



“Dear Disabled Black Women...”
A Community-Based Research Report (Canada)

An accompaniment to the documentary

Author: Ingrid Palmer

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Executive Summary

Black women with disabilities in Canada encounter overlapping racism, ableism, and sexism in the workplace, especially when disabilities are invisible or episodic. While laws already require barrier removal and equitable access, gaps remain in implementation, resourcing, and power-sharing.

This report pairs lived evidence from the documentary *Dear Black Disabled Women...* with a practical workplace agenda. It centres Black disabled women not only as workers, but as leaders, decision-makers, and experts in designing access.

Many Black disabled women are vocal because advocacy has always been a component of our survival. But being vocal isn't the same as being heard. Who is being resourced to speak and whose voices are being acted upon? Black women with disabilities continue to fight to represent themselves at decision-making tables.

For too long Black women living and working with disabilities have had our stories told through other people's voices that still end up skewing away from the core truths of our realities.

This film seeks to change that.

7 Black women share their experiences and perspectives on working with disability in Canada. They range in age, cultural background, class, orientation, and of course, disability.

Black women with disabilities in Canada encounter overlapping racism, ableism, and sexism at work; especially when disabilities are invisible or episodic. Anti-



queer oppression may be an additional layer of discrimination if a queer or non-binary identity is also present. Transwomen also face disproportional adversity; however, no transwoman participated in this documentary.

The gender factor is extremely relevant: sexism shapes who gets heard, and who's considered "professional". Disability justice invites us to look at intersectionality; the ways' identity factors shape experience. No one lives a single-issue life, and our inclusion practices shouldn't be single-issue either.

Black female employees with disabilities are often further marginalized in a labour market and economic system built on a hierarchy of worth. Black women with disabilities report not being believed, about pain, accommodation needs, or qualifications.

Peer connection and community solidarity are important. The film concludes with a series of "Dear Disabled Black Womn" quotes or affirmations from peers who did not provide an interview. One male ally also provided a statement. All participants are Black individuals living with one or more chronic or episodic, visible or invisible, physical, cognitive or neurological disabilities.

1) Intersectionality

Intersectionality describes how different forms of discrimination overlap and combine. This term first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 to describe the overlapping barriers faced particularly by Black women. It recognizes that certain individuals face multiple, unique, and intersecting forms of structural discrimination. The term has now been expanded to represent the experiences and challenges of anyone living with multiple stigmatized identities. Non-binary and trans Black disabled folks face layered erasure.

Black women with disabilities face racism, ableism and sexism all at once, they do not operate separately in real life. Instead, these diverse forms of discrimination interact, creating distinct barriers for people who live at those intersections. Think of the layered adversity of disabled Black women as a three-way traffic jam where all the lights are red. Each identity-Blackness, disability, and gender; comes with its own set of assumptions and barriers. When they overlap, those barriers compound. In practical terms, that means higher rates of poverty, lower access to support, more skepticism about expertise, and a constant requirement to educate others before allowances to contribute.



Disability justice asks us to design inclusion with this complexity in mind. No one lives a single-issue life, and workplace policies that address only one identity at a time will always fall short.

2) Racist ableism

Disability is still largely thought of as “White, male, and visible” by people without disabilities. Racist ableism is a term used by Black and Brown disability activist to describe how racialized groups experience additional adversity owing to ableism informed by racist beliefs. It reinforces the false association between whiteness and competence, while framing Black disability as risk, burden, or deficit. Racist-ableism shows up in whose pain is believed, whose access needs are questioned, and whose leadership is labeled “too much.”

“My disabilities have been worsened and new ones crated...” (Yasmine). Racism causes physiological and cognitive illness. This highlights how oppression not only has detrimental economic and social impact, but medical ones as well. Yasmine shares how prolonged and intense experiences with racism precipitated the development of another disability (PTSD).

Racist ableism contributes to the dismissal of disability in Black bodies and to view symptoms of disability as behavioral. “I just looked like flighty black girl, but I was in crisis” (Affrica). However, one participant (Lori), noted that for her, disability remained an accepted area of discrimination whereas racism was more protected under legislation. The perceived undesirability of Black and disabled women is another social factor of racist ableism that limits their potential and access to resources.

3) Black Women Face Disproportionate Workplace Discrimination

Hiring and advancement are often constrained by screening bias, “culture fit” language, and narrow ideas of the “ideal worker.”

“At a structural level, Black women have to show up differently,” says (Nkem). She goes on to describe how Black women’s mode of dress, communication styles, and hair are often deemed “unprofessional” and stigmatized. This leads to the necessity of Black female employees with disabilities to mask and code-switch to blend in with expected Eurocentric based norms. Black women must



fake playing the system with enthusiasm while they truly feel disempowered, isolated, and stalled in their careers.

Potential alone is not enough. Without resourcing, financing, opportunity, and mentoring, talent stalls. Sponsorship, not just mentorship is essential (Liza). Employment support often pushes quick placements over sustainable careers. Not being gainfully employed is another issue. As Liza explains, “Underemployment means we’re qualified but because of diabetes are perceived as not being qualified.”

Employment can take more from Black disabled female employees than it pours into them. Bev describes a previous employment where that while she only received one break, coworkers took several breaks, and that she was sometimes asked to assist these colleagues with their work.

4) Leadership Is Questioned More Often

Success doesn’t protect Black people from discrimination. In fact, the more leadership and power attained, the greater the instances of discrimination faced. Black women with disabilities report that their authority is regularly challenged. Their leadership is labeled “abrasive,” their credibility is conditional, and their advancement requires emotional self-editing.

Interviewees describe repeated, weaponized discrimination: extra scrutiny, “prove-it-again” loops, and tone-policing among other harmful practices that devalues outcomes. These dynamics directly affect pay equity, retention, and leadership pipelines, even when performance is strong. Chantaine refers to leadership navigation as a Black disabled woman as “a delicate dance” the navigation of Black women leaders with disability in the workplace. plotting a course around both subtle and overt insubordination, and “angry Black woman” tropes is a regular feature for many racialized women leaders.

Gender matters, disability matters, race matters. They matter in respect, pay gaps, and... safety. Misogyny, ableism, and racism shows up when a Black woman’s contribution is negated but accepted when it is repeated by a man. Similarity when a Black disabled woman’s suggestions or feedback is dismissed but praised when a worker of another race offers similar thoughts, that is a sure



sign of discrimination. A Black woman's power frequently comes second to another person's assumptions. Particularly in performance evaluations where likability is prioritized over measurable impact.

It is a 'constant "struggle" to be a Black woman in the workplace and disability only adds to the difficulty. Men with disabilities also stigmatize women with disabilities, and the shared presence of disability does not prevent misogyny and discrimination. As one interviewee Lori states, men with disabilities are averse to working for "women with disabilities."

In addition, microaggressions from White folk with disabilities toward successful Black women leaders with disability is a significant issue, particularly with episodic conditions. Yasmin talks about being referred to as a person without disability by White peers with disabilities. A Black woman's power comes second to another person's opinion, or assumptions,

5) Episodic Disability: Uncertainty and Invisibility

Not all disabilities are constant. Episodic disabilities involve periods of wellness interrupted by periods of illness or impairment. Their defining feature is unpredictability. Many episodic disabilities are invisible, which can lead to misunderstanding, doubt, or delayed support.

Examples include, but are not limited to: Crohn's disease, HIV/AIDS, lupus, Long COVID, bipolar disorder, depression, epilepsy, migraines, endometriosis, menstruation-related impairment, and Sickle Cell Anemia.

Without planned flexibility, episodic disability becomes a source of harm rather than a manageable reality.

The reality that profit, performance, and efficiency are typically valued over health in employment makes it difficult for disabled workers to access accommodations.

The uncertainty accompanying episodic conditions impacts energy, mobility, emotional regulation, and cognition. This unpredictability can create tension or misunderstanding in workplace unless we plan for flexibility. Employees working with episodic illness may be experiencing symptoms like fatigue, mobility



changes, to cognitive fog. Many employees do not feel safe disclosing. Regularly navigating spaces that are neither safe nor affirming is very stressful and aggravates symptoms and can even bring on a flare up. The pressure of having to prove skills repeatedly can lead to burnout, negatively impacting the nervous system, and amplification of symptoms of disability.

Employees working with disability and episodic disability often mask so well that when experiencing a bad flare day, their challenges may go unnoticed. Pushing through pain is a common occurrence for disabled people.

6) Difficulty Accessing Accommodations

Accommodations remove barriers and level the field. They are not special treatment; they are inclusion in action. Workers describe common practice gaps: excessive documentation requirements, long decision delays, and evaluation systems that penalize health fluctuations rather than measuring outcomes.

Accommodations should be moved out of the realm of disability as benefit everyone including employees without disabilities or those who become temporarily disabled.

Many members of the Black community were taught to be twice as good with half the resources. This cultural conditioning can make asking for accommodation feel incredibly vulnerable and difficult. Moreover, anti-Black racism constructs Blackness as less worthy, dehumanizes Black bodies, and therefore perceive Black people as less in need of comfort, or support, being able to bear more pain, and less capable of having disability.

When the cost of access includes unpaid administrative labour, emotional labour, or fear of retaliation, employment can take more from Black women with disabilities than it gives back.

Many Black women mask disability to achieve employment however, once a request for accommodations is made, it often triggers discrimination. “A workplace that doesn’t understand disability is like a brick wall.” *(Africa). A brick wall is a perfect metaphor for the adversity faced by disabled employees in accessing sufficient, meaningful and sustainable accommodations. In many



workplaces, the accommodation process is not clear or well supported. This leaves employees confused and anxious when “trying to determine what I need, who to enlist, what to disclose...,” *(Yasmine), and like “you must “jump through hoops” to only receive basic resources (Nkem).

Appropriate access to resources is also dependent on understanding intersectionality and the use of an intersectional lens. Accommodation needs to be considered as standard features not special requirements. Meaningful accommodation includes flexible work conditions, assistive devices and technology, frequent breaks, and culturally safe services. Rigid schedules, performance reviews, and team norms can amplify barriers unless we design for flexibility from the start. Black women will mask invisible disabilities and protect queerness to mitigate further marginalization and discrimination.

7) Ableism & Stigma Within Black Communities

Inside Black communities, there’s love and strength, however, stigma persists. It is a powerful force. Many people in the Black community do not identify as disabled even when they meet the legal definition. This suppresses accommodation uptake and deepens isolation.

Delays in access to care and disclosure are fueled by cultural moralization of disability along with tropes around resilience (strong Black woman) and spirituality (praying for healing).

Community-led dialogue, faith-based partnerships, and trusted messengers are critical to reducing harm.

Like many other communities, Liza asserts that the Black community lacks comprehension and skill in supporting and affirming disability. This is partly due to “historic global and cultural stigmatization and moralization of disability, as well as fear of accumulating discrimination”, says Nkem. This discussion did not make it into the documentary itself due to time limits but remains an integral issue.



There is more openness to talk about disability in the Black community, but it is not universal. There is increasing curiosity and young Black people with disabilities continue to push cultural norms and boundaries.

8) Need For Community Support

Peer networks, and culturally grounded disability and mental health supports reduce isolation and build collective capacity. Community affirmation is vital, to be connected to others from the Black diaspora and particularly Black disabled diaspora. It is integral to a sense of belonging, acceptance, culture and safety.

Intersectional connections enable the growth of disability competence within the larger Black community. This growth must also include anti-discrimination education that explicitly addresses LGBTQ+ identities, particularly where racism, ableism, gender identity, and sexuality intersect.

9) Feeling Seen and Supported in the Workplace

Some employers get it right and can support intersectional employees with disabilities in ways that support their wellbeing and belonging in the workplace. Interviewee Beverly, a cancer survivor who lives with chronic episodic disability, recounts how while she faced discrimination from co-workers of other departments, her own colleagues and department heads went above and beyond to accommodate and support her needs. “They would make sure I had a ride home, time off and rides to go get treatment.”

Working with “other disabled people” was seen as an ideal workplace culture because “they get it” and therefore creates a more disability friendly environment (Yasmine). Africa recounts a former employer who provided mental health days, and it was the first time she was introduced to the concept of care for mental health alongside physical health. She also highlights how her current employer intentionally partners with her medical support team to provide appropriate accommodation and optimal workplace environment which is revolutionary. As her employer, Liza, shares, she makes it a point to ask all her employees in detail about what they require to be successful in their roles.

Another participant, Chantaine, shares the support and empathy received from a manager who helped her identify needs around executive functioning and begin a conversation about accommodations.



When employees feel supported, connected, and respected, they thrive, are productive and the company benefits.

10) The Disability Paradox

The Disability Paradox states that there is no joy or pride in disabled identity. Participants counter this assertion with many examples of both. Shame of disability is taught and socialized to disabled people through pervasive messaging, particularly in childhood, but continuing through the life cycle. It is socialized in us and internalized. It comes from family, media, churches, schools etc.

Resistance through joy in identity has been a characteristic of Black justice movements for centuries. Chantaine exerts that she would not want “to be anything other than a Black disabled woman” *. Several interviewees speak about the joy they find in love, their culture, family, friendships, community, and acceptance. In addition, they enjoy nature, sports, art, music and everything else that other people do. Disabled people are human beings with diverse interests and capabilities just like anyone else.

The intersections of Blackness, gender, ability and queerness aren't only about harm, adversity and exclusion. It's a site of innovation and power. Black disabled women and non-binary folk have been building workarounds forever, community care, mutual aid, and kitchen-table policy.

That is why being in community with other disabled people is so important. Be in community to counter messages of disability shame and counter the ongoing socialization of ableism.

11) Recommendations (ready to implement)

What do black women need to thrive in the workplace?

We need to design better systems, and the place to start is where Black disabled women and non-binary lives meet. That intersection is where the real solutions live.

Flexibility in accommodations *(Nkem) so Black disabled employees can navigate with autonomy, grounded in disability justice principles, alongside collaboration and partnership with supporting agencies and caregivers (Affrica) are innovative



paths toward effective and competitive culture change and empowering the leadership of Black women working with chronic and/or episodic disabilities.

As leaders, the goal isn't to eliminate uncertainty, it's to build humane systems that support people through it. This is accomplished through nurturing trusting, reciprocal relationships on a foundation of curiosity. Liza laments the lack of Black disabled female leadership in Canada. She asserts the need for "a model for Black women to sponsor and bring up other Black women." Sponsorship pipelines could move Black disabled women into decision-making roles beyond "culture work" and should be funded, measured, and protected from retaliation.

Incorporate an intersectional lens in all you do. This lens helps design policies that see the whole person, not a single label. When we get it right for those at the margins, our workplace cultures, policies and programming become stronger and more equitable for everyone.

Other Key Recommendations:

A. Policy & practice: flare-friendly accommodations menu (no-proof options; 3-day decisions; documentation stipend); remote-by-default; core hours + grace windows; temporary redistribution during flares; outcome-based reviews; anti-tone-policing language; conversion of extraction to paid roles.

B. Power & progression: fund Black-disabled-women-led *Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)* – are employee-led groups formed around shared identities or lived experiences), can reduce isolation, build leadership pathways, and inform organizational decision-making when they are **paid, resourced, and connected to power**.

ERGs; launch sponsorship to decision roles; add disability competencies (anticipatory planning, crisis triage, process simplification) to promotion rubrics.

C. Inclusive hiring: accessible postings; structured interviews; interpreters/captions by default; work-sample tasks instead of timed tests where feasible.

D. Data & transparency: quarterly accessibility report on requests, timelines, outcomes, stipend totals, extraction-to-paid conversions, retention/promotion indicators.



E. Culture & community: resource peer groups, trauma-informed support, and partnerships with Black community and faith leaders.

11b) Recommendations (Ready To Implement)

The recommendations in this report are grounded in lived experience and supported by existing Canadian frameworks. Readers who want practical guidance can consult the following plain-language resources:

- **Accessible Canada Act (2019)**
Clarifies that disability is created by barriers, not bodies—and includes episodic and invisible disabilities.
→ [Accessible Canada Act, Government of Canada](#)
- **Employment Accessibility Standard (CAN/ASC-1.1)**
Offers guidance on accessible hiring, accommodations, and retention in federally regulated workplaces.
→ [Accessibility Standards Canada](#)
- **Disability Justice Principles**
Emphasize intersectionality, collective access, and leadership by those most impacted.
→ [Sins Invalid, 10 Principles of Disability Justice](#)
- **Paid ERGs & Sponsorship Models**
Research shows that ERGs are most effective when funded, protected from retaliation, and connected to promotion pathways—not treated as volunteer “culture work.”
→ [Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion \(CCDI\)](#)
- **Trauma-Informed & Culturally Responsive Practice**
Particularly relevant for Black women with disabilities navigating racial trauma, medical mistrust, and workplace surveillance.
→ [Public Health Agency of Canada; Black Health Alliance](#)

12) Accountability statements (for leaders)

- We will hire, pay, and follow the lead of Black disabled women.
- We will remove “prove-it-again” hoops and fund documentation time.
- We will move budget, not just applause, toward access fixes and leadership opportunities.
- We understand success doesn’t shield people from racism; it reveals where power needs redesign.