



Enlightened
SOLUTIONS

WORKPLACES

Project Noir

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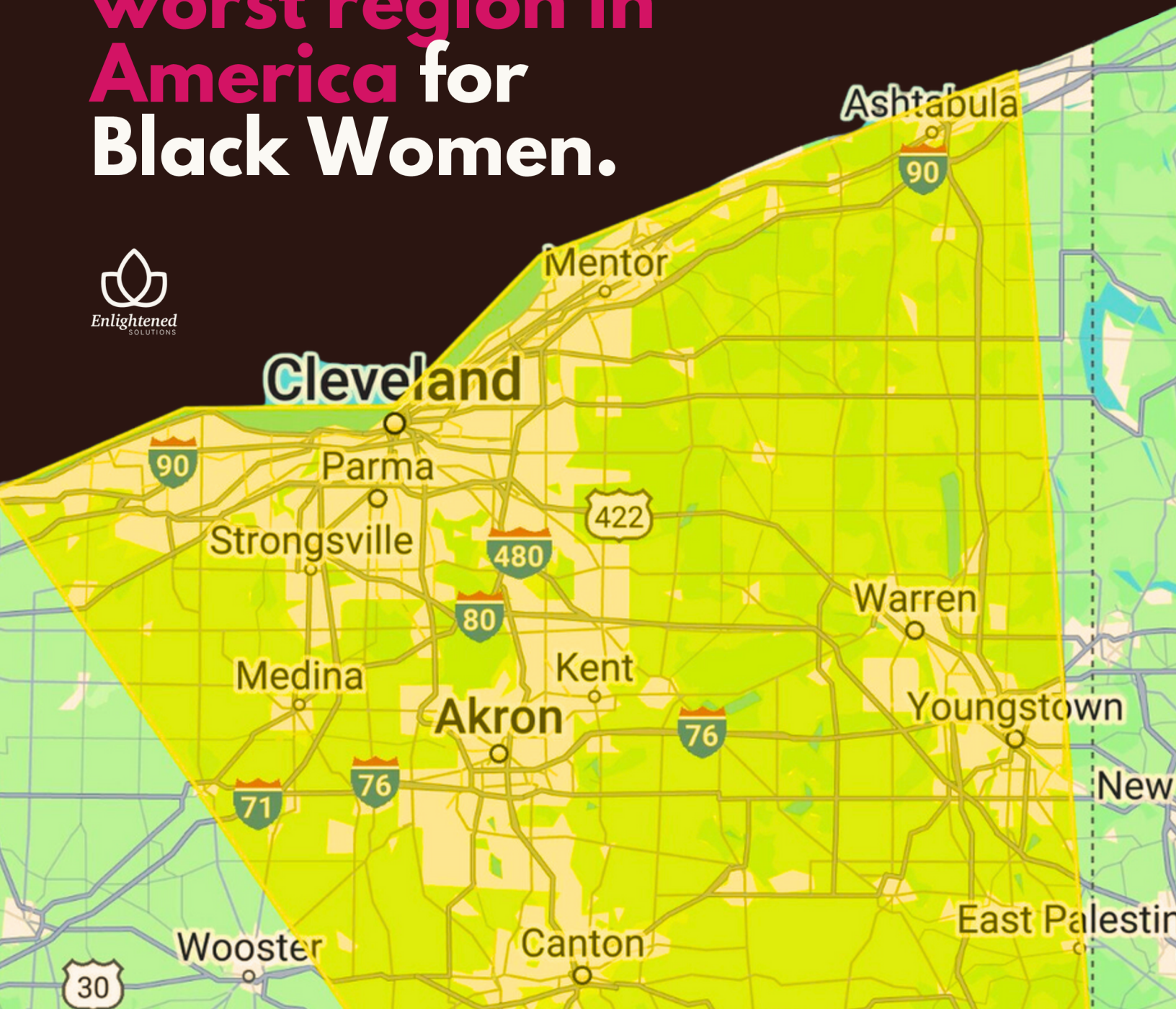
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In 2020, Northeast Ohio was ranked the worst region in America for Black Women.

Has
anything
changed?



For the full Project Noir report, head to projectnoir.org.



WORKPLACES

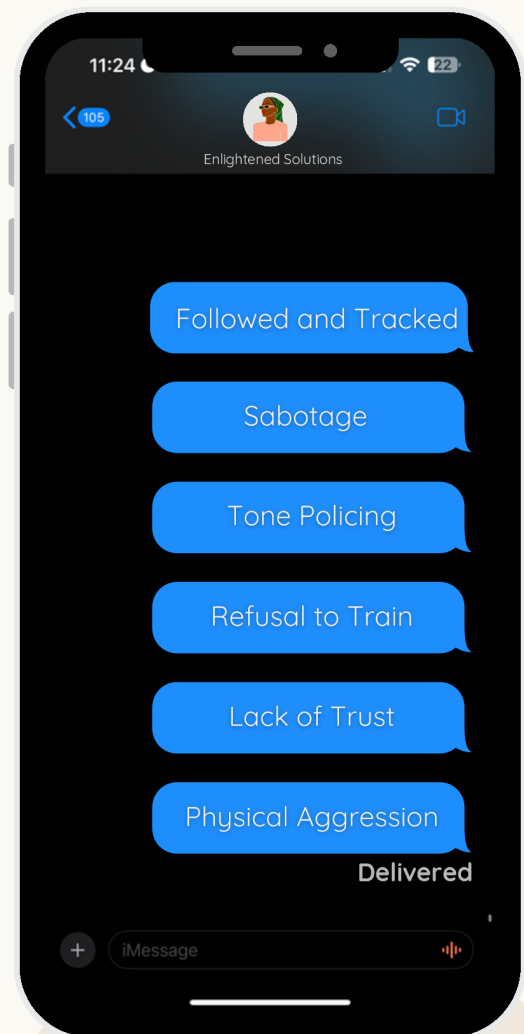
PRIVATE YET PROFESSIONAL PAIN

In Cleveland, where economic statistics often paint a rosy picture of post-COVID growth,¹ the experiences of Black Women in the workplace reveal a starkly different reality. This reality is masked by national tastemakers who publicize a thriving and diverse² Northeast Ohio job market, which often conceals the systemic issues and interpersonal struggles Black Women face throughout their professional careers.

Black Women frequently encounter workplace sabotage, a lack of progressive professional development, and harmful office gossip that undermines confidence and stifles career advancement.³

In addition, they battle offensive imagery and comments from co-workers, and tone policing by peers and clients alike.

Far from being the named beneficiaries of Northeast Ohio's economic success, Black Women are **disproportionately** pushed out of entire industries, reflecting a troubling pattern of exclusion and inequity that lies beneath the surface of the region's incremental economic success.



1. Greater Cleveland Partnership (2024) [All In Plan: 2023 Annual Report](#), [Greater Cleveland's: 2023 Annual Report](#).
2. (2024) [America's best employers for diversity 2023](#), Forbes.
3. Gonzales, M. (2024) [SHRM: Black Employees Discuss Effects of Hostile Work Environments](#).



Workplaces Statistics

79%

of respondents were paid less than others in similar position

71%

of respondents were passed over for a job or promotion

77%

of respondents have been micromanaged, felt as if their work was being unfairly critiqued, or that they were being held to a higher standard than their peers

76%

have been placed on a team with no other Black employees

72%

have been subjected to comments/debate about racism, sexism, or other issues



Workplaces Statistics

68%

of respondents were subjected to inappropriate comments about my features including hair/face/etc.

67%

have been placed on a team with a majority of Black employees when other teams/departments are majority White

51%

of respondents were retaliated against when they objected to inappropriate comments

65%

of respondents were asked to explain racism, sexism, or other political issues/current events

64%

were excluded from important meetings relevant to their job or responsibilities



Workplaces Statistics

50%

of respondents had their work sabotaged, destroyed or otherwise interfered with by coworker(s), management, or other staff

49%

of respondents have been called inappropriate names or slurs by coworkers or clients

33%

of respondents had coworkers displaying offensive imagery (e.g. confederate flags), or controversial materials like Blue Lives Matter stickers, etc.





Workplace Themes

CODED LANGUAGE

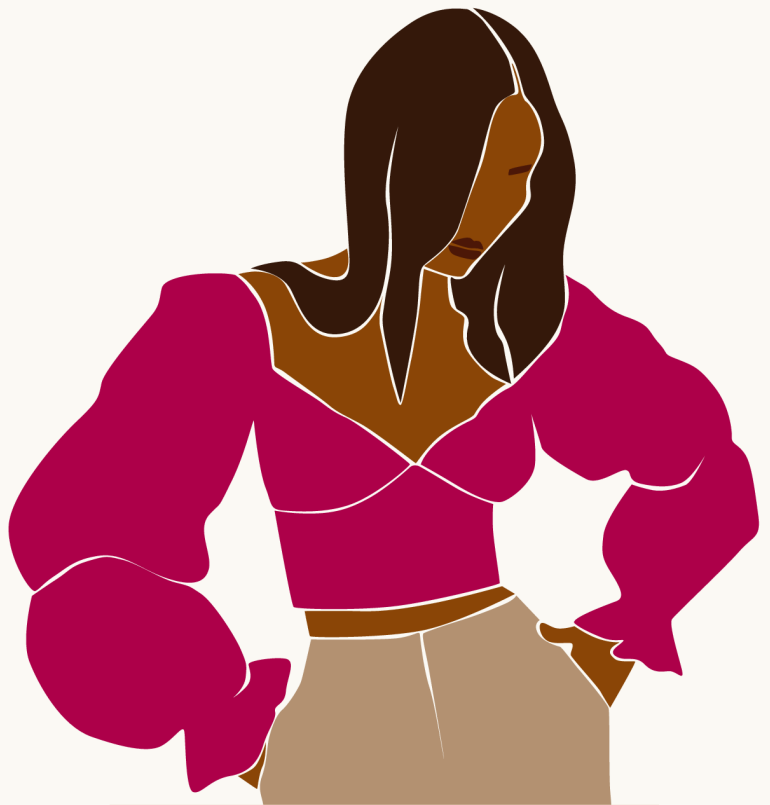
Coded language is a **subtle** yet **insidious** form of racism that remains pervasive in Northeast Ohio workplaces, where it serves as a powerful tool to undermine Black Women. These veiled criticisms—often disguised as innocuous remarks—create a minefield of microaggressions that Black Women must navigate daily.

Phrases like **"you're articulate for a Black Woman"** or **"you're too aggressive"** are not mere observations; they are thinly veiled attempts to diminish Black Women's identities and contributions.

Other terms, such as "unapproachable," "aggressive," or "not a good cultural fit," are frequently weaponized to target Black Women, critiquing their identity rather than their job performance.

The impact of coded language on Black Women in the workplace is profound. It creates a hostile environment where they are constantly scrutinized and judged by standards that are both unfair and unattainable.

This form of discrimination not only erodes confidence and mental health but also severely limits Black Women's opportunities for career advancement.



"I was once told by a co-worker that she was "glad that I was hired so I could help the other staff understand what is **'normal vs abnormal'** behavior for the Black clients."

PROJECT NOIR 2024 PARTICIPANT



Workplace Themes

LIES, GOSSIP + ACCUSATIONS

“I've worked with a non-Black person of color who performs their job inadequately and often tells lies. Despite their age and experience, I've maintained a professional demeanor and avoided confrontation.”

Misogynoir is both a massive societal problem and an internalized practice intra-community-wise, leading to destructive disputes among those of the same race and gender.

Project Noir participants encounter lies about themselves at work and in professional circles; these toxic practices can permanently tarnish reputations, erode intra-group trust, and create an environment of fear and anxiety.

It can lead to career stagnation, resignation, or even expulsion from their roles professionally and socially. This disrupts careers and perpetuates a cycle of exclusion that harms the economic vitality of Northeast Ohio by driving away talent and potential leaders.

The fine line Black Women in Northeast Ohio tread when addressing intra-racial and gender dynamics is complex and not typically discussed outside said intersections.

Black Women overwhelmingly highlight the critical importance of mutual support and solidarity, which serve as vital sources of emotional and professional protection during challenging times.

Recognizing how to address lies and gossip is crucial for building environments where Black Women can flourish professionally.



Workplace Themes

FAILURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

A consistent failure of accountability in the workplace allows discriminatory practices to persist unchecked, creating an environment where Black Women are routinely subjected to mistreatment with little recourse.

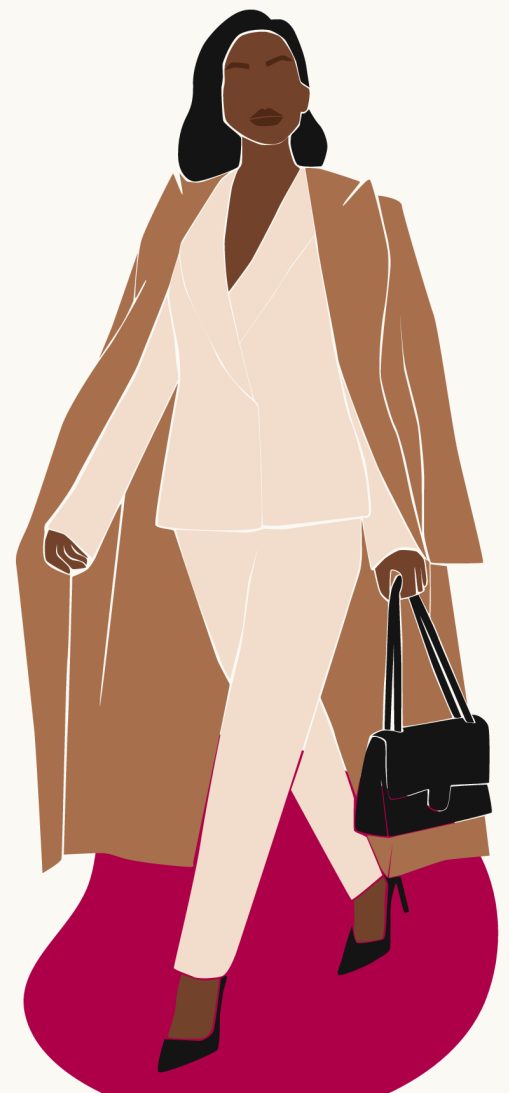
When organizations fail to hold individuals—be it managers, colleagues, or HR departments—responsible for their actions, the burden falls squarely on those most vulnerable - Black Women.

Black Women who report incidents of bias often face retaliation or are ignored, further entrenching a culture of impunity.

The failure to hold perpetrators of discrimination accountable is particularly damaging - it sends a message that business leaders and nonprofit professionals are unwilling and unable to create fair and equitable workplaces ready for Black Women. This will continue to hinder our region's ability to attract and retain highly skilled talent.

The ripple effects of these organizational failures are profound and far-reaching. It weakens not only the morale and well-being of Black Women but also undermines the broader economic foundation of the region.

A lack of accountability not only normalizes injustices but also signals that discrimination is acceptable toward Black Women at work.





Workplace Themes

SEGREGATION + ISOLATION

Black Women in the workplace often contend with social isolation, a multifaceted issue that can manifest as both overt segregation and subtler yet pernicious forms of social and professional exclusion.

This may be evident through physical separation from their peers or through emotional alienation, where they are excluded from both formal and informal professional networks and decision-making processes.

Examples include being purposefully removed from necessary email chains, being disinvented to standing meetings, or having projects reassigned to other team members.⁴

The result is a persistent sense of being “othered,” which undermines Black Women’s professional growth and esteem in the organization.⁵

When Black Women are excluded in the workplace, their unique viewpoints and contributions are sidelined, depriving businesses of the benefits that a truly diverse workforce can offer.

Organizations that neglect to address these critical issues are not only failing their employees but are also **missing significant opportunities for innovation** predicated on a wider lens, inclusive of Black Womanhood.

“It can be difficult to feel **socially integrated into corporate culture** when you’re often seen as an outsider. I’ve never been invited to after-hours social events by my coworkers.”

PROJECT NOIR 2024 PARTICIPANT

4. Tulshyan, Ruchika. “[The Psychological Toll of Being the Only Woman of Color at Work.](#)” Harvard Business Review, 20 Sept. 2022.

5. Delaney, Nora. “[When Black Women Work in Whiter Teams, They May Have Worse Job Outcomes.](#)” Harvard Gazette, 12 Dec. 2023, news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/newsplus/when-black-women-work-in-whiter-teams-they-may-have-worse-job-outcomes



Workplace Themes

UNFAIR + UNREACHABLE STANDARDS

Whether in nonprofit or corporate settings, Black Women in Northeast Ohio are frequently subjected to unreachable expectations, required to work harder, “prove” themselves more and more consistently and achieve exceptional results just to be considered equal to their counterparts.

“ It's really unfair. I'm a Black Woman, and I always feel like I have to be extra careful. If I show any emotion, people think I'm being aggressive or difficult. It's like I can't even have a normal day.

”

Moreover, when Black Women are systematically set up to fail by these unrealistic standards, **it perpetuates harmful stereotypes and justifies their exclusion from leadership roles.**

These unfair expectations not only place immense pressure⁶ on them but also contribute to physical weathering and eventual burnout.⁷

6. [“Supporters say Black academic’s suicide was fueled by the very pressures she studied in her dissertation.”](#) (2024) NBC News.

7. [“Women Leaders of Color Are Exhausted. Philanthropy Needs to Step Up.”](#) (2024). [Philanthropy Today.](#)

“[T]he function, the very serious function of racism is distraction.

It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being.”

Toni Morrison

Author, Northeast Ohio native



Closing Thoughts

RISE OF “DEI HIRE” AS A CODED SLUR FOR BLACK WOMEN

Since the 2021 publication of Project Noir, the rise⁸ of the term ‘DEI Hire’⁹ has become a coded slur aimed at Black Women in nonprofit and corporate spaces, both locally and nationally.¹⁰

This label deliberately reduces Black Women to mere “tokens of diversity,” painfully stripping them of the recognition they deserve as accomplished professionals¹¹ and highly skilled experts in their fields.¹²

The growing criticism¹³ of DEI initiatives highlights a concerning reversal, indicating that the commitments to greater equity made after 2020 are being undone. This shift disproportionately impacts Black Women, as they face heightened obstacles to representation once again.



8. (2021-2024) Google Trends, “[DEI Hire, Ohio](#)” Google Trends.

9. Harmeling, S. (2024) ‘[What Might It Mean When Critics Call Someone A DEI Hire?](#)’, Forbes.

10. (2024) ‘[Kamala Harris, labeled a ‘DEI candidate,’ makes her latest recipient of emerging insult.](#)’ NBC News.

11. [Women in the Workplace, 2024](#). McKinsey + Company.

12. [Women in the Workplace, 2022](#). McKinsey and Company.

13. Rafiel Deon Warfield. “[The Right Wants You to Forget Where DEI Really Started. You Shouldn’t.](#)” Slate Magazine, Slate, Aug. 2024.



THE RISE OF “DEI HIRE” AS A CODED SLUR FOR BLACK WOMEN

This practice burdens Black Women with the ongoing task of asserting and validating their credentials, both internally and externally, in a way that their counterparts are neither required nor expected to do.

This perpetual distraction—constantly having to prove one’s worth, legitimacy, or right to be in a professional space—is a burden uniquely placed on many Black Women in Northeast Ohio.

Just as Morrison described the endless need to dredge up “evidence” of Black excellence, in response to workplace challenges, many Black Women are similarly forced to defend their qualifications against the reductive label of “DEI Hire” by co-workers, hiring managers and professional colleagues alike.

This is a deeply ingrained issue that significantly hinders Black Women’s ability to thrive and succeed in their careers, diverting energy that could otherwise be used to make meaningful contributions in their fields.

It also absolves workplaces of true responsibility, often stemming from societal pressure against the concept of inclusion. This allows many workplaces to rely on superficial, **checkbox anti-racism training and performative statements** rather than systemic change which eliminates malicious actors and revamps toxic workplace culture.



PROJECT NOIR 2024 CALL TO ACTION

Enlightened Solutions believes Northeast Ohio will be a national leader in racial and gender equity — especially for Black Women.

This Call to Action is a starting point, based on Project Noir research and themes. We can transform our region through these ideas and more; yet we need all industries—from elected officials to individuals—to commit and meet the moment.

Join us.

Elected Officials (Local, County, Regional, State and Federal)

Immediate Actions

Partner with Enlightened Solutions to craft longitudinal data-driven policies addressing pay inequity and workplace discrimination.

Draft and support legislative policies addressing pay inequity, workplace discrimination, and healthcare disparities.

Ongoing Advocacy Ideas

Champion accountability measures for hiring practices and pay transparency.

Form a Healthcare Equity Oversight Committee to monitor progress and propose new policies.

Establish a Workplace Equity Certification Program.

Workplaces

Immediate Actions

Collaborate with Enlightened Solutions to analyze workplace discrimination through legal frameworks.

Invest in internal equity programs focused on the needs of Black Women.

Ongoing Advocacy Ideas

Advocate for stronger protections against workplace discrimination.

Establish a Workplace Equity Certification Program offering financial benefits for equitable practices.

Healthcare

Immediate Actions

Implement data collection protocols focused on the health outcomes of Black Women.

Commit publicly to equity goals for Black Women, outlining specific objectives and timelines.

Ongoing Advocacy Ideas

Partner with Enlightened Solutions for longitudinal data-backed research studies on health disparities.

Advocate for funding for hospitals implementing health equity initiatives.

Education

15

Immediate Actions

Create awareness Campaigns to address the targeted gender and racial challenges faced by Black Women and girls.

Ongoing Advocacy Ideas

Establish education equity task forces involving faculty, students, and external experts.

Advocate for the expansion of mental health services tailored to Black Women and girls.

Establish institution-wide task forces dedicated to addressing race and gender-based disparities by location.

Philanthropy and Community Groups

Immediate Actions

Support Project Noir fundraising for longitudinal, data-driven research and equity initiatives.

Engage with Enlightened Solutions to align efforts with broader philanthropic trends.

Ongoing Advocacy Ideas

Promote Project Noir 2024 through local and national platforms.

Collaborate with Enlightened Solutions on events discussing outcomes of Project Noir 2024 and next steps by industry.

Individuals

Immediate Actions

Promote and spotlight Project Noir 2024 themes.

Post and tag @WorkEnlightened on social media and use the hashtag #ProjectNoirCLE to connect with others.

Ongoing Advocacy Ideas

Co-host advocacy events with Enlightened Solutions to explore key themes.

Advocate for policy changes addressing disparities in workplaces, healthcare, and education.

Donate to Enlightened Solutions via Project Noir research to further their impact.

Media

Immediate Actions

Launch dedicated features focusing on the experiences of Black Women in Northeast Ohio.

Partner with community organizations to co-produce accurate, impactful content.

Ongoing Advocacy Ideas

Diversify newsrooms to authentically reflect community challenges and successes.

Facilitate public discussions featuring Black Women leaders and experts.





Listen to Project Noir Podcast Clips

Find
"Project Noir by Enlightened Solutions"
on these podcast platforms:



SPOTIFY



RSS



APPLE

Featuring the **anonymous, re-recorded lived experiences of Project Noir 2024 participants**. Each short podcast clip offers a creative way for listeners to engage with the Project Noir 2024 report.

We want to make sure that each experience is not reduced to mere statistics; each vignette captures the emotional and personal nuances that statistics alone cannot convey.

#ProjectNoirCLe





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