

THE INTERSECTION

AN EYEZWE CONSULTING NEWSLETTER & PODCAST

"Feminism isn't about making women stronger. Women are already strong.

it's about changing the way the world perceives that strength."

G D Anderson
Author

Series: Why Black Women in Corporate South Africa Fear Visibility – And How We Change It

Post 3: The Loneliness of Missing Role Models

"If you can't see her, you can't be her."

South Africa's corporate leadership still doesn't reflect its people. The absence of Black women at the top fuels fear, self-doubt, and isolation for those trying to rise through the ranks.

Laurie Frankel once wrote: "Representation matters not just because it matters that you see yourself in the world but because it matters that you see yourself positively in the world."

This is especially true in the workplace. Representation isn't only about what's possible — it's about seeing yourself reflected positively, with dignity and agency. When Black women are absent from the boardroom, the message is clear: leadership is still coded as something "other."

Numbers Don't Lie

The 2023/24 Employment Equity Commission Report confirms what many Black women already know: as you climb higher in corporate South Africa, representation thins out.

Top Management

African Female: 5.5%
Coloured Female: 2.4%
Indian Female: 4.0%
White Female: 13.3%

Professionally Qualified (Middle Management)

African Female: 15.4%
Coloured Female: 5.3%
Indian Female: 5.1%
White Female: 15.7%

Skilled Level

African Female: 23.2% (dominant here)
Coloured Female: 6.5%
Indian Female: 3.2%
White Female: 8.8%

Senior Management

African Female: 8.4%
Coloured Female: 3.7%
Indian Female: 5.1%
White Female: 18.3%

Unskilled Level

African Female: 35.7%
(overrepresented)
Coloured Female: 5.6%
Indian Female: 0.3%
White Female: 0.3%

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The story is stark: African women dominate at the bottom but vanish at the top. Meanwhile, White and Indian women — smaller in population share — occupy a disproportionate share of senior leadership roles.

The Mentorship Gap

Representation isn't just about numbers. It's about guidance, access, and networks.

- Limited role models: With so few Black women in executive positions, younger professionals struggle to find mentors who truly understand their lived experiences.
- Missed opportunities: Long commutes (still a reality for many Black professionals) make “after-work drinks” and informal mentorship inaccessible. These casual spaces often drive career advancement — yet Black women are excluded.
- Conflicted mentorship: Studies show male executives mentoring Black women may unintentionally impose stereotypes, shifting the burden of adaptation onto the mentee.

Mentorship done right is powerful. It creates belonging, opens doors, and validates potential. Done poorly, it reinforces isolation.

The Weight of Isolation

Many Black women enter leadership roles through Employment Equity (EE) or BBBEE pathways. While well-intentioned, poor onboarding often leaves them stranded without a clear scope, support, or networks. The unspoken message: You're here because of compliance, not competence.

This isolation creates self-doubt:

- Do I really belong here?
- Was I chosen because I'm qualified, or because I'm different?
- Am I allowed to ask for help without being judged?

The reality is this: you were hired because you met the requirements. You are the right person for the role. As Dr. Maya Angelou reminds us: “I come as one, but I stand as ten thousand.” Standing tall matters not only for yourself, but for those watching you — the next generation who need to see that leadership can look like them.

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What Needs to Change

Representation won't shift without intentional action. Here's what companies can do:

- Structured mentorship programmes tailored to Black women's lived realities.
- Inclusive workplace cultures that normalize cross-race and cross-gender mentorship with sincerity and accountability.
- Incentivized mentorship rooted in values, not box-ticking — with trust and commitment to transformation.
- Hiring for diversity of perspective, not cultural fit. Black women should not need to assimilate to belong.

The Bottom Line

When there are no role models who look like you, leadership feels unattainable. Representation is not just symbolic — it's systemic. Without it, fear thrives. With it, possibility multiplies.

Rise. Your time is now

*Next in the series: The Backlash
Against Visibility.*