

Black Herstories: Resisting Gendered Racism and Structural Violence





Acknowledgement

This resource has been developed under the project **Building Anti-Racist & Trauma-Informed Practices**. We would like to acknowledge our partners and advisory team of survivors with lived experience of GBV who contributed their guidance to this resource.



CSSP Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples
CGHH Centro para Gente de Habla Hispana

Disclaimer: The story presented here is a fictionalized account based on the real-life experiences of gender-based violence survivors. It is presented for educational purposes and does not depict the experiences of any specific individual.

To cite this resource: To cite this resource: WomanACT. (2025). *Black Herstories: Resisting Gendered Racism and Structural Violence*. <https://womanact.ca/publications/black-herstories-resisting-gendered-racism-and-structural-violence/>

For more information on this project, please **visit**: <https://womanact.ca/projects/building-anti-racism-trauma-informed-practices/>

This project is funded by:



Publication Date: February, 28th, 2025



Black Herstories: Resisting Gendered Racism and Structural Violence

Throughout Canadian history, Black women have endured slavery, racism in the medical system, segregation in schools, and unequal treatment in the workplace. Yet, Black communities have consistently resisted this oppression, fighting for justice, dignity, and equality through collective action and advocacy. White supremacy remains deeply embedded across Canadian systems perpetuating structural violence and gendered racism towards Black women and girls.

Not The Whole Story

Focusing on just one part of a group's experience can lead to harmful stereotypes. Black women in Canada face racism and gendered violence, but that's not the whole story.

They are also **leaders**, **innovators**, and **changemakers**. This brief cannot capture the full complexity of their experiences, but it aims to highlight both the challenges they have faced and their successes.



White supremacy

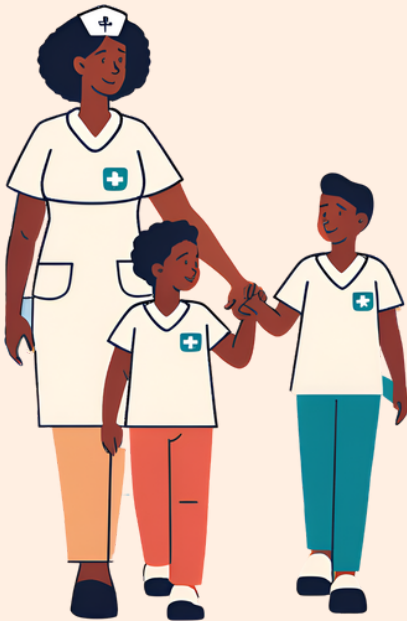
White supremacy is a system that gives power and privilege to White people while keeping **People of Colour** at a **disadvantage**. It shows up in how society is organized, from laws and institutions to everyday attitudes and actions, making White dominance seem normal and natural.

White supremacy is embedded in social, political, and economic systems, leading to lasting inequities and oppression. The intergenerational effects of this enforce systemic racism and continues to undermine the well-being and rights of Indigenous, Black, and other Racialized communities, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and trauma.



Imani's story

Imani is a Black woman with two sons, aged 7 and 10, living in Etobicoke, Ontario. She worked as a nurse at a hospital for 15 years.



Imani constantly worried about her capacity to take care of her kid's needs. To earn extra income, Imani started working some overnight shifts at a long-term care home.



Her partner, Andrew, worked in the trades as a welder when an injury left him unemployed and on disability. Andrew was at times critical of Imani and their relationship, they had been through some rough patches, but the pain from his injury combined with time spent at home made things worse between them.

Andrew started arguing with Imani and the boys, frequently seeming irritated and sharing that he was stressed from the job loss. Imani and Andrew had been discussing his temper for years, but lately, he seemed to be going off over the smallest issues.





The Numbers

4%

Black people make up about 4% of the Canadian population and represent about 371 different ethnic and cultural group.

20x

Black Torontonians are 20X more likely to be shot by police than White people and account for 70% of civilian deaths in police shootings.

49%

Nearly half of Black women in Canada report experiencing discrimination or unfair treatment.

3x

Black students in Toronto are 3X more likely to be suspended than White students and represent almost half of students who are expelled.

56¢

On average, Black women make 56 cents for every dollar that White men earn.

2x

In Ontario, Black families are more than 2X as likely as White families to be investigated by child welfare.

42%

According to Statistics Canada, 42% of Black women in Canada report experiencing IPV, in comparison to non-visible minority women (47%).



Viola Desmond

Image source: Canadian Encyclopedia (2013)

Inspiring Canada's Civil Rights Movement

Viola Desmond was a Black Canadian entrepreneur and trailblazer who made history in 1946 by challenging racial segregation. While visiting a Nova Scotia movie theatre, she refused to move from a whites-only section and was forcibly removed, arrested, and fined. Despite losing her appeal, her fight against injustice inspired Canada's civil rights movement.

Desmond was a successful businesswoman who owned a beauty salon, operated a beauty school for Black women, and created a cosmetics line for darker complexions. Her portrait is now featured on the Canadian \$10 bill.



Imani's story continued...

One night, Imani came home late from work to find Andrew passed out in their bedroom from drinking and the kids were still up and not in bed. When she tried to talk to Andrew about it the next day, he was furious and became physically aggressive.

Imani pushed him back, and he fell hard to the floor. It was the last straw for Imani. Her family lived far away, and she felt a sense of shame in calling them, so she turned to shelters for support.



Imani started calling local shelters, looking for a place she and the kids could stay, but each one was full, and no one could tell her when space might open up. Imani also tried looking for some kind of program that could help Andrew with his abusive and threatening behaviours but found nothing. Programs were available through the police and if he was charged. Despite this, Imani never thought of calling the police. She worried she could be charged along with Andrew and that Children's Aid Society might get involved.



How can I handle this?
It's too risky to call
Children's Aid.





Women's Experiences of Anti-Black Racism in Colonial Canada

In Canada, Black women and girls have faced systemic oppression rooted in slavery, colonialism, and patriarchy. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade operated from about 1500 to 1867, kidnapping around 13 million African people and bringing them to North America and the Caribbean. The slave trade was deeply patriarchal, with Black men enslaved for physical labor, while Black women were often forced into domestic and childcare work. Black women faced extreme sexual violence, and were exploited to reproduce, bearing more children to work as slaves.

During the American War of Independence (1775-1783) and the War of 1812, promises of freedom and land brought over 3,000 free Black Loyalists to Nova Scotia, but many were refused land or given poor farmland, forcing them into tenant farming, sharecropping, or servitude.

Slavery was abolished in the British Empire, including Canada, in 1834, though it continued until 1865 in the United States. Because of this, around 40,000 Black people came to Canada for the promise of freedom. However, upon arrival, they continued to experience racism, segregation, and systemic oppression.

Racial segregation in schools, legalized under the 1850 Common School Act, perpetuated inequality. Through the tireless advocacy of Black communities, the last segregated school was closed in Canada in 1965.



Structural racism

Structural racism refers to social systems, such as education and healthcare, that disadvantage racialized people while privileging white people. Rooted in slavery and colonialism, it persists through policies and practices that perpetuate inequality and limit opportunities.

Imani's story continued...

The struggles at home started impacting the boys in school. The school social worker eventually called Imani to talk about their behaviours, saying they were being disruptive and aggressive. Imani tried to explain that the family was going through a hard time and dealing with job loss. She said the kids had always done great in school up until now and they just needed a little extra support.

The social worker asked if Imani might want to come in and talk, but Imani said no, she could handle it on her own. She was wary of getting involved with social services, having spent a brief period in foster care herself as a child. Her challenges with Andrew continued.



One day, Imani began experiencing pain in her abdomen which became so bad that she decided to talk to the doctor and ask for some testing and pain medication.

The doctor suggested Imani make some lifestyle changes as there was a possibility her medical symptoms were associated with anxiety and handed her a pamphlet to participate in a free community yoga program. Imani started to get irritated and raised her voice.

She tried to explain that she worked two jobs, ate whatever she could find between shifts, and simply didn't have enough hours in the day to start going to a stress reduction program.





Black Women's Experience of Structural Racism Today

Black women and girls are uniquely harmed by racism, which is not only a historical but an ongoing reality.

Until the [second World War](#), working Black women were restricted to being [domestic servants](#). Black women continue to face [inequality in the workplace](#), including high [unemployment rates](#), [racial bias in hiring](#), and over-representation in [low-paying, precarious jobs](#).

“

I am proud to be carrying on the tradition of being a Black nurse in Canada, but the disproportionate role Black women play in health care as nurses, as healthcare aids and personal support workers is a reflection of our society overall – of the way we see women in general, and Black women specifically. It also is a reflection of the fact that we cannot easily access higher positions. Like, Black women aren't overrepresented as doctors, or surgeons, or even nurse practitioners. As a Black woman there are jobs you just know you won't get – it does not matter how qualified you are.

- Narissa, Montreal. ([Labour Market Information Council, 2023](#)).

Black women and girls also experience unequal treatment in the [medical system](#), where they face [racial biases and stereotyping](#) that impacts their access to and experience of healthcare, leading to [poor health outcomes](#). Black women's health experiences are [neglected in research](#), leading to disparities in health screening and treatment access.

For example, though [global data](#) suggests Black women face higher miscarriage rates and poorer maternal health outcomes, [Canada lacks race-based data](#), prompting [Black healthcare advocates](#) to call for better data collection to understand and address these disparities.

Research has found that Black girls in Canada often face discrimination in schools, where they can encounter [sexual stereotypes and low expectations](#). As with Black boys, they are also less likely to be placed in [gifted programs](#), even when they show the same potential as their peers.

2%

Fewer than [2% of teachers](#) in Canada are Black.

29%

Having a Black teacher has been found to decrease the probability of dropping out of school by [29%](#).

Imani's story continued...

She needed help to manage the pain, so she didn't lose her job. The doctor responded with, "You people are always coming in here and exaggerating so you can get drugs." He told her that menstrual cramps were just a part of being a woman; there was no way it could be as bad as all that.



That weekend she called her oldest friend, Becca, who lived in Nova Scotia. Completely overwhelmed, she told Becca everything that had been going on: the job loss, the suspension at school, the constant abdominal pain, and Andrew's temper and use of physical violence. Becca was horrified and worried. She couldn't believe that Imani had been keeping so much to herself for so long. Becca offered to take the boys during summer break in Nova Scotia and Imani agreed.





“

We were all taken into this classroom and the teacher put this film on. It showcased African people running around half-naked and dancing. I remember after that the White kids were laughing and saying, ‘that’s you. That’s what you look like.’ And I felt really bad. I really hated that.

- Yvonne, Research Participant
([Neeganagwedgin, 2013](#))

The criminal system also disproportionately targets Black women, who are often unfairly profiled or criminalized. A [2017 Ontario Human Rights Commission report](#) shared stories of Black women being stereotyped as sex workers, labeled as "angry" in family court, or unfairly suspected of shoplifting in stores. Black women are overrepresented in Ontario's criminal system, making up 8% of custody admissions despite being only 5% of the Ontario population.

Over-criminalization also impacts experiences of intimate partner violence. 42% of Black women in Canada report experiencing IPV. At the same time, Black women who call the police for help are more likely to be arrested along with their abuser. This leads to lower reported rates of IPV in Black communities and barriers to seeking help and support.

Breaking Barriers in STEM

[Dr. Eugenia Duodu Addy](#) is a Canadian chemist, educator, and CEO of [Visions of Science](#), a non-profit empowering youth in low-income communities to explore **STEM** fields. Growing up in Toronto Community Housing, she overcame systemic barriers with the support of mentors and her determined mother, earning a PhD in medicinal chemistry. Under her leadership, Visions of Science now serves 1,500 students across 29 neighborhoods, fostering confidence and critical thinking in young minds.

An award-winning advocate, Dr. Addy is passionate about equitable STEM access and inspiring the next generation of scientists to claim their place.



Image source: The “Unlikely” Scientist [Dr. Eugenia Addy](#). [TEDxYouth@Toronto](#)

Imani's story continued...

With the children away for the summer Imani finally had the mental space to start making a plan. Imani found a Black female doctor with a history of working with marginalized communities.

The doctor not only prescribed meds to manage pain but also asked Imani if someone was hurting her. Imani was connected with support services to address intimate partner violence, including counselling and housing support.



Imani also started attending a 10-week program offered by anti-violence organization. She began to see patterns of abuse and control in her relationship with Andrew that began well before his job loss and drinking. While she didn't want to end her marriage of nearly ten years, she did want to feel that her children were safe and that she was in control of her life again.





Community Organizing and Collective Advocacy by Black Women

Over the last few decades, there have been strides in advancing [Black women's rights in Canada](#). These successes are a part of a broader movement for racial justice, equality, and the empowerment of marginalized communities. Black communities, including women and girls, are pushing back against negative stereotypes and changing the narrative at the grassroots and system level.

For instance, the way Black women and girls are shown in the media often reinforces harmful stereotypes, like being aggressive, poor, traumatized, or overly sexualized. These portrayals contribute to the unfair treatment they face in education, healthcare, work, and the justice system. Movements like [#BlackGirlMagic](#) on social media celebrate and empower Black women and girls, challenging harmful portrayals. Black girls are also participating in [non-tokenistic community initiatives](#) to challenge stereotypes. [Akeelah's Room](#), an initiative of The Power to Be International, is one example of this. Led by Black girls, the program promotes critical thinking and engagement with the issues that impact them most, creating safe spaces, both in-person and online, where girls can connect, share their stories, and build confidence.

Black Lives Matter united Black communities in solidarity, lifting up the

voices of [Black women](#) in Canada and around the globe, highlighting systemic racism and economic inequity.

In 2020, the Ontario government released its [Anti-Black Racism Strategy](#), which includes policies aimed at eliminating systemic racism in public services, including education, health care, and justice.

This strategy directly address issues that affect Black women, such as educational disparities and healthcare access. While there is still much work to do, progress has been made in addressing systemic racism and [advancing the rights](#) of Black women in Canada. From politics to culture, to social and [legal advocacy](#), Black women, alongside allies, have increasingly asserted their rights, [influenced public policy](#), and [inspired future generations](#) towards further change.



Imani's story completed

Through a loan from her family and friends Imani was able to rent a small, one-bedroom apartment with just enough room for the kids if Imani slept in the living room. Despite the smaller space, it somehow felt larger, and the mood of the whole house improved.



Imani also began to recognize the ways that Andrew had encountered systemic racism in his own life. After they separated, Andrew started seeking his own support. While they didn't stay together, they co-parented and their relationship improved greatly as they both learned and healed.





#BlackGirlMagic

Each **February is Black History Month**. Black women in Canada have long been at the forefront of social change, yet their contributions are often overlooked. We honour both the trailblazers of the past and those advancing this work today.



Carrie Best (1903-2001)

Civil rights activist and notable journalist who founded “[The Clarion](#)”, the first newspaper in Nova Scotia which was owned, operated and published by Black Canadians.



Viola Desmond (1914-1965)

Challenged segregation and racial discrimination in Nova Scotia. Take a look at a [\\$10 bill](#)—you’ll see Viola Desmond’s face, and there’s a powerful reason why.



Anne Cools (1943-)

First Black person to become Canadian senator. Anne is best known for her part in the 1969 “[Sir George Williams Affair](#),” She was also a candidate for the Liberal Party in two federal elections.



Rosemary Brown (1930-2003)

Jamaican-Canadian politician who served as a [member of British Columbia’s legislative assembly for 14 years](#). She advocated for better women’s working conditions.



Dr. Dorothy Roberts (1956-)

A [trailblazing scholar](#) whose work challenges systemic racism and injustice in health law, and society.



Tarana Burke (1973-)

Founder of [#MeToo movement](#), has empowered survivors of sexual violence worldwide, especially women of colour.

