

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the findings of a study done by CPAC Institute between January 2020 and June 2021. It is the first of its kind that identifies the representation of Chinese Canadians in senior leadership positions in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Canada's largest metropolitan area with the most ethnically diverse population and workforce. This study also explored the observations and insights of Chinese Canadian leaders on their leadership journeys – the barriers and obstacles they have to overcome, the impact of systemic racism and personal biases on their career advancement, and possible strategies at the government and organizational levels to enhance workplace equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Methodologically, this two-phase study employs both quantitative (Phase I) and qualitative (Phase II) analyses. In Phase I, senior leaders of Chinese descent were identified from the largest organizations in eight major sectors in the GTA – public service, judicial, corporate, core health care, education, charitable, elected office and agencies, boards, and commissions (ABCs). In this report, Tier 1 leaders in most cases refer to the board of directors and the most senior management executives as defined by each organization. Where data are available, Chinese Canadians in Tier 2 leadership positions were also identified, with the aim of illuminating whether a leadership pipeline has been developed. The representation of Chinese Canadian women was examined as well to shed light on the multifaceted intersections of gender, race and other factors that have created additional challenges for women of color on their path towards senior leadership. "Woman" instead of "female" is used to distinguish gender (socially constructed) from sex (biologically determined).

Our findings suggest that Chinese Canadians, representing 11.1% of the population in the GTA, are severely underrepresented in leadership positions in all eight sectors. Of the 8,998 Tier 1 leaders examined, only 195, or 2.17%, are of Chinese descent. There is zero representation at the senior executive level in all the big accounting and law firms, or among the Directors or Associate Directors of Education in all 10 public and Catholic school boards.

The picture of Chinese representation in Tier 2 leadership is even more grim. The data of Tier 2 leadership was available only in three sectors - public service, judicial and post-secondary education. Of the 1,734 Tier 2 leaders examined, only 33, or 1.90%, are Chinese Canadians, even lower than in Tier 1. Chinese Canadians' extremely low representation in pipeline leadership positions will make it even harder for them to break the existing "bamboo" ceiling, if the issue is not addressed immediately and adequately.

Chinese Canadian women's representation in Tier 1 leadership is 0.97%, lower than that of men's (1.20%). They represent one fifth of Chinese Canadian leaders in the public service sector, and one third of those in the corporate sector. Excluding the judicial sector, Chinese Canadian women represent less than men in all sectors at Tier 1.

Among the Tier 2 leaders of Chinese descent, however, 24 out of 33 are women.



In Phase II of the study, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 senior leaders identified in Phase I to provide a deeper understanding of the causes of Chinese Canadians' underrepresentation in leadership and identify possible strategies to enhance workplace equity, diversity and inclusion. Another 7 senior leaders of Chinese descent, who were not part of the quantitative study, were also invited to share their experiences and perspectives to enrich the discussion.

As reflected from the interviews, racial and gender biases, stereotypes and discrimination persist in the workplace, which have hindered Chinese Canadians, particularly women, from advancing to senior leadership. There are biases and discrimination at both the individual and systemic levels, implicit and explicit, which not only discourage and restrain Chinese Canadians from pursuing senior leadership, but may also result in lowered self-esteem and a sense of inferiority, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating racial biases and stereotypes.

Another major barrier experienced by Chinese Canadians is the masculinized and westernized leadership culture to which they struggle to conform. As leaders, some participants were given negative comments as not being assertive or aggressive enough. Paradoxically, they sometimes face backlash for failing to meet the expected stereotype of a quiet, submissive “model minority” when they do show assertiveness.

The lack of mentorship support and role models at the senior executive level is another barrier recognized by most participants, which results in an inability of the racialized people to see themselves in top leadership roles.

The interviews with women leaders confirm the interplay of racial and gender biases, which has reduced Chinese Canadian women to double minorities. The qualitative data collected echo existing literature which found Chinese or East-Asian women were less likely to be considered leaders, as a result of centuries-long westernized portrayals of them as being submissive, passive, and obedient.

This study has identified several key strategies to increase equity, diversity and inclusion in the workplace. They are 1) promoting true understanding and appreciation of the value and benefits of diversity; 2) enacting meaningful, effective and systemic EDI policies and practices that produce sustained results; 3) demonstrating a strong commitment to EDI from the top and backing it up with a designated EDI leader and strong EDI infrastructure; 4) being intentional and concrete in designing and implementing EDI policies and practices; and ultimately 5) cultivating an organizational culture of EDI and infusing EDI values into every part of the organization's business.

Governments also have a substantial part to play, mainly in shaping dominant narratives and advocating and nudging changes through legislation, regulations and policies. Governments can also fund research, education, training and other support programs and activities. Finally, as large employers, governments can model the desired behaviours for all other employers.

