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SOLUTIONS

Project Noir

Written By
Chinenye Nkemere
Bethany Studenic

Graphic Design
Alyissa Sagoes

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Enlightened SOLUTIONS

Project Noir 2024

PROJECT NOIR 2024

Executive Summary

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

Has anything changed?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE + OBEJECTIVES

The purpose of Project Noir 2024 is to amplify the voices of Black Women in Northeast Ohio.

Enlightened Solutions conducted a phenomenological survey and report to determine whether the Cleveland-Lorain-Youngstown-Akron rural, suburban and metropolitan areas remain the "worst" region in America for Black Women.

By integrating lived qualitative vignettes with quantitative data, we aim to create actionable interventions based on the experiences of Black Women throughout Northeast Ohio.

Enlightened Solutions believes that because Northeast Ohio remains the most proximate to race and gender-based inequities, our region is the most apt to solve and export these solutions nationwide.

Project Noir is not designed to prove or disprove the existence of disparities for Black Women, nor to unfairly criticize the region.

We live here. We love Northeast Ohio.

However, we resolve to provide a research-based framework for public, private, governmental, and nonprofit organizations to improve the lived experiences of Black Women—who have long been leaders, colleagues, neighbors, matriarchs, and experts—yet continue to face systemic racism and misogyny.

Project Noir 2024 is organized into four key areas of discussion: Workplaces, Healthcare, and Education, aligning with our inaugural research and an additional 2024 Call to Action.

FINDINGS + INSIGHTS

For Project Noir 2024, we enhanced survey methodology and questions to gather more precise, timely, and highly targeted data.

As a result, year-over-year comparisons should be made with caution, emphasizing significant trends rather than minor fluctuations. While most categories in Project Noir 2024 showed only slight changes compared to Project Noir 2020, a few areas revealed more significant shifts.

For example, we observed a 37% increase in respondents reporting experiences of unfair grading in the Education category. In Healthcare, weight-related comments from practitioners decreased substantially, likely due to more precise question-wording.

Additionally, there was a 10% decline in reports of medical professionals pressuring Black Women to go on birth control. However, it's unclear if this is related to the legal impact of the Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade and the broader effects on protecting birth control access, accessing fertility treatments and more broadly general body autonomy.

Tackling gender and anti-Black racism-based issues requires interventions across intergovernmental, corporate, non-profit, social advocacy, cultural, educational, and healthcare sectors on a regional scale.

Collaboration and long-term strategic commitments are essential to addressing microaggressions and creating inclusive systems for Black Women.

Despite some progress, efforts to confront misogynoir—the unique intersection of racism and sexism faced by Black Women—have been sidelined both in our region and nationwide.

Enlightened Solutions firmly asserts that without bold, long-term financial investment and prioritization, these deeply ingrained practices will not only persist but **actively impede** our region's potential for 21st-century economic growth.
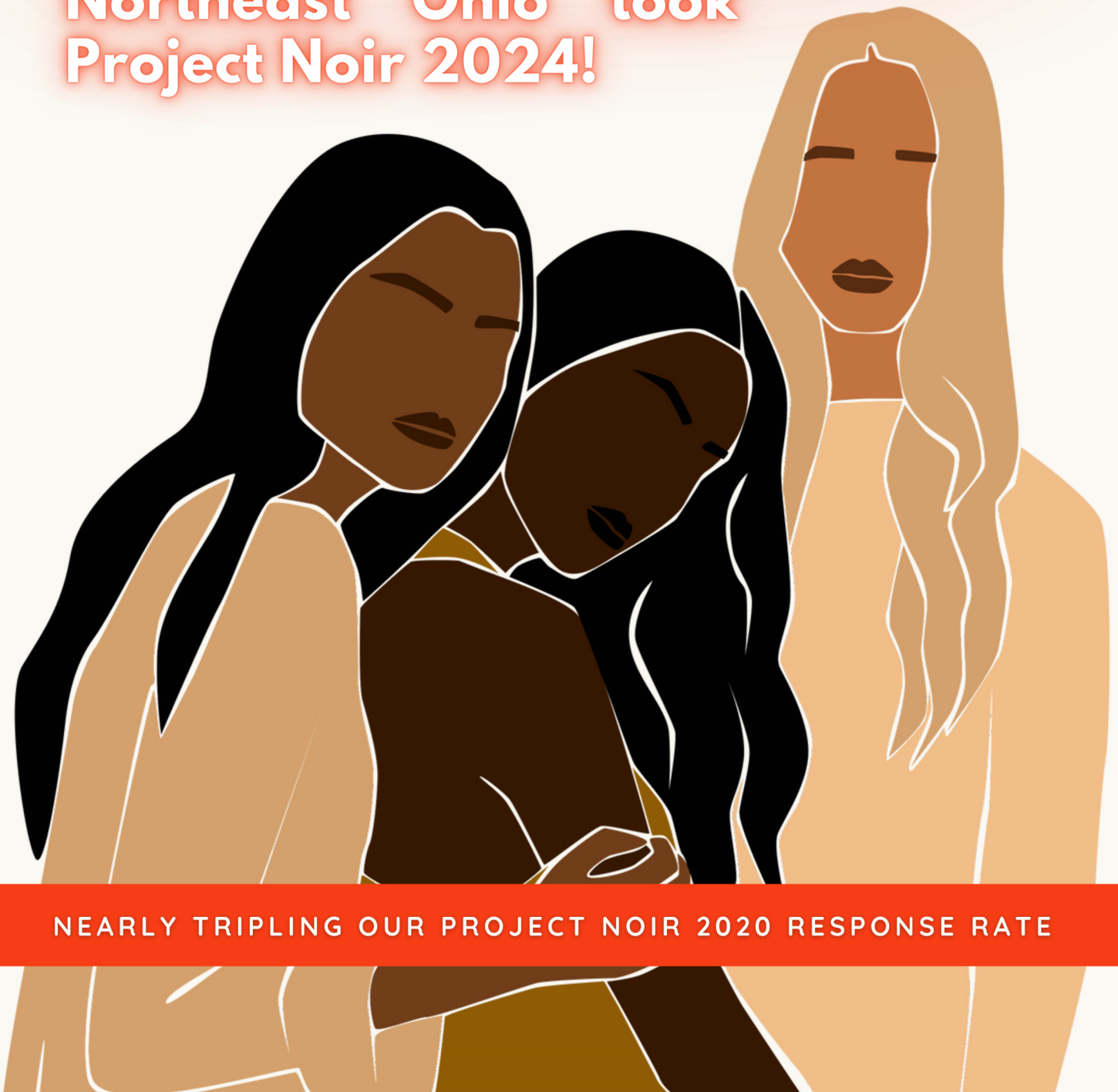
CALL TO ACTION

Enlightened Solutions believes Northeast Ohio will be a **national leader in racial and gender equity** — especially for Black Women, if local leaders invest.

Find our "Call to Action" recommendations online: Project Noir 2024: Call to Action.

1,324

Black Women across Northeast Ohio took Project Noir 2024!

OUR METHODOLOGY

The Project Noir survey was designed to assess the interpersonal tactics and behaviors that contribute to systemic gender and race-based inequalities, with a methodology that centers the lived experiences of Black Women.

Our framework prioritizes community input, using feedback analysis and consistent iteration to shape and refine new questions.

We implement this approach in several ways: [4]

Microaggression Scale: We ask Black Women in Northeast Ohio about explicit microaggressions to examine the prevalence of specific exclusionary behaviors.

Qualitative Feedback: We ask open-ended questions about our respondents' experiences within each category and use their feedback to -

> **Provide Insight into Existing Microaggressions**: We use open-ended feedback to highlight the real-life impact of specific microaggressions on Black Women, providing concrete examples of how these behaviors manifest in everyday situations.

> **Identify New Themes**: We categorize key themes and identify clusters of stories that reflect similar experiences. The clusters with the highest frequency are reported as community-identified themes. These themes are then incorporated into our Microaggression Scale in subsequent surveys, ensuring that it is shaped and informed by direct community input.

Survey Distribution: Between February and April 2024, we distributed the Project Noir 2024 survey through a fully digital outreach strategy, supplemented by in-person survey and advocacy events.

Response: A remarkable **1,324 Black Women** from rural, suburban and metropolitan areas—including **Cleveland**, **Lorain**, **Youngstown**, and **Akron**—took Project Noir 2024 with an impressive 85% participant completion rate.

Workplaces

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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 diverse[2] 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.
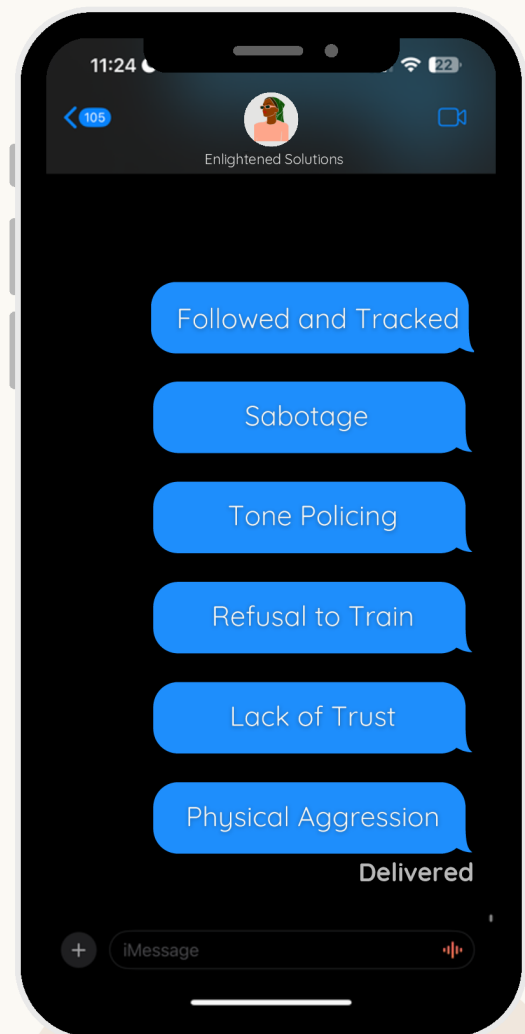
1. Greater Cleveland Partnership (2024) All In Plan: 2023 Annual Report, Greater Cleveland's: 2023 Annual Report.

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.
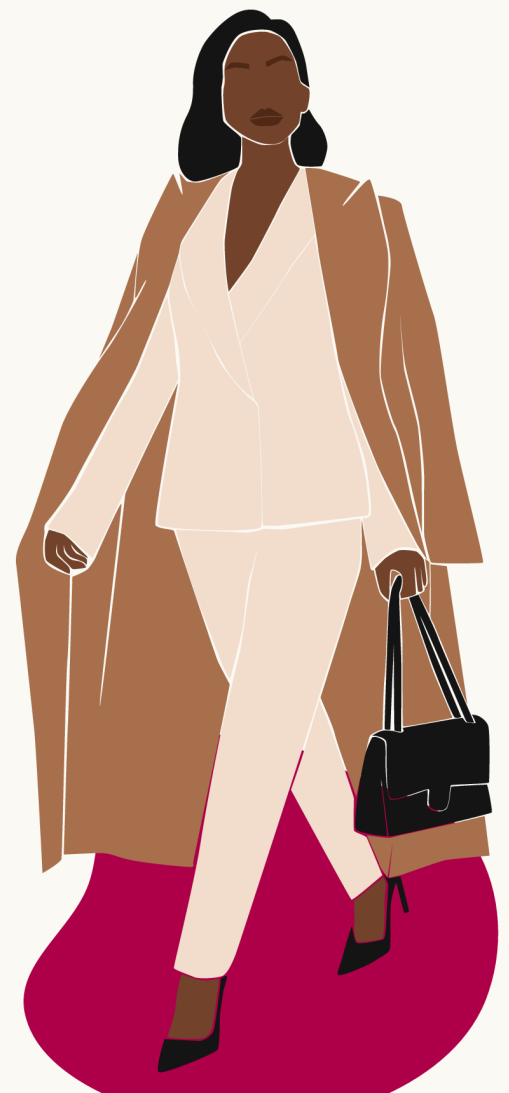
Workplace Themes

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 disinvited 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 pressure[6] on them but also contribute to physical weathering and eventual burnout.[7]

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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 rise[8] 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 professionals[11] and highly skilled experts in their fields.[12]

The growing criticism[13] 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.

Healthcare

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HEALTHCARE

GLOBAL ESTEEM. PERSISTENT DISPARITIES.

Despite our region's stellar global healthcare and healthcare innovation reputation,[14] we must still underscore a troubling reality: health disparities continue to adversely affect Black Women and families seeking care at our local institutions.

And to preempt, these health disparities are not solely related to poverty.

Black Women of means, class, and education[15] in Northeast Ohio experience some of the worst healthcare outcomes in the nation when being treated in traditional healthcare systems.

Northeast Oho healthcare systems hyper-focus on weight, sexuality and reproduction, often neglecting other chronic or critical needs.

This narrow approach reinforces negative stereotypes and undermines comprehensive care, reflecting a broader failure to address the unique, intersectional needs of Black Women.

Black Women need Black healthcare providers. Black families need Black healthcare providers.[16]

How are leaders in healthcare business, recruitment, and educational institutions recruiting to Northeast Ohio actively and transparently investing in a comprehensive strategy?

Specifically, how are they allocating financial resources to educate, recruit, and retain Black medical providers, birth workers and advocates across diverse specialties into the region?

14. "Cleveland Industries | Health Care." This Is Cleveland, This is Cleveland, 2024.

15. Fishman, S. H., Hummer, R. A., Sierra, G., Hargrove, T., Powers, D. A., + Rogers, R. G. (2021). Race/ethnicity, maternal educational attainment, and infant mortality in the United States. Biodemography and Social Biology, 66(1), 1–26.

16. For the Fiscal Year July 2023 to May 2024, Village of Healing Center achieved 2,561 visits, doubling the total visits from the previous year. Additionally, 95% of mothers receiving care at the Village of Healing Center delivered at 37 weeks gestation or later. | Village of Healing Center, Fiscal Year Report (July 2023 to May 2024)

Healthcare Statistics

56%
of respondents have been spoken down to about their symptoms or health

55%
of respondents said they felt uncomfortable with a healthcare provider

40%
of respondents said the Healthcare staff's body language made them uncomfortable (refused to shake their hand, will not make eye contact)

42%
of respondents were made to wait for very long times while other patients with less severe issues are seen

41%
of respondents were told to lose weight or change their diet/exercise routine, when this is unrelated to the reason they came in (e.x. came in for an eye exam and told they need to lose weight)

Healthcare Statistics

35%
of respondents were told that their health issues are in their head or not real

35%
of respondents' healthcare provider refused to provide treatment or testing

29%
of respondents were given bad news without compassion or kindness (e.g. told they are very sick and not given any support or treatment options, told to stop crying)

30%
of respondents have been subjected to painful procedures without enough pain management

28%
of respondents had been subjected to inappropriate comments about their sex life (for example, Assuming their children have different fathers, or that they are unmarried)

Healthcare Statistics

10%
of respondents had procedures performed without their explicit consent or going beyond their given consent

13%
of respondents had Healthcare staff who used inappropriate language like "baby daddy"

27%
of respondents were pressured to get on birth control or other family planning tools

7%
of respondents were subjected to unnecessary breast exams

10%
of respondents were subjected to unnecessary pelvic exams

Healthcare Themes

BEDSIDE MANNER + OVERT CALLOUSNESS

One of the most ubiquitous issues faced by Black Women seeking healthcare in Northeast Ohio is the lack of adequate bedside manners among medical professionals.

This manifests as dismissive attitudes toward patient questions and concerns or a profound lack of empathy. Black Women also encounter interactions where concerns are minimized or outright disregarded.

The emotional toll of dehumanizing interactions with medical professionals can lead to a **reluctance to pursue necessary medical attention**, ultimately compounding chronic or critical health outcomes for Black Women across Northeast Ohio.

Cleveland's Black maternal healthcare crisis is marked by alarmingly high rates of infant and maternal morbidity as well as reduced life expectancy on Cleveland's East Side neighborhoods.[17] These statistics ring true across Northeast Ohio in Lorain County, Stark County, Summit County and Trumbull County.[18]

"A nurse at the hospital made me feel incredibly uncomfortable during a pelvic ultrasound. **Her bedside manner was awful**, and she treated me like I was just a practice dummy rather than a human being.

I saw later that the hospital has terrible reviews, but I had already scheduled my appointment there."

PROJECT NOIR 2024 PARTICIPANT

17. Oprea, Mark. "Here Are the Best and Worst Northeast Ohio Neighborhoods and Suburbs for Life Expectancy." Cleveland Scene, Cleveland Scene, Sept. 2024

18. Tejada-Vera B, Bastian B, Arias E, Escobedo LA., Salant B, Life Expectancy Estimates by U.S. Census Tract, 2010-2015. National Center for Health Statistics. 2020.

Healthcare Themes

BARRIERS TO BODY AUTONOMY

The marriage of discriminatory healthcare practices and rapidly changing state and federal legal restrictions extends to limiting access to essential services such as prenatal and pregnancy management, and abortion healthcare for Black Women in and around Northeast Ohio.

Black Women face layered obstacles including financial and cultural barriers[19] to fertility treatments [20] and a higher rate of surgical interventions for fibroid management [21] compared to non-Black Women.

Biases around sexual behavior and reproductive choices lead healthcare providers to question the competence and decisions of Black Women concerning fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting.

These challenges are frequently worsened by negative stereotypes held by insurance companies, medical professionals, and hospital administrators.

America has seen the impact of such limitations as fatal and profoundly affecting Black families across the country.[22]

All biases profoundly undermine Black Women's efforts to exercise reproductive body autonomy, often limiting access to necessary, less expensive and invasive care.

19. Goddard, Isabel, and Carolina Aragão. "A Growing Share of Americans Say They've Had Fertility Treatments or Know Someone Who Has." Pew Research Center, 14 Sept. 2023.

20. Mallenbaum, Carly. "What It Will Take to Eliminate Disparities in Fertility Care for Black Women." Axios, 2023.

21. "The health disparities of uterine fibroid tumors for African American women: a public health issue"
Eltoukhi, Heba M. et al. American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology, Volume 210, Issue 3, 194 - 199

22. Surana, Kavitha. "Abortion Bans Have Delayed Emergency Medical Care. In Georgia, Experts Say This Mother's Death Was Preventable."

Healthcare Themes

ANTI-BLACK STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes contribute significantly to a hostile healthcare environment for Black Women, creating a cycle of disrespect and inequity that pervades every interaction within the healthcare system.

From the moment Black Women enter traditional healthcare facilities in Northeast Ohio, they often face stereotypes that compromise their dignity and quality of care.

This can start with interactions with security guards and receptionists, and extend to highly specialized providers who may set a negative tone and project biases throughout the visit.

Such biases continue with medical professionals who, through the lens of harmful stereotypes, may exhibit discriminatory treatment and a lack of respect for their genuine concerns.

The impact of these stereotypes is evident not only in individual interactions but also in the broader healthcare experience.

This systemic issue exacerbates existing health disparities, making it more challenging for Black Women to receive the comprehensive and respectful care they need.

"I overheard healthcare staff making derogatory comments about Medicaid, that implied patients with this insurance were 'less valuable' or 'less important' than those with other types of insurance or paying patients."

PROJECT NOIR 2024 PARTICIPANT

Healthcare Themes

OVER SEXUALIZATION

Black Women and girls, regardless of experiences or specific health concerns, often face unwanted sexualized attention or assumptions about their sexual behavior.

The over-sexualization of Black Women in healthcare settings [23] is a deeply ingrained issue, illustrating the historical prevalence of racism and misogyny, particularly through the lens of the "Jezebel" stereotype. [24]

This abhorrent stereotype depicts Black Women as "hypersexual" and "overly desirous," perpetuating harmful assumptions that their bodies are primarily objects of sexual gratification rather than human beings with genuine healthcare needs.

This objectification breaches professional boundaries and creates a hostile and uncomfortable environment.

For young Black Women and girls, over sexualization during healthcare appointments can be profoundly damaging, affecting their willingness to seek necessary care during adolescence.

"A white male gynecologist made comments about my **sexual activity with my husband** while he was actively doing my Pap smear.

It was extremely uncomfortable, and I felt incredibly **vulnerable** and **embarrassed**."

PROJECT NOIR 2024 PARTICIPANT

23. Chambers Jerald, Morgan. "Respectable Women: Exploring the Influence of the Jezebel Stereotype on Black Women's Sexual Well-Being." 2018.

24. Pilgrim, David. "The Jezebel Stereotype - Anti-Black Imagery - Jim Crow Museum." Jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu, 2012, jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/jezebel/index.htm

Closing Thoughts

PAIN MANAGEMENT + IMPORTANCE OF BLACK PROVIDERS

Black Women are disproportionately affected by chronic pain on a physical level,[25] yet they frequently encounter substantial obstacles in obtaining high-quality and effective pain management within traditional healthcare systems.

This critical issue is characterized by the frequent underestimation and undertreatment of pain experienced by Black patients, highlighting broader systemic gender and racial biases and inequities in traditional healthcare systems.

These disparities are the result of individual decisions made by medical providers and teams of healthcare decision-makers, **reflecting a culmination of entrenched racial and gender biases within healthcare systems**.[26]

The need for culturally competent care is paramount, and Black healthcare providers, both within traditional healthcare institutions and in transformative clinics play a crucial role in addressing these issues.

Black providers and support advocates who understand the unique experiences and challenges faced by Black Women are better equipped to offer empathetic, patient-centered care that addresses not only clinical needs but also the cultural and emotional well-being of their patients. [27]

Clinics and organizations operating outside traditional healthcare models often emphasize this kind of care, advocating for patients in ways that prioritize their individual needs while still providing premium care with exceptional metrics.

25. Ndao-Brumblay, S Khady, and Carmen R Green. "Racial differences in the physical and psychosocial health among black and white women with chronic pain." Journal of the National Medical Association vol. 97,10 (2005): 1369-77.

26. Mateo, Camila, et al. "The Sociopolitical Context of the Unequal Treatment Report: Then and Now." The Urban Institute, 2024.

27. Snyder JE, Upton RD, Hassett TC, Lee H, Nouri Z, Dill M. "Black Representation in the Primary Care Physician Workforce and Its Association With Population Life Expectancy and Mortality Rates in the US." JAMA Netw Open. 2023.

Education

EDUCATION

EDUCATED, BUT AT WHAT COST?

"If you educate a man, you educate an individual; but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation." [28]

Education is often hailed as a cornerstone of American meritocracy - with hard work, a bit of luck, and natural talent. For Black Women, particularly those who have matriculated through college and post-graduate programs, formal education provides the opportunity for self-actualization, pathways to professional success and socio-economic upward mobility.

However, this promise remains a myth since the barrier for entry is written at the intersections of race and gender for many Black Women and girls across Northeast Ohio.

Many encounter severe and inflexible impediments, seen and unseen. Isolation is a recurring theme, with Black Women often excluded from informal networks of support and career navigation.

Many Black Women and girls are subtly pushed into lower-paying and less prestigious specialties due to a lack of imagination by educators and administrators.

One of the most significant issues affecting Black Women in education is inescapable microaggressions from educators and peers alike.

28. Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir-Aggrey

Education Statistics

63%

of respondents said they felt that they (or their close family) needed to work harder to get the same grades as fellow students"

54%

of respondents said they were excluded or felt excluded from educational advancement opportunities, including professional development"

53%

of respondents felt their grades did not fairly represent the quality of their work (for them or their children)"

49%

of respondents were "Steered into entry-level careers rather than urged to chase their passion (i.e. they wanted to be a dentist but were told to be dental assistant)"

Education Statistics

46%
of respondents were discouraged in certain classes like math or science

46%
of respondents were called angry, aggressive, problematic, or otherwise threatening (for them or their children)"

44%
of respondents were expected to educate others on their experience (e.g. professor asking them to explain race dynamics)"

43%
used textbooks or other learning materials that tell a biased viewpoint (using terms like "transport" instead of "enslavement")

Education Statistics

41%

of respondents have been subjected to comments about hairstyle or other features by educational professionals (for them or their children)"

35%

of respondents had educational professionals refuse to answer questions or call on their raised hand in class when attempting to participate in class

33%

of respondents were excluded from informal gatherings like study groups with classmates, lunches with professors, or additional outings etc

30%

of respondents have been subjected to comments about how they (or close family including child) dress by educational professionals"

Education Statistics

29%

of respondents were denied extensions, re-submissions, bathroom breaks, grace periods, or other informal benefits afforded to others

22%

of respondents had a teacher or professor refuse tutoring or additional support (for them or their children)

19%

of respondents were stopped by police or security inside an educational institution (for them or their children)"

11%

Regarding a child or children in their care, respondents have been threatened that educational providers would call child services or other authorities"

Education Themes

DISCOURAGEMENT

> **"My startup business was belittled and called ridiculous by my professor in front of my peers at a college - which led me to shelve it immediately."**

Discouraging Black Women and girls through the biased limitations imposed by educators and institutions stifles the potential of Northeast Ohio, making it the responsibility of academic institutions to root out harmful individuals and practices.

Regularly facing negative academic reinforcement erodes self-esteem, diminishes academic ambitions, and outright dismisses potential.

Discouraging Black Women and girls through the biased limitations imposed by educators and institutions stifles the potential of Northeast Ohio, making it the responsibility of academic institutions to root out harmful individuals and practices.

Educators, whether consciously or unconsciously, often distort the quality and value of instruction and feedback provided to Black Women and girls.

The absence of support and validation from educators dampens passion for life-long learning and also decreases earning potential for Black Women and girls — ultimately contributing to regional economic instability within our region.

> "A professor in college told me I **wasn't good enough** to be an engineer."
>
> PROJECT NOIR 2024 PARTICIPANT

Education Themes

ISOLATION

Isolation is a hurdle for Black Women and girls in educational settings, in both formal and informal ways. They frequently encounter exclusion from peer and expert-created networks and opportunities that are essential for academic and professional advancement. In addition, Black Women often find themselves excluded from mentorship opportunities and critical decision-making circles.

This isolation extends to being denied access to exclusive study groups, industry mixers, and informal social circles that provide key resources and support.

This exclusion can significantly limit access to career guidance, and peer support - all of which are vital for progression. The resulting feelings of alienation hinder Black Women's ability to fully engage with and benefit from the fullness of their educational experiences.

"In grad school, I was chastised for **daring to disagree with the professor** in front of my peers.

When I persisted, the discussion was abruptly ended by the professor, and we were ordered to take a break."

PROJECT NOIR 2024 PARTICIPANT

"As a Black Woman, I've often been made to feel **invisible in the classroom**, as if my thoughts and perspectives don't matter."

PROJECT NOIR 2024 PARTICIPANT

Education Themes

EXPECTATION TO EDUCATE OTHERS

Black Women and girls frequently encounter an unspoken expectation to educate their peers and educators on complex gender and racial issues, often on the spot and without proper psychological support.

This burden becomes especially challenging when they are asked to provide up-to-date insights in environments where their experiences are subject to scrutiny, dismissal, or outright questioning.

The expectation to **always be the "expert"** hinders Black Women and girls from fully concentrating on their own academic goals.

Lastly, the burden of educating others can lead to Black female experiences being publicly 'impeached' by both classmates and educators alike.

11:24

Project Noir 2024 Participant

I had to explain to my classroom of White peers what it meant to be a double minority - followed immediately by questions about 'Black History Month' and 'BET.'

A teacher asked me about my experience in 'the hood' in a college Economics class.

Delivered

iMessage

Education Themes

DRESS "CODES" + SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Dress codes are often enforced more strictly and subjectively on Black Women and girls compared to their peers. [29]

This selective enforcement, often justified as maintaining educational professionalism, disproportionately targets Black Women and girls.

Black Women and girls are often subjected to a higher level of scrutiny regarding their attire, which can be used as a tool for racial profiling and sexual harassment.

This double standard creates a hostile and uncomfortable environment, detracting from their educational experience and imposing dangerous barriers to personal, mental health and academic success.

29. "DRESS CODED: Black Girls, Bodies, and Bias in D.C. Schools."
National Women's Law Center, 24 Apr. 2018.

"During college, I had a professor who routinely sexually harassed me and asked me out on dates during class and while I was their student."

Education Themes

ACADEMIC STEERING

One of the most insidious challenges facing Black Women and girls in Cleveland's educational system is the phenomenon of academic steering.

As explored in <u>Project Noir 2020</u>,[30] **educational steering involves subtle, yet pervasive, attempts to divert Black Women and girls from their chosen academic or career pathways, driven by both misogynistic and racist assumptions.**

From an early age, Black girls may find themselves pressured by counselors and educators to pursue traditionally "pink-collar" feminine-coded,[31] lower-paying professions. Educational steering confines professional horizons and perpetuates a cycle of underrepresentation in high-paying and influential 21st-century industries.

"When I was in high school, my Honors Geometry teacher came up to my desk and told me I'd be "perfect" as a preschool teacher.

He tried to discourage me from pursuing my plans to become a physician or engineer."

30. Nkemere, Chinenye, and Studenic, Bethany. "<u>Project Noir 2020</u>" Enlightened Solutions, 2021.

31. "<u>Pink-Collar Worker</u>." Wikipedia.

Closing Thoughts

BRAIN DRAIN + COMPETITION CREATION

Undereducating Black Women and girls in Northeast Ohio due to bias jeopardizes broader economic stability of the entire state of Ohio — period.

When race and gender-based barriers prevent Black Women and girls from reaching their full educational potential, it not only hinders their entry into prestigious fields but also deprives Northeast Ohio of future high earners, innovation, and economic power.

Discouragement is a major Project Noir 2024 theme, we believe will exacerbate Northeast Ohio's brain drain,[32] as talented Black Women (and families) are driven to seek opportunities elsewhere.[33]

This deprives Ohio of talent, creative business ventures, and a viable tax base in major urban-suburban areas like Youngstown,[34] and Akron.[35]

If limited opportunities persist, Black Women may be compelled to move to Southern,[36] sunbelt regions or coastal cities where their intersections and skills are more valued, social and romantic prospects are more robust, and career advancement is more transparent.

32. Brain Drain: refers to the movement of highly skilled or educated individuals from a region in search of better career opportunities, higher wages, or improved living conditions. This phenomenon can significantly impact the economic and social development of the area left behind.

33. Gabriel, Margo. "These Black Women Moved to Europe for a Better Life — Did They Find It?" 4 Nov. 2022.

34. McCormack, Richard. "The Social Costs of Deindustrialization." YSU, 5 May 2020.

35. Akron, Ohio. United States Census Bureau, 2020.

36. Frey, William H. "A 'New Great Migration' Is Bringing Black Americans back to the South." Brookings, 12 Sept. 2022.

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	Ongoing Advocacy Ideas
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.	**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	Ongoing Advocacy Ideas
Collaborate with Enlightened Solutions to analyze workplace discrimination through legal frameworks. **Invest in internal equity programs** focused on the needs of Black Women.	**Advocate** for stronger protections against workplace discrimination. **Establish** a Workplace Equity Certification Program offering financial benefits for equitable practices.
Healthcare	
Immediate Actions	Ongoing Advocacy Ideas
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.	**Partner with Enlightened Solutions** for longitudinal data-backed research studies on health disparities. **Advocate** for funding for hospitals implementing health equity initiatives.

HELLO@ENLIGHTENED-SOLUTIONS.COM
PROJECTNOIRORG.COM/CALLTOACTION

Education

Immediate Actions	Ongoing Advocacy Ideas
Create awareness Campaigns to address the targeted gender and racial challenges faced by Black Women and girls.	**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	Ongoing Advocacy Ideas
Support Project Noir fundraising for longitudinal, data-driven research and equity initiatives. **Engage with Enlightened Solutions** to align efforts with broader philanthropic trends.	**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	Ongoing Advocacy Ideas
Promote and spotlight Project Noir 2024 themes. **Post** and tag @WorkEnlightened on social media and use the hashtag #ProjectNoirCLE to connect with others.	**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	Ongoing Advocacy Ideas
Launch dedicated features focusing on the experiences of Black Women in Northeast Ohio. **Partner with community organizations** to co-produce accurate, impactful content.	**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

Acknowledgements

![Enlightened Solutions logo]

TO THE ENLIGHTENED SOLUTIONS BOARD OF DIRECTORS

We want to extend our boundless gratitude for your unwavering commitment to Enlightened Solutions as an organization and Project Noir as our banner research initiative.

We are profoundly grateful for your time, talent, ties, and treasures. All of these have empowered our organization to make significant progress across Northeast Ohio - driving systems change and advancing research focused on the lived experiences of Black Women.

This energy has enabled us to deepen and create solutions that will create a lasting impact for the betterment of our region.

We are incredibly excited about the future and look forward to our continued partnerships, brainstorms, and heart-centered work in Cleveland and across the nation.

In Solidarity,

Chinenye Nkemere and *Bethany Studenic*

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hello@enlightened-solutions.com

projectnoircle.org