent forms, completed surveys, interview transcripts, etc., will be stored in a safe, locked place, accessible only by the researcher. This will apply to electronic and paper research materials. Any digital data files will be stored in an encrypted drive in a password protected folder only accessible by the researcher. All research material will be destroyed after three years as per federal regulations.

Taking part is voluntary: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may quit at any time.

If you have questions: Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at R.Fields4340@o365.ncu.edu or at (585) 348-7053.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at irb@nu.edu