

2022

12/GEN-041:

**The impact of slavery
and racism upon women
of African descent in the
Atlantic who work in the
federal public service,
and the role of unions
in this struggle**



Public Service Alliance of Canada
Alliance de la Fonction publique du Canada



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Introduction

Canada has a troubling history of racism. Fully understanding the scope of colonialism and slavery in Canada is necessary to make meaningful commitments and take action to move towards a society that is free from racism. It is impossible to currently compile the complete history and impact of slavery in Canada absent a recognition and a commitment to include Black history in our education system and in our Canadian narrative.

As part of this essential work, the Public Service Alliance of Canada's (PSAC) Halifax Regional Women's Committee called for an investigation into the impacts of slavery in Canada on women of African descent in the federal public service through the submission of GEN-041. This paper is the fruit of resolution GEN-041 and the dedicated work of these women both past and present.

The purpose of this paper is to share the experiences of public service workers who identify as women of African descent, while also addressing the role of unions in the struggle against sexism and racism. While this paper is focused on the issues faced by women of African descent in Atlantic Canada only, the experiences and findings in this paper extend across the country.

The paper shows how a correlation between present day acts of racism and oppression perpetuated in the workplace, or experienced in the union, against women of African descent are linked to the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. To gather the necessary qualitative and quantitative data, PSAC conducted a survey in 2021 with women of African descent in the Atlantic region. Furthermore, a regional roundtable was held in the Atlantic where women of African descent were consulted and invited to share their experiences of racism and sexism in the federal public service and the broader Canadian labour movement. These difficult and candid conversations included personal experiences of overt and systemic instances of racism, subtle microaggressions, and racial gaslighting.

The paper closes with a brief overview of the ongoing Black Class Action lawsuit, followed by a section on the case for a national apology and reparations. A series of PSAC recommendations and actions are provided including training and development opportunities for women of African descent within the union, annual reporting on discrimination within PSAC, and advocacy work for national reparations.

Throughout this paper, the term "of African descent" is used to encompass Africans born on the continent of Africa or throughout the African diaspora, and who identify as either Black, Caribbean or of African descent.

Background: GEN-041 and labour's commitment

In 1994, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) established a national Anti-Racism Taskforce (the Taskforce) to examine racism within the labour movement and in society. The product of that Taskforce was a 1997 report titled *Challenging Racism: Moving Beyond Recommendations*.¹ The report was both broad in scope and groundbreaking in its execution. The Taskforce held consultations with trade unionists and their respective communities across the country. The stories and experiences that came from these consultations were grim and dehumanizing; the pervasiveness and extent of racism experienced by members within our workplaces, unions, and communities was highlighted.

In an effort to examine racism internally within unions, the CLC used a multi-faceted approach to look at a plethora of issues including immigration, education, housing, politics, the justice system, media, and environmental racism. The Taskforce was designed to break down barriers and provide a forum to hear the voices of people of African descent and for them to discuss and share the issues they faced.

Concurrent with the CLC Taskforce, PSAC made efforts to build an anti-racism agenda in the 1990s. Equal opportunity and human rights committees were created within PSAC at the national, regional, and component level. Anxious to be part of this bigger and broader initiative through the CLC, PSAC signed on to support the Taskforce report.

In 2011 the United Nations General Assembly declared the year 2011 as International Year for People of African Descent. It quickly became apparent that more than one year was required to bring attention to the rampant anti-Black racism that was occurring globally; therefore, the UN International Year for People of African Descent became the Decade for the People of African Descent, spanning the years from 2015 to 2024. The original purpose of the Year for People of African Descent was to:

Strengthen (...) national action and regional and international cooperation for the benefit of people of African descent. This includes their full enjoyment of economic, cultural, social, civil and political rights, their participation and integration in all political, economic, social and cultural aspects of society, and the promotion of a greater knowledge of and respect for their diverse heritage and culture.

¹ The CLC report *Challenging Racism: Moving Beyond Recommendations* will be added once released.

Building on the work of CLC’s Taskforce and the Declaration from the United Nations General assembly, PSAC’s Halifax Regional Women’s Committee submitted resolution GEN-041 to the 2012 PSAC National Triennial Convention, which gained support from across the country. The resolution reads as follows:

WHEREAS last year marked the 200th Anniversary of the British Act that abolished the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in African people also known as the Slave Trade; and

WHEREAS the atrocities and crimes against humanity perpetrated against women and children of African descent during this period are well known and documented; and

WHEREAS the long-standing effects of slavery and the slave trade have had far reaching negative consequences for women in the Federal Public Service who are of African descent; and

WHEREAS there is a world movement requesting reparations to African People as a result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in African people in effect:

BE IT RESOLVED THAT PSAC develop a policy paper that includes educating the members on the impact of slavery and racism upon women of African descent who work in the Federal Public Service and addresses the role of unions in this struggle.

Through the determined, tireless, and creative work of the Halifax Regional Women's Committee and allies, this became a resolution of record of PSAC’s National Board of Directors in June 2012.

PSAC’s leadership made a firm commitment to seeing this resolution through to completion and is dedicated to implementing the union’s anti-racism work, beginning with GEN-041 and continuing with PSAC’s Anti-Racism Action Plan.

Teaching the history of slavery in Canada

In order to begin an investigation into the impacts of slavery on women of African descent in the federal public service, it is first necessary to accept a reality that is often ignored: **slavery existed in Canada.**

Unfortunately, there is very little education provided in Canadian school curriculums regarding the introduction of people of African descent to Canada. References to slavery are often about the Underground Railroad, usually incorporated in curricula during Black History Month. The notion is that slavery was unique to the United States, and that Canada was a safe haven and a beacon of hope for those escaping the shackles of slavery in the United States. In reality, for over 200 years, Africans were enslaved in the early colonial settlements of New France (Quebec), New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and Upper Canada (Ontario). While this paper's focus is on slavery in the Atlantic, it is important to stress that the experiences, trauma, and legacy of slavery are felt across the country.

Just as the history of slavery is not sufficiently taught in classrooms, the unacknowledged histories of early Black and Indigenous slave experiences are conspicuously absent from Canadian history texts. In 1501, a Portuguese slave trader by the name of Gaspar Corte-Real arrived on the shores of Newfoundland and abducted over 50 Indigenous people to sell as slaves. Panis (male) and Panise (female) Indigenous captives represented the earliest slavery practiced in New France (Quebec). Africans were enslaved and brought to Canada via the transatlantic slave trade. This history must be told.

Changing the narrative around the history of slavery in Canada requires engaging with the public to develop an understanding of this brutal history. Dr. Charmaine Nelson worked to develop the Institute for the Study of Canadian Slavery, the first of its kind in Canada. Dr. Nelson is clear: the failure to acknowledge and recognize slavery in Canadian education is "dire." She notes that, "there are only about five academics who are employed at Canadian universities and institutions who routinely produce research and/or teach about Canadian slavery."

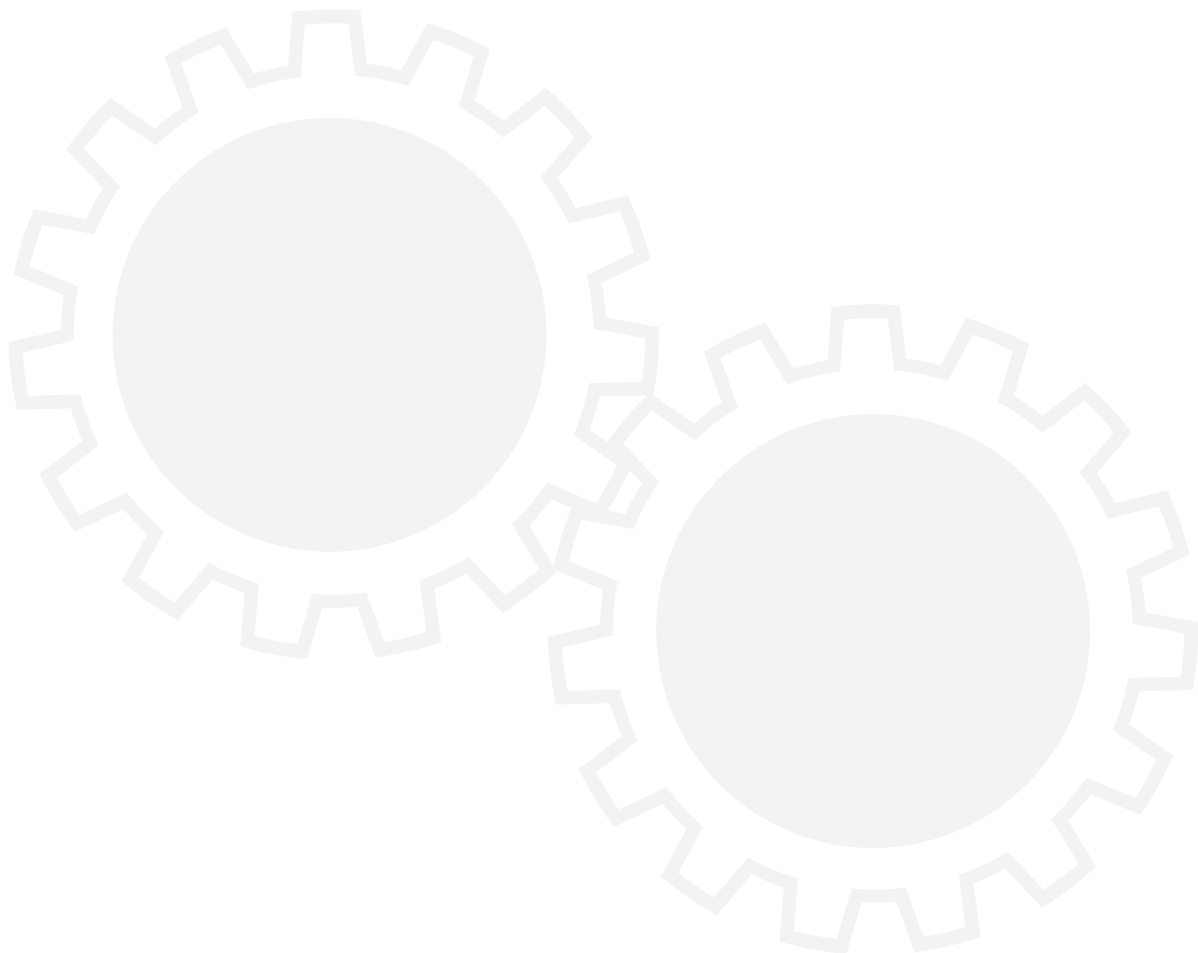
Substantive changes need to be made to Canadian school curriculums, as well as a meaningful commitment from governments. As an immediate step, PSAC calls upon the federal government to institute mandatory equity training courses for all federal public service employees, including content about Canada's history of slavery and the impact on peoples of African descent.

The settlement of African people in the Atlantic

African people were introduced to Canada directly as a result of the transatlantic slave trade and were largely concentrated in New France, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and Upper Canada. It is important to also note that there were original settlements of non-enslaved African people in Canada in Nova Scotia. Nova Scotians of African descent have the longest history and experience with anti-Black racism in Canada and were the largest concentrated population of people of African descent in Canada until the 1960s.

That said, between 550 to 600 Jamaican Maroon men and women arrived in Halifax in 1796 to work in the Cape Breton and Sydney mines. These Maroons were enslaved Africans who had initially been brought to the Caribbean (Jamaica) by the Spanish, and after 1655, by the British. The Maroons immigrated to Nova Scotia after an unsuccessful British attempt to enslave them in Jamaica. While no slave ship docked on Canadian shores directly from Africa, the majority of enslaved people from Africa who arrived in Canada did so via passage from Caribbean colonies.

This paper focuses on the experiences and histories of women in the Atlantic, recognizing that the realities and barriers they face are in no way unique or isolated to the Atlantic, but represent a snapshot of what is happening across the country. If we are to move forward and heal the destructive legacy of the transatlantic slave trade in Canada, we must recognize and honour both the stories and the lived experiences of those bought and sold through chattel slavery across Canada.



Impact of slavery and racism upon women of African descent in:

A) The federal public service

To further understand the impacts of slavery and racism affecting Women of African descent, one must examine their experience in the federal public service. Racism in the federal public service is experienced by women of African descent in every province and territory. While the abolition of slavery means that slavery is no longer legal, its legacy and the ongoing reality of racism in our institutions from housing, healthcare, workplace practices to education, arts, and sports are very much present.

In her work on the legacies of slavery, Dr. Charmaine Nelson, leading scholar, author, and independent curator illustrates some of the predominant stereotypes used to justify slavery for so many years. Stereotypes of women of African descent were created, and African bodies were commoditized as property. This led to a stereotype of “Blackness” that has persisted beyond slavery into the present day. Examples of such stereotypes include, but are not limited to:

1. Women of African descent are aggressive, volatile, and violent;
2. Women of African descent are hypersexualized;
3. Women of African descent lack cultural sophistication; and
4. Women of African descent lack intellect and the capacity for self-governance.

The implications of such derogatory and unfounded stereotypes are profound. Most alarming is that these stereotypes still persist in Canadian institutions, organizations, and unions. The federal public service is not exempt. For women of African descent working in the federal public service, the legacy of slavery is something that is navigated as part of everyday life. Women living with these stereotypes, combined with a failure of many to acknowledge that these stereotypes exist, allows the oppression and marginalization of women of African descent to continue.

Public service workers of African descent are disproportionately underrepresented at the highest levels of the federal public service. According to 2019 Treasury Board statistics, Black workers represent the largest group of racialized workers in the federal government at 3.2%, yet represent only 1.6% of those at the executive level. Black workers also tend to be clustered in lower-level administrative categories. When we examine these statistics through an intersectional lens, we see Black women in the public service not only experiencing anti-Black racism but also sexism and misogyny. Discrimination experienced is compounded when other oppressed identities and realities intersect.

Women of African descent face unique challenges as they embody intersectional identities and have complex lived experiences. “Intersectionality” is a term coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a civil rights advocate and a leading scholar of critical race theory. Crenshaw suggested that the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination and/or disadvantage for individuals and groups. The unique challenges faced by women of African descent in the federal public service simply cannot be minimized. Without incorporating all these challenges and accepting the individual lived experiences, women of African descent will continue to be held back in the workplace.

The need for representation and advancement of racialized people in the federal public service has been recognized for decades, but serious attempts to reshape the status quo have been few and far between. What little has been done is tokenistic at best. As a result, the Federal Black Employee Caucus (FBEC) was created in 2018 by Black federal public service employees in response to the deep need expressed to address issues related to racism, harassment, discrimination, and lack of career advancement for Black employees in the federal public service.

Two objectives guide the work of FBEC:

1. Collect disaggregated employment equity data to better understand where Black federal employees work; and
2. Support the mental health of Black employees by working together to reduce harassment and discrimination in the workplace.

B) The Canadian labour movement

To truly understand the experiences of women of African descent in the workplace, the roles of labour unions must be closely examined. While unions purport to be supportive of anti-discrimination policies and practices, unions are fraught with their own inconsistencies and contradictions when it comes to policies, actions, and structural approaches to race and other equity issues. They may be quick to challenge the employer with these concerns, but are not as persistent or open when it comes to self-reflection and examining the role they play in perpetuating these inequities. These inconsistencies result in exclusionary and discriminatory behaviour towards women of African descent within the Canadian labour movement. This is very much tied to the formation and preservation of a hierarchy based on race, class, gender, and place of origin that continues to place women of African descent at the bottom.

The labour movement has made some efforts to remove racist language from their governing policies; however, this does not preclude or rectify the existence of structural and institutionalized racism. There is a critical need to move away from narrowly seeing racism as an individual encounter, instead viewing it as a network of institutional structures, policies, and practices that create advantages for certain people while perpetuating discrimination, oppression, and disadvantages for others.

Institutional and systemic racism are embedded within labour policies and practices. These policies and practices shape union elections, hiring, bargaining, committee structures and more. Despite a general understanding that this is the case, these policies survive through willful ignorance. Some of the barriers that women of African descent face within the labour movement include:

- its hierarchical structure
- the use of *Roberts Rules of Order* and other decision-making processes
- hours of required availability and consequences for not being available
- limited opportunities for upward mobility
- inequity in the application of years of service and experience as a prerequisite for opportunities in the union
- a lack of access to resources
- lack of diversity in union activities
- racism is treated as a 'bread and butter issue'

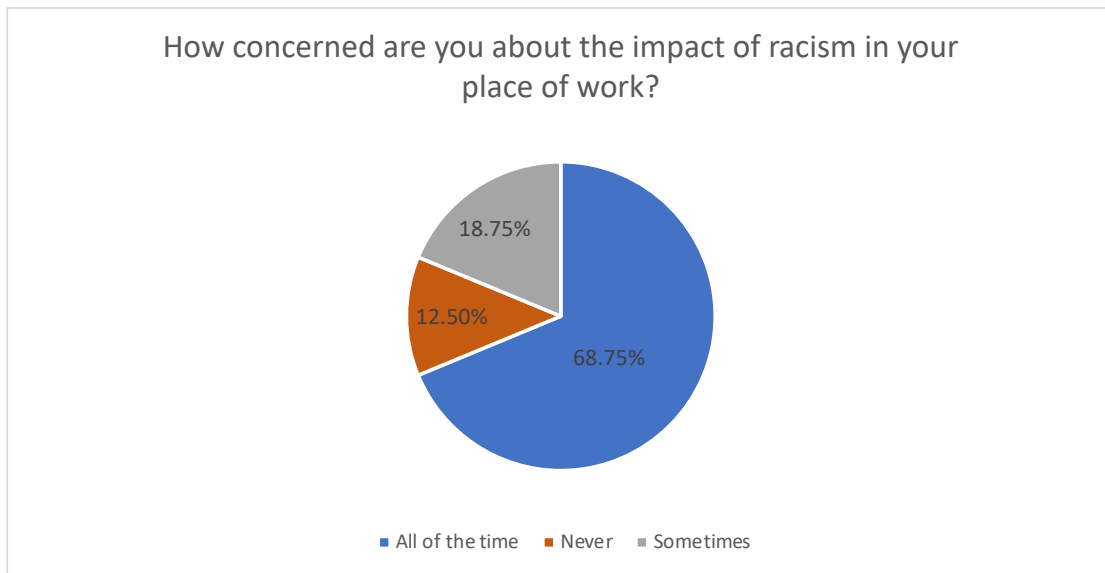
In the 1990's PSAC identified the need for inclusive and accessible spaces such as the National Human Rights Committee and regional human rights committees that reflect the diverse identities of their membership. The creation of these committees has helped increase the number of equity seats on regional and national executive union bodies and has helped bring important changes to race-based barriers as well as other identity-markers of oppression, but it's not enough. Valid concerns continue to be raised around the ineffectiveness of these changes in creating long-term, meaningful strides within PSAC and the wider labour movement. These committees lack the ability to institute change in a structural way as they do not have the power to send resolutions to convention, unlike other committees including women's committees. It is imperative that continuous thought is given to creating lasting space for women of African descent within the labour movement. The movement will be stronger with the inclusion of all members involved and engaged, and the ability for all members to achieve their full potential.

Atlantic labour movement survey on racism

Given the limited resources focused on addressing racism within the labour movement, there is a lack of data detailing racism and its effects in the workplace and in unions. In an effort to collect this data, a preliminary survey, titled “Racism in Your Workplace and Our Union” was distributed to women PSAC members of African descent in the Atlantic region in 2021.

The objective of this survey was to uncover issues of racial discrimination against women of African descent in the workplace and within the union. Women of African descent were invited and encouraged to participate. This online survey was posted on November 15, 2021 and was open until January 10, 2022. The survey was promoted largely through word of mouth because the lack of disaggregated data means that PSAC does not have a list of members who identify as women of African descent. The survey consisted of 21 questions (Appendix A).

The survey shed light on the scope of racism in the workplace and within PSAC – specifically with respect to the impact on women of African descent. A striking 69% of respondents stated that they are constantly concerned about the impact of racism in their place of work, with nearly half saying that their psychological well-being is, and/or has been, negatively affected by racist comments, behaviors or attitudes. Furthermore, 31% of respondents believe that they have been affected economically because of their identity. The results of the survey clearly demonstrate that many women of African descent have been impacted by intersectional structural racism.

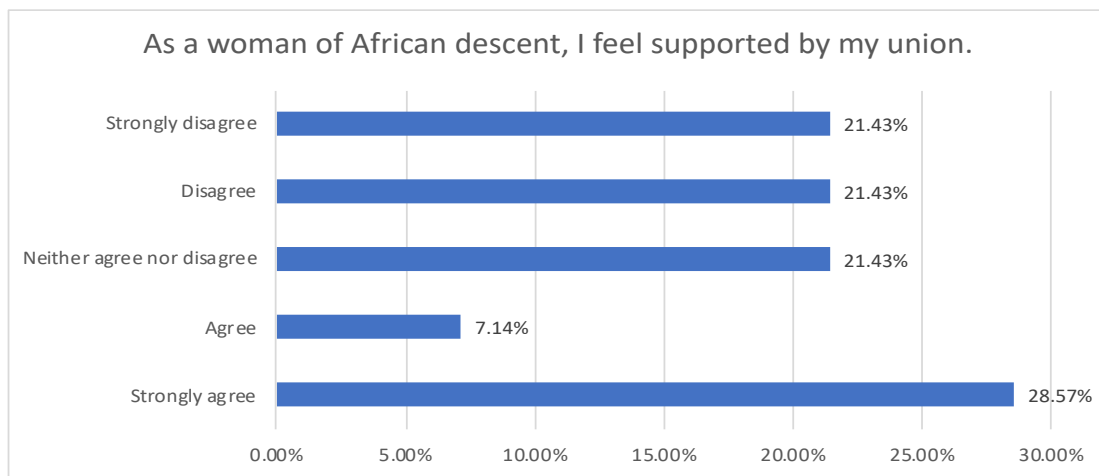


A stark finding from the survey demonstrates that the union has a lot of work to do to be seen as a support in situations of racial discrimination. Respondents shared that they felt safer addressing any form of racism and/or discrimination in their workplace through their employer (direct supervisor, department director or peers), rather than with their union. Human resources (HR) departments and personnel were identified as the least trusted entity. More than half of the respondents (56.25%) know and understand the procedures for reporting incidents of discrimination and/or bias in their place of employment when faced with issues of racism, and still opt not to go to their union when it comes to racism in the workplace.

This lack of confidence in the union might be attributed to the fact that members are generally unaware of the many PSAC actions and resources dedicated to addressing anti-racism in their workplaces (such as training and educational courses, representation provided by the union, provisions in their collective agreement, publications, etc.). However, this may also have to do with a general feeling that they lack the support of their union, rather than a lack of information. Almost half of the women of African descent (42.86%) responded that they do not feel supported by their union, while 35.71% feel like they are. The remaining participants neither agree nor disagree.

As for those who choose to report incidents of workplace discrimination and/or harassment to their union, these respondents tend to first contact their regional representative, then local representative, and lastly the union steward. One respondent mentioned that the fear of reprisal caused them not to report an incident at all.

Based on this data alone, it's clear that a significant percentage of survey respondents do not feel supported by their union. PSAC must work on building trust and a meaningful sense of support with its membership when dealing with incidents of racism and discrimination, while raising awareness of the role that their union can play.



Survey respondents identified the role of employer-side HR departments as being problematic. HR ought to play a role in supporting women of African descent in combating racism; however, a common theme arose that HR is there to, "keep you down." One participant suggested that employer-side HR departments and unions need to interact more regularly on equity-based issues:

I feel that the union has to work with HR to develop a better awareness. Specifically, more educational awareness of the struggles Black women face is necessary. How are they going to help us if they aren't on the same wavelength? HR has to play a big part of it. A lot of our hiring managers were all white women. From what I've seen, HR should take an active role of being aware of racial disparities.

People of African descent are keenly aware that identity plays a role with respect to union support. The lack of understanding and acceptance of intersectional identities is repeatedly raised as a barrier to full participation and support from the union.

In order to feel like they belong, are valued, and are provided the necessary support to thrive professionally in their workplaces and unions, members need:

- ✓ a better sense of understanding and action from their teams, management, and unions when it comes to incorporating the lived experiences of women of African descent and the effects of discrimination;
- ✓ equitable treatment and opportunities; and
- ✓ to be seen and acknowledged.

The persistence of these barriers denotes a divide between what members seek and how PSAC addresses racism. Many feel that the union is regressing, rather than progressing. As one respondent put it:

The formula changed. In the past, we had support but now capacity is a major challenge. Presently, there are not enough people within the PSAC to help our own members. PSAC is a bureaucratic organization and when you try to challenge it, you are ostracized.

The very composition of PSAC's leadership is seen as a barrier. Historically and presently, PSAC's National Board of Directors, and the overwhelming majority of other elected positions, are comprised of white men. Through activism and organizing, some of these seats are now occupied by white women. As one respondent put it:

From the time I came into PSAC, the room was filled with white men and now it's white women. White women are being elected as the human rights representatives for their components. The majority of the executive council of many components are predominantly comprised of white members. These executive council members traditionally travel a lot and hold more power to make decisions and effect change. In contrast, when women of African descent do hold titles, they are often positions of secretary or shop steward, where opportunities for travel or decision-making are not as available. One ramification of not traveling is that executive council officers of components are not electing women of African descent because they are not getting to component conventions and getting to meet key players. Unfortunately, Black women do not have access to decision-making positions at local, regional, and national positions such as president and vice-president.

If the goal is to have a union that is reflective of the membership, including members of African descent, a tangible and active commitment is required to meet the need for representation at all levels.

In summary, survey findings demonstrate that systemic discrimination is still prevalent in the workplace and in the union. Unfortunately, most of the respondents have determined that the employer is the main responsible actor to address racism in the workplace. In part, because almost half of respondents simply don't feel supported by their union and by the lack of knowledge about the role of the union and anti-racist work undertaken by PSAC. More work needs to be done to ensure PSAC members have access to all the union resources available to them, and initiatives like this report are needed to affirm that the union supports its members on issues of racism and discrimination.

In order to feel like they belong, are valued, and are supported to thrive professionally at their workplace and in their union, survey respondents need to be treated equitably and to be offered the same opportunities that are given to their white counterparts. PSAC members who identify as women of African descent need to be seen and acknowledged and they require a better sense of understanding from their teams, management and union bodies when it comes to their lived experiences and the impacts of racial discrimination.

Regional round table: Women of African descent in the federal public service and PSAC

In 1867, George Pullman, owner of the Pullman Palace Car Company, established the Pullman porter by recruiting former slaves to attend to passengers in sleeping cars. This workforce of porters was comprised entirely of Black men. In 1945, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, an African-American union, successfully negotiated a collective agreement with the Canadian Pacific Rail company, a first in Canadian history. This achievement is generally not known, let alone celebrated. This milestone came to be after years of porters being poorly treated and barred from any existing Canadian union because of their race. Their workdays were 21 hours long and the conditions were terrible. One of the most alarming aspects of their work experience was that for simplicity's sake all porters were called "George." As a result of this blatant racism, the workers had their names and identities erased for convenience's sake.

Nearly 80 years later, we see a striking parallel in the lived experiences of women working in the federal public service. PSAC members who are women of African descent are being called generic names by colleagues and superiors, rather than by their given or chosen name in blatant acts of racism. This and several other painful revelations came to light during a regional roundtable that took place in the fall of 2021. The event was designed to hear the first-hand experiences and voices of women of African descent in both the federal public service and in their union.

Moderated by Dr. OmiSoore Dryden, the James R. Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies at Dalhousie University, the objectives of the roundtable were three-fold:

- To acknowledge the lived experiences of participants, and how these experiences affect the workplace and union lives of women-members of African descent in the Atlantic;
- To address what PSAC membership needs in terms of resources to combat racism in both our union and the public service; and
- To educate PSAC members on the impact of chattel slavery and racism in the federal public service by identifying overlapping concerns, issues, and experiences faced by women of African descent in the workplace.

Not surprisingly, participants expressed how racism, discrimination, and oppression result in isolation – be it in the workplace or the union. Regardless of the participants' varied backgrounds (age, position, years of employment), other common themes emerged:

- under-employment
- lack of opportunities
- lack of access to employment that is equivalent to their skillset
- impacts on mental health

Dr. Dryden beautifully articulated the situation that women of African descent face when she said, “the glass ceiling is opaque for Black woman. We can’t even find a door.”

The excerpts below highlight the experiences of three roundtable participants at various stages in their federal public service careers. All three women spoke under the condition of anonymity and chose pseudonyms to protect their identities. Similar to the experiences of the “Georges,” co-workers call these PSAC members by the wrong name, rather than learning their proper names. This has been their experience throughout their time in the federal public service, so they opted for these incorrect names as their pseudonyms:

- **Jane** is at the end of her career. She began her career with the federal public service in 1977 at the age of 17.
- **Natalie** is in the middle of her career with 15 years of experience in the federal public service.
- **Clara** is just beginning her career in the federal public service.

Dr. Dryden: What are key issues facing women of African descent in the public service?

Jane: *Currently, I am on sick leave without pay as a result of the racism I’ve experienced in the workplace. I believe that the systems and hiring practices are inherently racist. I am very discouraged. I now carry 10 different qualifications and I am only at the CR3 level. I was originally a CR2, but that level was abolished. I was required to train my co-workers for higher level positions but was never compensated for it. When I would ask for compensation for conducting the training, I was repeatedly told that the added burden of training my co-workers would not last for a long enough time frame to be worth compensation. Through this training, I watched my co-workers obtain higher level positions that I was excluded from receiving.*

Jane’s experience speaks to a recurrent theme we have seen amongst PSAC members who identify of African descent. Many reported being asked to train colleagues in the public service only to then watch those colleagues be promoted ahead of them despite their experience and seniority. Such experiences leave members feeling used and disrespected. They are considered qualified enough to train new workers but are often denied promotional opportunities.

Clara: *This all takes a toll on our mental health. I don’t think that people understand how Black women struggle. And even though I’ve done three-times the work, I’m made to feel like I’m not contributing enough. Mentally that weighs on you...People need to understand that there are forms of microaggressions that are directed at me every day. When they (co-workers) make comments about other races, it makes me wonder what they are saying about me when I am not around...I was at a retreat, and they were talking about the importance of being friends with people at work. I don’t feel like I connect with them. It’s not that I don’t want to interact with them, but I don’t see anyone who relates to my experiences. I don’t have that connection. There is an entitlement that allows them to constantly question the knowledge that Black women have. This makes you question your value. Right now, I’m in school getting my master’s degree. I often wonder if maybe I’m too ambitious? How are you ever going to succeed? Because you don’t have anyone to mentor you or support you. How do I move forward?*

Clara's account sheds light on the emotional impact of systemic discrimination. Enduring microaggressions and repeated exposure to overt and covert acts of racism creates a lasting impact of racial trauma. Employers are responsible for creating safe and healthy workplaces that are free of racism and discrimination. It is also important for public service workers to have access to trauma-informed and culturally sensitive mental health services to address such injuries when they occur.

Natalie: *I think some of the critical issues facing women of African descent today is the burden of too much work. I'm just feeling slammed with work. When I ask why I am getting more work than anyone else – the response is "because you're good at it." I started my career as a CR5 and then advanced to AS1. In our pool, everyone was promoted from an AS1 to an AS2 except the only two Black women. We were both delayed in moving to an AS2. To this day, no one could ever tell me why we were delayed. Certain people can progress quicker. We are Black women. Why weren't we given the same opportunity? In 2013, I was workforce-adjusted and I had to take a pay cut to stay in the public service. I'm always sad about the fact that, by listening to stories of other women here at the roundtable, the lack of transparency in administering the workforce adjustment is a repetitive cycle.*

In my situation, my assumption was that maybe it was because I required further education, so I went to law school. Now I am doing three times the amount of work as my co-workers who have less formal education. Why does it take this much education for me to do the same work? You don't feel valued. You feel like you want to work even harder to be respected. I think that's part of the learning journey. You think that you don't have enough education to advance so you get more education, only you don't advance, and you take on more work because you want to prove yourself. You are working harder, and you still don't advance. At the end, it's not your education or your experience. I know now that I don't need any more education, but it is all linked to racism and its effects on your confidence. It took me a while to see the internalized oppression.

Unfortunately, Natalie's story is not unique. Many PSAC members of African descent have shared experiences of feeling they need to overwork to prove their value in the public service. Several members have pointed to the sentiment that they need "to work twice as hard to be considered half as good". Women of African descent experience this pressure two-fold as they often feel they are being discriminated against due to their gender, in addition to their race. Feeling overworked and undervalued often leads to burnout and has a negative impact on a member's self-confidence, self-worth, and overall mental health.

Dr. Dryden to Jane: *What advice would you have for those of African descent who are planning on a career in the federal public service?*

Jane: *My advice is to document, document, document everything you experience, and God be with you. I can't believe what happened to me. I would never want it to happen to anyone else. It's okay to have an employment equity program but when there's no follow-up, there is nothing...does this program really work? Employment equity in our workplace has no accountability; no one to check and see if the program is working, no follow-up regarding employee participation. It seems as if employment equity is just a slot they have to fill. I'm trying to rebuild my confidence so that I can retire as whole person and not someone who has been used and abused. I was just their token.*

Another roundtable participant echoed this advice to those starting out, saying:

Do a good job, work, pay attention to the promotional opportunities whether it be competitions or assignments. It would have been good to recognize this earlier in my career. Back in our day, we were just thankful that we had a job. I didn't know about doing competitions. Be aware and maybe you will have some progression, instead of sitting at a job and working your best but not having any progression.

The lack of ability to advance and little enforcement of employment equity were recurring themes at the roundtable. There is a saying amongst public service workers of African descent that, "when you start as a CR4 you retire as a CR4." The common sentiment was that, despite how deserving employees of African descent are of a promotion, their work is completely undervalued, even when it is essential.

The concept of resilience was frequently raised and acknowledged at the roundtable. One participant highlighted:

There are systems in place that don't allow us to make the gains. Just trying to get your foot in the door is always a challenge. I think the power structure is a problem. But one thing we have as Black women is a wealth of resilience.

Another added:

We have had to be resilient. When you have a system that does not accommodate you from the hiring process to when you retire, we have had to learn to operate and survive in this hostile environment. Each time we have been attacked we get back up again. That's resilience. We should not have to be relied upon to be resilient. Women of African descent need to be given the same opportunities, recognizing that we live in a society where everyone deserves an opportunity to advance and everyone deserves to "retire as a whole person."

Unfortunately, it is clear that resilience was, and still is, a necessary survival skill for women of African descent working in the federal public service.

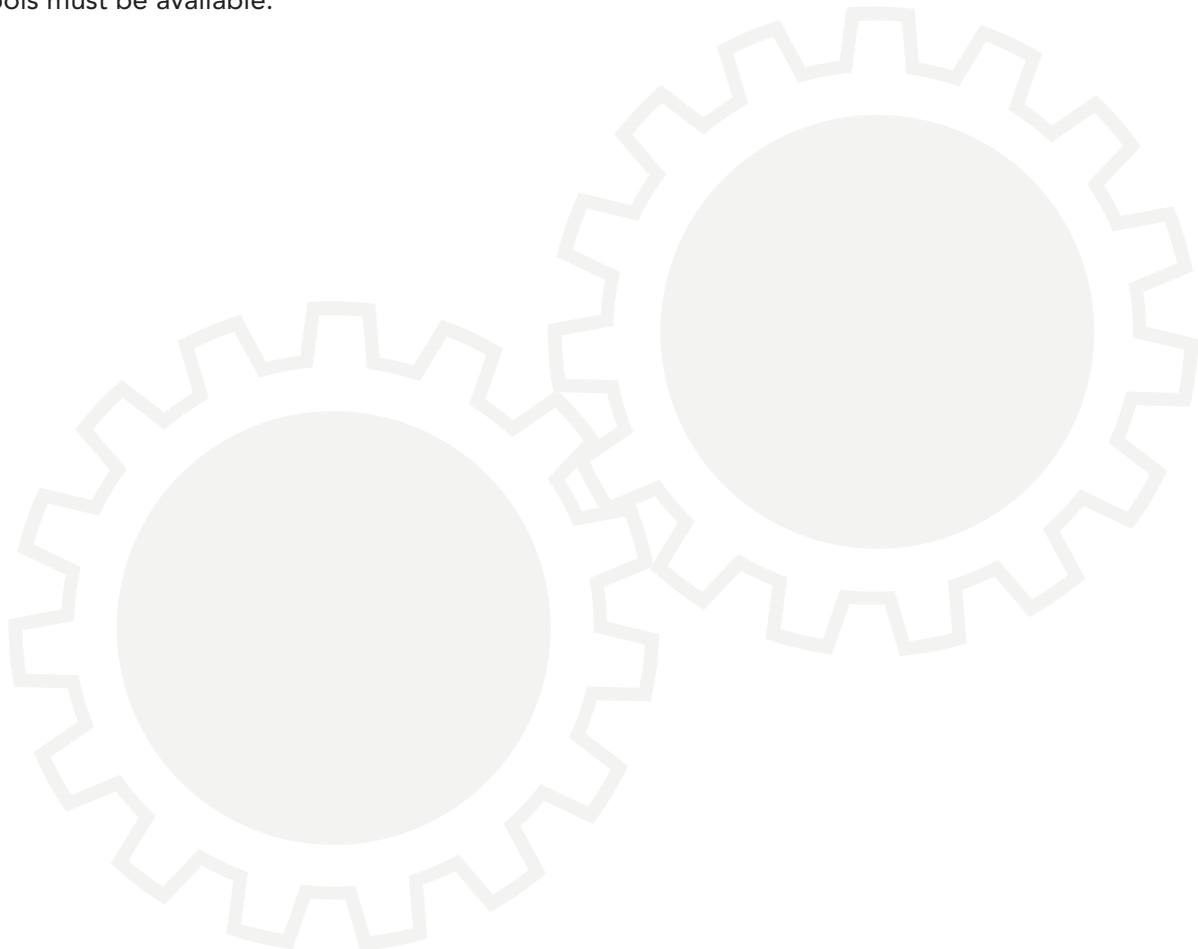
Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS)

As a result of pervasive and persistent racism and resulting inequity, PSAC members of African descent faced generations of trauma and negative consequences. This intergenerational trauma known as Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome is defined by Dr. Joy DeGruy as a:

condition that exists as a consequence of multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants resulting from centuries of chattel slavery, a form of slavery which was predicated on the belief that African Americans were inherently/genetically inferior to whites. This was then followed by institutionalized racism which continues to perpetuate injury.

Dr. DeGruy highlights that people of African descent must be given the same opportunities, recognizing that we live in a society where everyone deserves an opportunity to advance and thrive.

This concept of PTSS highlights the importance of mental health support. Given the trauma of systemic racism, microaggressions, and isolation, the need for therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists with lived experience and/or an understanding of the specific needs of women of African descent is crucial, although often sadly lacking. For women of African descent to be truly supported and able to succeed in the federal public service, the right mental health support and tools must be available.



Black Class-Action Lawsuit

In 1800, a person enslaved by the name of Nancy took her 'owner', Caleb Jones, to the New Brunswick Supreme Court, in an attempt to sue for her freedom. This was the first instance in Canada of a woman of African descent taking legal action against the institution of slavery. Not surprisingly, the court sided with Caleb Jones.

Over 200 years later, the systemic discrimination and anti-Black racism that is embedded in Canadian institutions has forced people of African descent to continue the fight for their human rights and equity in the workplace. In December 2020, twelve Black public service workers, including PSAC members Nicholas Marcus Thompson, Jennifer Phillips, Wagna Celidon, Michelle Herbert, and Shalane Rooney, launched a class action lawsuit against the federal government of Canada. The suit denounces the government's discriminatory hiring and promotional practices, as well as the systemic employee exclusion of Black public service workers from executive and leadership roles. Quoting the statement of claim:

Damages include the wrongful failure to promote, intentional infliction of mental suffering, constructive dismissal, wrongful termination, negligence, and in particular, violations of employment law, human rights law, and Charter breaches.

The claim includes any past or present federal public service worker from the past 50 years who identify as Black, Caribbean or of African descent. It makes reference to the aforementioned statistics demonstrating the under-representation of people of African descent in the highest positions within the federal public service. The lawsuit demands that the federal government implement a plan to truly diversify the federal public service and to provide restitution to tens of thousands of Black public service workers who have suffered financial and emotional harm from systemic discrimination and anti-Black racism. In addition to asking for changes to the *Employment Equity Act*, the Black Class Action has also asked for a \$100 million mental health fund for Black public service workers to address the racial trauma they have experienced. As of April 2022, more than 1500 current and former Black public service workers have joined the lawsuit.

Systemic racism is pervasive, and no organization is exempt – PSAC included. PSAC acknowledges this and recognizes that there have been situations where it could have done more to address the discrimination and racism experienced by its members in the federal public service. The union is committed to improving the supports available to Black, Indigenous and racialized members in the workplace.

In May 2021, PSAC's National Board of Directors adopted an Anti-Racism Action Plan to review PSAC's policies, structures, and membership services from an anti-racist lens. The plan includes consultations with Black, Indigenous and other racialized members, the development of anti-racist tools for union leaders, and an intersectional review of all collective agreements to ensure they are barrier-free. To strengthen and improve our representation of racialized workers, PSAC will launch an Advocacy and Representation on Racial Discrimination Workshop that will be provided to all shop stewards, local executives and component executives to better equip them on how to handle grievances involving racism.

PSAC pledges to do better, and strongly supports the historic Black Class Action lawsuit, providing both resources and funds. PSAC's legal team and staff meet regularly with the Black Class Action Secretariat to share resources, coordinate media coverage, and promote social media content. PSAC has also published in-depth interviews of plaintiffs, held an informational panel about the case, and commissioned a survey on how to improve our representation of Black PSAC members.

A case for reparations

Reparations is the global demand for redress, compensation, and restitution that addresses the tragedy and resulting political, social, and economic damage caused to Afrikan people by the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, and colonialism, including its lasting legacy of poverty, discrimination, and anti-Black racism.

- Definition from the Children's book, *R is for Reparations*

One cannot speak to the transatlantic slave trade, its lasting legacies, and the breadth of what happened without also examining how generational inequities might be addressed to enable all those of African descent to move forward as a people. This is the call for reparations.

In 1807, a bill was introduced in the British Parliament that would lead to the eventual – but partial – abolition of slavery. Then, on August 1, 1834, the Slavery Abolition Act (the Act) was passed, which freed more than 800,000 Black people in Britain's overseas colonies, including what was to become Canada. However, the Act only provided for 'partial liberation'. Children under the age of six were emancipated, while others were retained as 'apprentices' by enslavers for four to six years.

The Slavery Compensation Act was adopted in 1837 whereby, slave owners and institutions in Caribbean colonies, Mauritius, and South Africa were paid for the economic loss of each enslaved person. Even more appalling, was that these compensations continued until 2015. Even with a legislative end to slavery, injustice continues.

Reparations require a long-term investment and process that aims to identify the scope of the problem, address it, and ultimately to change mindsets. There must be an acknowledgement that harm has been done and that correcting it will not be a "one size fits all" solution. Work is required to identify what needs to be done to make each individual feel whole. This requires money and resources. As part of any initiative to address the systemic effects of perpetual racism in the workplace experienced by women of African descent, it is necessary to support individual journeys to wholeness with meaningful education, work, and the ability to advance.

To be "made whole" is a central philosophy to grievance resolutions and union activity. For example, when filing a grievance along with various demands, there is often a final request of the grieving party to be "made whole." This means that, should the grievance be meritorious, the griever should be compensated to a level that brings them to the same position as they would have been should the injury/harm not have occurred.

People of African descent suffered injury and harm as a result of the transatlantic slave trade and this ought to be recognized and addressed. Reparations is a mechanism to do so. Reparations have been demanded for decades throughout the multiple jurisdictions where slavery was practiced - including here in Canada.

Despite little progress, Dr. Lynn Jones, an African-Canadian trade union member, advocate and the first Black person to join the executive ranks of the CLC, continues to champion reparations here in Canada. The biggest reparations movements are found in the Caribbean, the United States and the UK. Canada lags far behind. In 2017, the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent visited Canada and recommended a transformative justice approach. The report recommended that the Government of Canada should:

- i.** Issue an apology and consider providing reparations to African Canadians for enslavement and historical injustices;
- ii.** Legally recognize African Canadians as a distinct group who have made, and continue to make, profound economic, political, social, cultural and spiritual contributions to Canadian society;
- iii.** Take concrete steps to preserve the history of enslavement and the political, social and economic contributions of African Canadians by establishing monuments in their honour; and
- iv.** Ensure that textbooks and other educational materials accurately reflect historical facts as they relate to past tragedies and atrocities, in particular enslavement, to avoid negative stereotypes of people of African descent.

To date, the Government of Canada has yet to act on this report or implement any of the recommendations.

Similarly, all internal systems in the union must be examined to identify areas where members of African descent have been, and may continue to be, marginalized, isolated, and/or have experienced discrimination. As noted above, systemic racism exists in all institutions. Reparations are essential to correct these systemic failings. The first step is to recognize that these inequities exist, to reconcile with the past, and to review and revise internal systems and processes. These steps are imperative to pave the way for women, and all people of African descent in Canada, to be made whole.

PSAC action recommendations

PSAC recognizes that addressing systemic racism and discrimination within the union is a top organizational priority. To that end, PSAC recently committed to undergoing a full review of its systems, documents, and processes to ensure that all elements of the union are free from racism and discrimination. Furthermore, as noted above, PSAC recently developed a full Anti-Racism Action Plan with the following objectives:

- ✓ **Raise awareness and provide tools** for leaders, union representatives and the general membership to become anti-racist activists;
- ✓ **Increase the participation and engagement** of Black, Indigenous, Asian and racialized members within the union at all levels – local, component, region and national;
- ✓ **Ensure representation** through available recourse processes with a Black, Indigenous, Asian and anti-racism lens;
- ✓ **Meaningfully engage with, and support,** community organizations and initiatives fighting racism against Black, Indigenous, Asian and racialized communities; and
- ✓ **Develop and undertake** anti-racism human rights and political campaigns with Black, Indigenous and Asian lenses.

There is a recognition of the urgent need to provide training and tools to help members understand the impact of racism, as well as the need for training specifically aimed to support Black, Indigenous, Asian, and racialized members to address some of the barriers they face in the union.

The Anti-Racism Action Plan is comprehensive and—to be effective—it will require substantive resources in terms of personnel and financial commitment. While it will take time to implement the full action plan, steps are already being undertaken.

When asked why a participant brought her daughter to a union event, she responded:

They are young and the next generation. It is informative for them to know what is going on and they should be informed as much as they can. What better place than at union events? You have to start somewhere. Union events, workshops – that's how you are going to know what's going on around you.

It is this sense of commitment to future generations that compels us to act.

PSAC path forward

Based on consultations with members and the results of our survey, PSAC has identified several action items to improve our support and representation of our members who identify as women of African descent, as well as Indigenous and other racialized members. The union must:

- commit to the acquisition of disaggregated data of our racialized members;
- support mental health initiatives for racialized members;
- ensure that Grievance and Adjudication Officers have the necessary expertise to handle issues involving race and discrimination;
- dedicate seats for racialized members at conventions, committees, and conferences.
- ensure that resources are allocated for training and development on anti-racism;
- establish and provide stable funding and resources to support the Anti-Racism Action Plan;
- prioritize and establish a regular cycle of anti-discrimination audits;
- report annually on issues of discrimination within the union to the National Board of Directors;
- provide anti-oppression training and education at all levels of the union on the effects of discrimination faced by members;
- increase representation of racialized people on hiring committees and competition boards within the union and provide leaders with tools, resources and education on inclusive hiring;
- support women of African descent in their career growth and development within the union by offering mentorship opportunities and training;
- enhance internal accountability and leadership to fight discrimination in the workplace and within the union;
- take immediate action when a discrimination complaint is raised within the union;
- support the call for reparations for the discrimination and racial trauma that has impacted people of African descent;
- continue to support the Black Class Action and other legal actions or grievances filed by people of African descent to address the discrimination they have faced working for the federal public service;
- host more resolution writing education sessions so members feel empowered to use union tools and mechanisms to effect change;
- provide education on governance in the union (effective bylaws, constitution);
- provide leadership training to racialized members on running locals, secondary trauma, time management, communication, etc.;
- implement cultural competency training for all union leaders; and
- develop an information hub related to human rights, equity issues and social justice accessible to the membership to empower members channel their activism or partner with others to write/research with the goal of contributing to positive and constructive change.

Conclusion

PSAC acknowledges that action on resolution GEN-041 was significantly delayed. However, the union fully recognizes that there is hard work that needs to be done and is committed to fighting racism in all its forms. Dismantling racist structures and institutions must be a priority for each and every member. Racist structures and practices must, and will, change. All members, regardless of their role within the union, must take responsibility. It is time to both learn, and do better.

While women of African descent should be applauded for their past resiliency, transformative change is essential to the way that members are represented and supported so that this exceptional resiliency is no longer required. It is important that the current narrative is disrupted and that persistent stereotypes are addressed if PSAC and the labour movement are to recognize wholly and respectfully, the historical and lived realities of women of African descent.

The transatlantic slave trade is critical to fully understanding Canada's history and to learning and recognizing the injustices of the past that, unfortunately, continue to this day. This particular history, and the history of women of African descent in Atlantic Canada, must be acknowledged in PSAC's anti-racism work going forward.

Limitations of this paper

While the objective of this paper was to educate members on the impact of slavery on women in the federal public service, and address the role of unions, there was a lack of data available from which to build on. It cannot be overstated that disaggregated data on race and gender is vital to any anti-racism work moving forward. The Atlantic Labour Movement Survey on Racism and the Regional Roundtable Discussions with women of African descent were by no means comprehensive. Rather, they merely represent a starting point for discussion regarding the issues facing women of African descent in the federal public service. More detailed and exhaustive research is required to collect and evaluate data objectively that reflects not only Atlantic women of African descent, but also a larger, more national perspective. It is recommended that resources, funding and an appropriately selected committee be instituted to continue the research and objectives of this paper.

Acknowledgments

This paper would not have happened but for the determination and drive of the members of the Halifax Regional Women's Committee, both past and present. Thank you to each and every participant of the roundtable who showed up for change, and who demonstrated courage and generosity with their experiences and their words. To PSAC staff who assisted with the development of the paper, distribution of the survey, organizing the roundtable and more, many thanks for your dedication and support. And to everyone who took the time to fill out the survey, thank you for your time and your contribution. Finally, Dr. Lynn Jones cannot be thanked enough for her insight and time.

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Appendix A

Racism in your workplace and in our union survey

Questions

- Gender Identity
- Race/ethnicity: The Canadian Census identifies the following categories in its census of the population. Please indicate how you yourself-identify? This self-identification is not intended as an indication of one's place of origin, citizenship, language or culture and recognizes that there are differences both between and among subgroups of members of equity groups. If you are of mixed-heritage, please indicate this by checking off all that apply, rather than using the "other" line unless parts of your self-identification do not appear in this list. Please check all that apply.
- What component or directly chartered local are you affiliated with?
- What PSAC region are you located in?
- For the purposes of employment equity, "age" has been identified as a factor that can positively or negatively impact opportunities and experiences. With that in mind, please confirm your age range.
- How concerned are you about the impact of racism, in your place of work?
- Which of the following experiences of racism and/or discrimination do you face at your place of employment?
- Whose responsibility is it to address racism in the workplace?
- How confident are you that your workplace leadership is committed to creating an inclusive anti-racist environment?
- How safe do you or would you feel addressing any form of racism and/or discrimination with the following?
- What do you need most from your workplace, to feel like you belong, are valued and are supported to thrive professionally?
- Do you think your place of employment offers equal opportunities for career growth?
- Are you aware of any actions or ideas implemented by PSAC to address anti-racism in the workplace such as training and educational courses or provisions in your collective agreement, publications etc.?
- As a woman of African descent, I feel supported by my union.
- Do you think your union offers equal opportunities for union development?
- Who would you report incidents of discrimination/ and or harassment to in your union?
- When faced with issues of racism, I know and understand the procedures for reporting incidents of discrimination and/or bias in my place of employment?
- If you have never been active in your union, why not?
- How best can PSAC support you in the workplace so that you feel like you belong, are valued and are supported?
- Would you like someone from PSAC to contact you for further follow-up?
- If yes, please provide your personal email address (ie: an email account that is not operated by your employer)

Appendix B

GLOSSARY

African diaspora: The term commonly used to describe the mass dispersion of peoples from Africa during the transatlantic slave trade from the 1500s to the 1800s. This diaspora took millions of people from Western and Central Africa to different regions throughout the Americas and the Caribbean.

Chattel slavery: Is a civil relationship in which one person has absolute power over the life, fortune, and liberty of another. Chattel slavery means that one person has total ownership of another. There are two basic forms of chattel: domestic chattel, with menial household duties, and productive chattel, working in the fields or mines.

International Year for People of African Descent: On December 18, 2009, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the year beginning on January 1, 2011, the International Year for People of African Descent. The year aimed at strengthening national action and regional and international cooperation for the benefit of people of African descent. This includes their full enjoyment of economic, cultural, social, civil and political rights; their participation and integration in all political, economic, social and cultural aspects of society; and the promotion of a greater knowledge of and respect for their diverse heritage and culture.

Intersectionality: Complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, transphobia, classism and more) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.

Middle Passage: The journey of enslaved West African people across the Atlantic by ship as part of the slave trade. Ships travelled from Britain to Africa carrying goods, which were exchanged for captured people who were then taken to be sold in America or the West Indies. Conditions on the journey were terrible and many Africans died as a result.

Racial gaslighting: Racial gaslighting undermines the lived experiences of racialized people. It refers to the process whereby racialized people question their own thoughts and actions due to systematically delivered racialized messages that make them second guess their own lived experiences with racism.

Reparations: Something that one does or gives to correct a mistake or wrongdoing. Reparations are usually made by governments to make amends for wars, serious crimes, and abuse.

Stereotypes: A preconceived generalization of a group of people. This generalization ascribes the same characteristic(s) to all members of the group, regardless of their individual differences.

Systemic racism: This is an interlocking and reciprocal relationship between individual, institutional, and structural levels that function as a system of racism. These various levels of racism operate together in a lockstep model and function together as whole system. These levels are:

- Individual (within interactions between people)
- Institutional (within institutions and systems of power)
- Structural or societal (among institutional and across society)

Transformative justice: Is a socio-political framework that seeks to respond to violence without creating more violence and/or to engage in harm reduction as to lessen or eliminate an environment that enables violence.

Underemployment: Is a measure of employment and labor utilization in the economy that looks at how well the labor force is being used in terms of skills, experience, and availability to work. People who are classified as underemployed include workers who are highly skilled but working in low-paying or low-skill jobs and part-time workers who would prefer to be full-time.

Underground Railroad: This was a secret network of abolitionists (people who wanted to abolish slavery). They helped African Americans escape from enslavement in the American South to free northern states or to Canada. The Underground Railroad was the largest anti-slavery freedom movement in North America. It brought between 30,000 and 40,000 people to British North America (now Canada).

