Supplement: Guideline for Engineers and Engineering Firms on Workplace Equity for Women

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Introduction

In 2023, Engineers Canada published the **Guideline for Engineers and Engineering Firms on Workplace Equity for Women** (the Guideline). The Guideline was created as a resource for enhancing women's participation in the engineering profession, while providing a deeper understanding of the challenges experienced by women in the workplace, and a sense of how to tackle these issues. It was developed to complement the Guideline and embed women's lived experiences. This supplement was developed in collaboration with Dr. Camille Hernández-Ramdwar, Author, Consultant, and former Associate Professor Emerita, Toronto Metropolitan University.

The stories featured in this piece are the realities of people within the engineering field. Names and other information that could identify these individuals have been altered. Along with these stories, there are various questions throughout the piece, which will challenge your understandings of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) work. This supplement focuses on the complexities of navigating the issues that different women encounter in the workplace on a day-to-day basis.

By its nature, engineering is a collaborative profession. Engineers collaborate with individuals from diverse backgrounds to fulfil their duties, tasks, and professional responsibilities. Although we collectively hold the responsibility of culture change, engineers are not expected to tackle these issues independently. Engineers can, and are encouraged to, seek out the expertise of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) professionals, as well as individuals who have expertise in culture change and justice.

In addition, it is important to keep in mind that the category of "women" in the context of workplace equity for women is diverse in itself. As such, a universal or "one-size-fits-all" approach is not be suitable as it does not account for the unique challenges that different groups of women may face. To learn more about diversity in engineering, please visit the following page.

In order to engage deeply with the stories presented in this supplement, we have identified three major themes that run throughout the Guideline: diversity goals, data collection, and the business case for EDI. These are discussed in relation to each story.

For each story we have embedded checkpoints, provided suggestions for what could help in this situation and have identified specific sections within the Guideline where these stories will provide additional context and an opportunity to engage critically with the complex issues discussed. Lastly, we have provided additional resources to support your learning journey.

The information presented will not equip you with the ability to solve systemic oppression. Instead it will illuminate the nuances and complexities of doing EDI work and, that engineers can't and shouldn't tackle this problem alone, we can and should depend on and listen to people with expertise in culture change, justice, and EDI.

Acknowledgements

EDI strategies

Diversity goals

Diversity goals are often put forth by organizations as the primary mechanism through which they will achieve culture change. Diversity is a measurement of the identities people hold. It does not equate to equity, justice, or belonging. Also, diversity within organizations does not address the roots of the systemic issues that cause the underrepresentation of certain groups of people who have historically been excluded, and continue to be, based on their social identities (gender, race, (dis)ability, religion, etc.).

For instance, a women empowerment training that caters to women professionals, may be of good intention, yet fail to address the systemic issues and barriers that women face as they try to make space for themselves within their workplaces.

When we recruit people into an environment without doing the work of breaking down barriers that prevent their participation, it often puts such people in a position where they bear the burden of educating those around them about the issues that exist, while simultaneously tackling these issues without sufficient supports. In this scenario, not only do they have to resist discrimination and oppression, they must try to fix it as well.

Checkpoint

Before enacting EDI policies consider the following questions:

- Who is responsible or accountable to develop and enact an EDI workplace/policy? Do they have professional, academic, or personal experience in this area? Are they adequately compensated for this experience and expertise?
- Do they have the support of the organization's leadership? Has the organization set aside resources (e.g., budget, people resources) for this work?
- Will these responsibilities be transferred if the role is replaced or dissolved?

- How do you define a diverse workplace? Is this definition consistent among all employees?
- How does the employer define inclusion? Does that overlap with how employees define belonging?
- Do you see anti-racism as separate from gender discrimination? What about ableism, homophobia, or xenophobia? To what extent does the person(s) responsible for EDI policy/practices understand anti-oppression?

Read about Ewaoluwa's story below.

Ewaoluwa's story

Ewaoluwa is a West African woman who migrated to Canada three years ago. She is a single (divorced) mother of two children, one of whom has special needs. Ewaoluwa had a good engineering job back in Nigeria but is having to start over in Canada, now without the assistance of a partner, family, or hired help.

Since arriving in Canada, she has been taking classes and doing workshops to increase her skills and marketability, although it is difficult to find time to do this when she has two school-age children, including one with special needs. Sometimes she has to take time off work to accompany her son to appointments. Ewaoluwa is also trying to sponsor her parents to come to Canada so that they can assist her with childcare. She has started to lose her hair due to stress.

What Ewaoluwa encounters on the job: Ewaoluwa's primary source of stress at work in Canada is racism. Her co-workers are predominantly White men and women who are also fifth or sixth-generation Canadians. There are a few South Asian and Middle Eastern employees, but they tend to keep to themselves, and half of them were born in Canada, so they "fit into" the workplace culture in a way she does not.

For example, the other racialized co-workers might share stories with White co-workers of having to take their kids to hockey and soccer games over the weekend, which Ewaoluwa does not do. She has also noticed that many of her co-workers assume that she is not skilled enough to handle particular jobs, or that her education or credentials are subpar because she comes from Africa.

Once when she was in the toilet stall of the women's washroom at work, she overheard two White co-workers (who did not know she was there) conversing. One co-worker asked the other if they have universities in Africa. Neither of them was sure. More than once she has found a banana on her desk—at first, she thought it was a gift, and then she came to realize that it was a racial attack.

Many of her co-workers have great difficulty pronouncing her name and ask if they can just call her "Ewa." In an attempt to get along with everyone, she agrees to this, although it irks her. Co-workers have also asked if they can touch her braids, or sometimes they will just reach out and touch her hair without permission.

There have been instances where co-workers insist that they cannot understand her accent (even though English is her first language). Her accent has been used as a reason why she cannot front-face with clients. Interestingly, her other racialized immigrant co-workers (from India and Iran) are

not told the same thing. To make matters worse, a young White French man, recently hired, has been making sexual innuendos and inappropriate comments to Ewaoluwa.

When George Floyd was killed in 2020 and Black Lives Matter was in the news, her co-workers, supervisors, and managers all wanted her opinion as a "Black woman" on what was happening, but she had to explain to them that she isn't African-American nor has she ever identified as "Black"— in Nigeria she identified with her ethnic group and religious affiliation.

Ewaoluwa's response: Ewaoluwa is extremely dependent on her job for her income. She is a single parent and although she receives some money from the children's father, she is alone in Canada and needs to show economic independence so that she can sponsor her parents. She spoke to some fellow West African immigrant women at her church, and they advised her to speak to the HR person at her workplace, and an EDI person if one existed. They also told her to look for networks of Black and African professional women in her area, which she did.

Ewaoluwa began speaking to Black/African women who were encountering similar treatment in their workplaces, some of them for years, without resolution. For the first time in her adult life, Ewaoluwa began to consider giving up her engineering career. When she went to the HR person at work (an older White woman) she was told to document what was happening but was also told that engineering firms were often "boys' clubs" and that she would have to put up with a certain amount of teasing and ignorance to fit in.

When Ewaoluwa stated that it was also White women who were a problem, the HR person became cold and told her that maybe engineering was not the field for her. Her firm does not have a designated EDI person but has held a few voluntary workshops on EDI, anti-oppression, and anti-racism.

Ewaoluwa attended one of these workshops but felt uncomfortable as the only Black person there, especially when the hired consultant began to talk about anti-Black racism and she felt her co-workers expected her to explain what that was using her own life as an example. She also felt the workshops "had no teeth"—for example, talking about creating a "welcoming and respectful work environment' without clearly delineating what that would look like on a daily basis. The workshops also tended to focus on discrimination by men towards women, not between different kinds of women, which was a reality Ewaoluwa was facing.

Will your EDI strategy address her experiences?

What could help in this situation?

- Mandatory workshops on different forms of racism (including anti-Black racism). This would be mandatory for all employees except those directly affected by this kind of racism.
- More flex time in the workplace to accommodate parents, caregivers, persons with disabilities, etc.
- A commitment to a no-tolerance policy on different forms of discrimination, and an EDI policy with repercussions for non-adherence.

- Hiring of a designated, full-time, long-term/permanent EDI Officer who is in a position of power to make culture change.
- A commitment to hiring and retaining more Black employees.

Additional resources

- Intersectionality in the Workplace: Creating Justice, Not Diversity. DISORIENT. 2020. https://disorient.co/intersectionality-in-the-workplace/
- Trauma Mining: Do you really need that "tough conversation". Quake Lab. 2020. https://quakelab.ca/blog/trauma-mining-do-you-really-need-that-hard-conversation
- Responses to 10 common criticisms of anti-racism action in STEMM. PLOS Computational Biology.2021 https://journals.plos.org/ploscompbiol/article?id=10.1371/journal.pcbi.1009141

Data collection

Data collection is an important and rigorous process that has to be done intentionally, transparently, and with great care. Data collection can and often has been weaponized against groups such as Indigenous peoples, Black people, disabled people, and queer and trans people.

Organizations should be aware of risks involved with data collection being used as a self-congratulatory or public relations exercise. The end goal of data collection should be to create systemic change and enact justice for the people they survey.

Checkpoint

Before collecting data, consider the following questions:

- Why does this data need to be collected?
- Is the purpose of data collection measuring diversity, equity, inclusion, or belonging?
- Will the data be used to inform policy and practices to ensure equity and belonging?
- Have you built trust with the people you will be collecting data from? What have you done to ensure they feel safe?
- How will your organization keep sight of lived experiences while collecting and representing data?
- How will you approach individuals who do not believe in answering demographic questions?
- How will you react to data that negatively implicates your organization?
- How will you react to data that positively implicates your organization?
- Are you more likely to engage with positive feedback than negative feedback?

Read about Jaynee's story below.

Jaynee is an Indigenous woman and recent graduate from a prestigious Canadian university. She grew up on reserve in northern Manitoba and is the first in her community to graduate from university and is also the first to become an engineer.

As a child, Jaynee was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. She knows that what she has achieved is rare and against the odds and she feels a tremendous sense of responsibility to be a shining example to her younger siblings, her parents, grandparents, her community, and by extension all Indigenous people in Canada.

What Jaynee encounters on the job: Jaynee started working for an engineering firm while she was still in university; this was part of a sponsored program encouraging Indigenous students to succeed. Because of this experience, some of her co-workers see her as benefiting from her identity, but not from her merit.

While she has spoken to some of the other women at her workplace about the sexism they all encounter on the job, there are limits to how much she feels she can share, because she is not sure they understand her Indigenous identity and her neurodivergent status.

Jaynee needs peace and quiet to do her work, which means she tends to keep her office door closed. More than once, a co-worker has opened her door without knocking, explaining that "we like to keep things friendly around here" or asking, "why are you hiding yourself away?"

Jaynee is grounded in her tribe's spiritual practices which include smudging, a practice she is allowed, by law, to engage in at work, and for which her employer must make an accommodation. The first time she smudged at work she could hear a co-worker marching up and down outside her office shouting "WHAT IS THAT SMELL?!" Her director then told her she would have to smudge in a different location and led her to a custodial closet full of mops and cleaning supplies. Jaynee did not smudge again at work, although she would very much like to, but only if her practice is treated with respect.

When the remains of Indigenous children were discovered on the grounds of a residential school in May 2021, Jaynee was deeply affected and felt physically sick but did not want to ask for the day off as her team was working on an important project. She went to work where it was "business as usual" and co-workers were cracking jokes about a celebrity scandal that was also in the news that day.

Jaynee became an engineer because she is deeply committed to being an Indigenous representative in a field where there are so few, and yet where so many projects affect the lives of Indigenous people directly. She wants to bring an Indigenous, land-, and spirit-based approach to engineering in Canada, but she is not sure if she will be able to do this because currently she does not have any allies at work and feels very much alone in her perspective and beliefs.

Jaynee's response: Jaynee learned to be proactive during her years at university regarding differential and discriminatory treatment. She is very aware of how intersectionality can create multiple forms of discrimination and oppression.

She has had to work with HR and her manager to get the accommodations she needs as a neurodivergent employee, and the firm has held several EDI and anti-oppression workshops on disability so that her co-workers are more aware of her needs. However, as an Indigenous woman, Jaynee feels less accepted and respected. The lack of support for her smudging is one example.

She has also noticed that if she dresses in a skirt and puts on make-up, her male co-workers are much more likely to pay attention to her, but not always in a good way. Sometimes they ask intrusive questions or take liberties with her in a way she notices they don't with the White women in the firm. As an Indigenous woman living in Canada, Jaynee is hyper-aware of the very high levels of gender-based violence that Indigenous women face and of which they have historically been the victims.

There have been times she does not feel safe around her male co-workers because she feels they are viewing her in a stereotypical, sexualized way as an Indigenous woman. She would like to educate her co-workers about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) so that they would be more sensitive to her reality. However, while Jaynee's workplace seems very concerned and proactive about gender parity and defeating sexism, it is less aware and concerned about addressing Indigeneity or other aspects of intersectionality related to gender.

"Women" often means "White women only" and Jaynee has to continually educate her colleagues—both women and men—about how and why her experiences and realities are different from theirs. This is exhausting and stressful for Jaynee, and her colleagues rarely support her when she raises these issues. Finally, Jaynee believes that taking a "scientific" approach to "solving" EDI, racism, and oppression does not work.

Racism, sexism, colonialism and so on are not mathematical equations to be "solved" but socially-constructed issues that need to be dismantled and worked through, often on an emotional level, and over a long period of time. There is no quick fix.

Will your data collection allow for Jaynee's story to be told?

What could help in this situation?

- Mandatory educational workshops on issues that disproportionately impact Indigenous Peoples, by Indigenous consultants. Indigenous Peoples would not be required to attend these workshops.
- Support for Jaynee (and other Indigenous/racialized employees) who require accommodation for cultural practices.
- A no-tolerance policy in the workplace for any form of discrimination or harassment, with real penalties applied (suspension, dismissal, etc.).
- A commitment to hiring and retaining more Indigenous engineers at Jaynee's firm so that she is not the only one.
- A commitment and understanding, among managers and employees, that EDI, anti-racism, and anti-oppression work is long-term, often difficult and uncomfortable, but transformational and necessary.

Additional resources

- All your equity data questions answered". Quake Lab. 2022. https://quakelab.ca/blog/all-your-equity-data-questions-answered
- Considerations for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Research. Gareth Bowden. https://blog.flexmr.net/equity-diversity-inclusion-research
- Weaponized data: How the obsession with data has been hurting marginalized communities . 2015. https://nonprofitaf.com/2015/05/weaponized-data-how-the-obsession-with-data-has-been-hurting-marginalized-communities/
- Weaponizing Data Versus Using It As A Tool To Humanize Consumers. Forbes. 2022. https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2020/10/28/weaponizing-data-versus-using-it-as-a-tool-to-humanize-consumers/?sh=1a6602f72f04

The business case

The business case is often used as a justification or rationale for organizations adopting EDI policies. However, there is a risk that if businesses adopt EDI practices exclusively as a business end, it will lead to the exploitation of people for the sole purpose of organizational success. In this context, people may feel like their presence and performance at the company is being judged based on their identity rather than the full scope of their contributions.

Although the business case may sometimes be required to advance certain conversations, primary focus must be placed on efforts to address the systemic problems that cause underrepresentation, like racism and homophobia. An organization must be mindful of the ways they contribute to the systemic problems that cause underrepresentation. If not, it can be exploitative of marginalized people, and it can further exacerbate stereotypes and prejudice.

Checkpoint

Consider the following questions when making the "business case:"

- Would I continue to advocate for inclusion if it did not increase productivity?
- Would my organization create equitable policies if they cost the organization money?
- Have I addressed the issues in my organization that have caused underrepresentation?
- What practices have I embedded in workplace culture to match the changes in the identity of my workforce?
- Would I sever a relationship with a client if they harassed, discriminated, or acted violently towards my marginalized staff?
- Do I expect marginalized people to engage in organizational change and to shift workplace culture? Am I adequately compensating them for that expertise and work?

Read about Albertina's story below.

Albertina's Story

Albertina is a White, Francophone, trans woman from rural Ontario who transitioned while in her current job, a position she has held for ten years. She and her partner are now expecting their first child, and she is seeking parental leave. After her leave is finished, she would also like flex time so she can work from home and be a more involved parent. Albertina has worked very hard at her job and is now qualified for a significant promotion.

What Albertina encounters on the job: Albertina's co-workers have seemingly adapted to her transition quite well. She credits some on-the-job EDI training that HR put in place a few years ago for this. However, her boss recently told her that she risks losing out on her much-anticipated promotion if she takes parental leave and then continues to work more frequently from home. In addition, and unbeknownst to her boss, Albertina has been the victim of sexual harassment and sexual assault both at her workplace and offsite when dealing with clients.

Sometimes the harassment and assaults are in relation to her trans status, but other times clients (who do not know she is trans) have harassed and assaulted her as if she were a cis woman. This has included inappropriate questions, unwanted sexual touching, and voyeurism. Albertina is hoping that by working from home more she will be able to avoid the harassment and assaults.

She is also considering looking for another job, but with a child on the way she is reluctant to do this. Albertina also feels that she has worked very hard at her present firm and should not have to leave because of the actions of others.

An additional work issue that troubles Albertina is that the health benefits at her job do not cover some of her gender-specific health concerns. She would like to have this addressed but is concerned that if she raises this issue (in addition to the others) she will encounter more discrimination.

Albertina's response: Once the harassment and assaults began, Albertina went to HR at her job and lodged a complaint, but it was never dealt with effectively. She also went to her union, but the colleague who had assaulted her was a long-standing, popular member of the firm, and the union representatives had good relationships with him. Albertina felt that the grievance officer who took her complaint did not believe all that she was telling him. Because neither HR nor her union took any action on the harassment and assaults, Albertina sought legal counsel outside her workplace.

Again and again, lawyers told her that they could do nothing for her because she was a union member and the union had to deal with it. She is not very encouraged by the fact that there are inconsistencies in how this type of unethical behaviour is addressed for licensed members of the profession. She is hoping that both HR and her union will be more supportive in her quest to take parental leave and get more flex time to be able to work from home, but she is nervous and stressed about what is actually going to happen, given the lack of accountability leaving her feeling alone and isolated.

Would the business case problematize the treatment she endured? Could the business case be used to motivate just treatment for her?

What could help in this situation?

- A no-tolerance policy for discrimination of any kind at Albertina's workplace, with clear communication to employees that sexual assault, for example, is a crime punishable by law.
- Recourse for employees who do not feel properly represented by their union when it comes to matters of discrimination.
- Allies and advocates at Albertina's workplace who will support Albertina in her quest for justice so that she is not alone. This could take the form of a Gender Committee, or through the hiring of EDI personnel whose sole purpose is to ensure that the workplace is equitable and upholds tenets of inclusion and belonging.

Additional resources

- Workers in Transition: A Practical Guide for Union Representatives and Trans Union Members. Canadian Labour Congress. 2021. https://canadianlabour.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/WorkersInTransition-Guide-EN.pdf
- Workplace Diversity Training Isn't Working. Lilly Singh. 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PerOlqMOcc
- Stop Making the Business Case for Diversity. Oriane Georgeac and Aneeta Rattan. 2022. https://hbr.org/2022/06/stop-making-the-business-case-for-diversity