

Advancing inclusive leadership for a feminist economic recovery

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Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified pre-existing conditions and barriers to women’s participation in leadership and in the workplace. We believe in a feminist economic recovery, and a critical part of that process is for organizations to understand the ways that they can support and retain women in leadership. This report draws from the experiences and wisdom of seven notable women leaders who generously contributed their time towards this project:

Humaira Ahmed, Founder and CEO of Locelle

Kiana Alexander-Hill, Lead Executive Officer of the Raven Institute

Aftab Erfan, Chief Equity Officer of the City of Vancouver

Nikki Fraser, Indigenous Advocate

Pamela Jeffery, Founder and CEO of the Prosperity Project

Tamara Vrooman, President and CEO of the Vancouver Airport Authority (YVR)

Ellen Woodsworth, Founder and External Chairperson of Women Transforming Cities

Throughout interviews with these panelists, five themes emerged strongly across the breadth of their experiences and perspectives: mentorship, trust, inclusion, authenticity and justice. These themes tie in everything from advice for women navigating their careers, calls to action, and personal stories. Finally, we draw attention to valuable work done by other organizations focused on women and labour for further reading on the impacts of the pandemic on women.

While the intent of our report initially aimed to answer questions about the post-COVID era, many findings and insights are not unique to COVID and contribute to building more just and equitable systems of leadership in the future. We offer this collection of personal stories, lived experiences and calls to action to a growing and urgent collection of reports and recommendations on the impacts of the pandemic on women and imagining a just path forward.

Introduction

In BC and beyond, we are seeing how women are bearing the brunt of the economic impacts of COVID-19, holding the majority of domestic labour and childcare responsibilities. Many women recognize that working full-time while also homeschool teaching full-time and taking care of a household is simply not sustainable. We are interested in exploring ideas around how our workplaces can be better structured to reflect and improve the conditions of women's lives. We also acknowledge that these burdens are not new, but rather, these structural inequities have been amplified by the pandemic.

We hold this report as part of the constellation of reports that have surfaced throughout the pandemic focusing on a feminist economic recovery. Women's organizations, in particular, have been driving the conversation on women's labour under the conditions of the pandemic. Our interviews and findings seek to be in conversation with the existing research and recommendations that have emerged in this past year. Further reading can be found at the end of this report.

Methodology

The findings of this report primarily centre the wisdom and lived experiences of women in leadership. While the intent of our report aimed to answer questions about the post-COVID era, many findings and insights are not unique to COVID and maintain relevance long-term. Interviews were conducted virtually with each of our 7 panelists through winter 2020-21. The responses have been categorized into 5 overarching themes of mentorship, trust, inclusion, authenticity and justice, which will be expanded upon throughout this report.

Meet the Panelists

Our intention with this report was to centre the wisdom and lived experiences of women in leadership. The themes and recommendations we draw upon are rooted in the stories they shared through virtual interviews conducted Winter 2020-21 with the project scholar. We are privileged to learn from the following women, whose answers and insights shaped this report:

Humaira Ahmed

Humaira Ahmed is the Founder and CEO of Locelle – a platform dedicated to advancing and progressing women in the workplace. With a background in Software Engineering and Marketing, Humaira is extremely passionate about empowering young girls and women by breaking gender stereotypes. As a working mom of two little girls, Humaira wants more women to pursue their dreams fearlessly, take a leap of faith and dream big.

Kiana Alexander-Hill

Kiana Alexander-Hill is the Lead Executive Officer at the Raven Institute, Team Lead at Iskwew Air, and Director at Indigenous LIFT Collective. In 2019, Kiana was named WXN's Top 100 Most Powerful Women in Canada in the Future Leaders Category and Future of Good's 2019 list of 21 Young Impact Leaders. Most recently, Kiana completed her Masters degree in Leadership at Royal Roads University with distinction for her thesis titled: A Journey to kiscâyâwin ᑭᑭᑭᑭᑭᑭ: Belonging Within us, Around us and Between us A Co-Created Exploration into Cultivating Collective Belonging for Young People- that was awarded the Governor General's Gold Medal.

Aftab Erfan

Aftab Erfan, PhD, is a scholar-practitioner working in the areas of community development, strategic planning, diversity and leadership development. Aftab started her career in the environmental movement and has been an employee in local government, university and corporate settings. She is the inaugural Chief Equity Officer at the City of Vancouver and previously worked as the Director of Dialogue and Conflict Engagement at the UBC Equity and Inclusion office.

Nikki Fraser

Nikki Fraser is an Indigenous advocate and proud mom of two from the Secwépemc Nation. Nikki has used her platform to advocate for young Indigenous Women and Girls by participating in meetings, conferences, and gatherings in communities across Canada, United States of America and Central America. Recognized by her work with the Indigenous communities, Nikki was nominated for “Young Leaders for the Sustainable Development Goals” to the United Nations Youth Envoy in 2016 and was one of the seventeen selected among 18,000 nominations. Nikki is currently enrolled in Thompson Rivers University pursuing her B.A. in Sociology and Political Science.

Pamela Jeffery

Pamela Jeffery is the founder and CEO of the Prosperity Project, a new not-for-profit organization working to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Canadian women who are being disproportionately affected. Pamela is also the founder and CEO of the Women's Executive Network (WXN) in 1997, Canada's Most Powerful Women: Top 100 Awards in 2003 and the Canadian Board Diversity Council in 2008.

Tamara Vrooman

Tamara Vrooman is the President and CEO of the Vancouver Airport Authority (YVR). Tamara's previous leadership experience includes working as president and CEO of Vancity, the

country's largest credit union, and as British Columbia's first and youngest deputy minister of finance. Tamara has also been named the next chairperson of the Canada Infrastructure Bank and 12th chancellor of Simon Fraser University.

Ellen Woodsworth

Ellen Woodsworth is a writer, organizer, and international speaker and consultant on urban issues. Ellen is the founder and external chairperson of Women Transforming Cities International Society and approaches urban issues from a gendered intersectional lens. A former Vancouver City councillor, Ellen is passionate about working for social justice, economic equality and environmentally sound planning.

Themes

Throughout our interviews with panelists, five themes emerged strongly across the breadth of their experiences and perspectives: mentorship, trust, inclusion, authenticity and justice. These themes tie in everything from individual advice, calls on institutions, and personal stories. Findings are compiled into these themes below. Itemized recommendations can be found at the end of this report.

Mentorship

“To young women: asking for help is not a sign of weakness, it’s a sign of strength.”

Tamara Vrooman

The significance of mentorship as a source of support for women in leadership emerged as a constant, strong theme. Panelists were asked to reflect on what supports they wished they had received as a young leader, or what supports they wish emerging leaders could have access to.

Aftab Erfan emphasized the unique, reciprocal value of mentorship between older and younger folks. “I don’t think I realized as a young person how much expertise I actually had. It took a very long time to realize that,” said Erfan. She highlights skills like comfort with technology, communicative skills, and the ability to speak truth to power as important skillsets of a younger generation, ones that could be useful for seasoned leaders to learn from. Erfan hopes to put in place a mentorship program for older people, by younger folks.

Ellen Woodsworth also highlighted the importance of engaging women across generations:

“Young women are looking for something to get engaged with. I think it’s really important for them to be in an organized women’s movement where there are supports and the mentoring and the places where they can feel like they can make a change. We need them to be part of this movement. We need their leadership to address racism, colonialism, homophobia, transphobia and Islamophobia. I think there's a lot of older women a huge number of the population are older women who could be helping share what they know. Most younger women don't know anything about the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. What a powerful organization that was - and the BC Federation of Women, Press Gang publishers, Kinesis, The Other Women Newspaper, CORA the Women’s Liberation Bookmobile, the Women’s Bookstore etc. We built those organizations because, we couldn't even get birth control, let alone abortion, and homosexuality was illegal. There were very few basic women's rights. So, we had to fight for them. We need to build those Coalition's again this time with an intersectional lens. Young racialized, Indigenous, Asian and other marginalized women are looking for things to get engaged with. We have to make those organizations work for them. We have to give them the tools to build new movements that includes them.”

She also highlighted the importance of mentorship and listening to Black, Indigenous, women of colour. “For the wide diversity of women who are really looking to create a new world, but if they're not given the supports necessary in the in the understanding of the context in which they're moving into, and they fail, that that's a tragic loss of skills and knowledge and enthusiasm,” said Woodsworth.

Humaira Ahmed believes emerging women leaders need good feedback, tailored support, and access to people who you identify with in leadership positions. “No matter where you are in your leadership journey, it’s important to have people who understand you and can support you. People who can really lift you up and remind you of how amazing you are,” she said. For Ahmed, seeing yourself represented in leadership is key. “If you don't see people like you in certain positions, it's hard to think that you could get there. I know that if I had access to somebody who was from Pakistan who did great work, just even connecting with them would have been amazing to just be like ‘oh, wow, she can do it – and I can too’”

Tamara Vrooman reflected on the importance of asking for help. “If I could give one piece of advice to young women that I meet, it’s that asking for help is not a sign of weakness, it's a sign of strength - it's essential. And so how do I, as more senior woman leader now, how do I find ways to create opportunities for that to happen?” Vrooman called upon senior leaders to do their part in creating a culture and creating opportunities where asking for help is not only encouraged, but seen as a positive attribute.

Trust

“Give people the opportunity to do their best work – when they can, where they can.”

Humaira Ahmed

Trust emerged strongly as a key theme, especially in light of increasingly more common work-from-home conditions. The ability for employers to trust their employees and their ability to regulate what works best for them came across as a consistent message. Flexibility and support are key in a work-from-home scenario, but these are not one-size-fits-all approaches. As the pandemic lifts, understanding what each woman needs and desires will be key to their retention.

Tamara Vrooman reflected on her experience developing a maternity leave policy as Deputy Minister of Finance for the province of BC, and what it’s taught her about the importance of empowering those who are impacted by policy:

“I found there was no maternity leave for deputy ministers, because there never been one that had taken one before. There had not been young women as deputy ministers before, and so being given the opportunity, and requirement anyway, to draft a maternity leave for a senior public servant, was tremendously helpful. First of all, I could design things that were actually person centered, which is what all those policies should be, but often aren't. And second, I could consult with people and I did so in a way that hopefully left a legacy for others. It was engaging, it required me to think about what my needs would be and to build something. In one way, they didn't have a choice because somebody had to write the policy, but the fact that they allowed me to do it myself and took the advice of what somebody in my situation would actually need. And was very empowering. And I think quite practical as a way to get it done.”

Kiana Alexander-Hill reflected on the ways the entanglement of home life and work life has been put on display. In particular since COVID, Alexander-Hill has been reframing how a lot of the processing and the space to do what is necessary within families and communities is actually in service to the work rather than taking away from it. “I’ve really been rethinking and recalibrating how my own wellness and ability to take care of myself and those that are around me, ultimately, is in better service of whatever I'm doing.”

Nikki Fraser highlighted the opportunities and accessibility of working-from-home, and what we can learn as the pandemic lifts. “There's something about that face-to-face interaction that you can't really get online. But we also know that we all we don't need that every single time. And I think that's something this pandemic has shown us is to kind of reevaluate how we do things and when we need to do things and appreciate when we have the opportunity to meet

face-to-face and, and able to travel,” Fraser said. Fraser also emphasized the importance of demonstrating appreciation for your employees and providing them with opportunities for growth.

Aftab Erfan reinforced the value of a workplace culture that understands and trusts employees. She recalled working in environments at UBC and at the City where the managers understood that everyone is doing the best that they can and taking into account the difficulty of this moment. For Erfan, one of the perks of this is mindset and working from home is the ability to manage childcare and pick up her kids from school. “The flexibility of working from home has allowed for a different kind of balance and engagement with my kids that was impossible before.”

Humaira Ahmed echoed the importance of ‘giving people the opportunity to do their best work, when they can, where they can’. “I cannot even imagine not giving that flexibility to my team members. And it doesn't happen until you are in those shoes, which is why I think women in leadership, executive leadership is extremely important to be able to understand the challenges,” said Ahmed. She also emphasized the need to understand that women will have different challenges and preferences with working from home. Someone who lives alone faces the very different challenges with working for home than someone who’s unable to focus with their family around, and it’s the employer’s responsibility to be able to offer flexibility for all needs.

Inclusion

“It’s really critical, as we come out of this time, that leaders take the opportunity to really step back and ask themselves: am I leading inclusively?”

Pamela Jeffery

The impact of inclusive organizations and the culture they create is not unique to a post-COVID context. Inclusive organizations have always and will always be places where women, especially racialized, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQIA+ and disabled women, will feel most supported in pursuit of their goals and work. As we think about what will be needed to retain women in the workforce in our post-COVID economic recovery, inclusion is at the core of this call to action.

Kiana Alexander-Hill spoke about the importance of a shared humanity and bringing your whole self with you. “I think this idea of understanding and accepting things that, often, I think, workplaces have culturally embedded as different aspects of ourselves to leave at the door or not to be integrated in the work that we do. I think that this forced kind of interconnectedness of all things is something that has always existed, it's not new because of COVID. But I think people have had to adapt to understanding people's circumstances a little

bit more,” said Alexander-Hill. She emphasizes the importance of these reflections to organizational survival long-term: “I think it's becoming more and more clear that if organizations want to survive, grow and thrive in our world, it will no longer be possible without understanding our own positionality, but also how we support diverse representation and in sets of lived experiences and understandings.”

Humaira Ahmed called for going beyond buzzwords and fostering an inclusive workplace culture. “I think a lot of times there's buzzwords of diversity and inclusion, and then they hire consultants to do the work for them. That doesn't change anything, you basically end up with a new policy. What really helps, when you think of like long-term solutions, it's asking: is this sustainable? Is this something that we can do? You've hired a consultant, but who's going to continue to lead it? Do you have resources in place?” said Ahmed. She probes companies to think about their workplace culture and what they are doing to make it inclusive.

Tamara Vrooman emphasized the need for leadership to lead by example and ensure the tone at the top is consistent with these values. “I think it's quite important that I hear and participate and receive that feedback around what we could be doing differently and better as the CEO, as much as the head of diversity, or the head of HR, or the diversity Working Group, to model the expectation across the organization,” said Vrooman. She also called for companies to open source their policies to share and learn from others on what’s working well.

Pamela Jeffery calls upon leaders to reflect on their practices. “It’s really critical, as we come out of this time, that leaders take the opportunity to really step back and ask themselves: am I leading inclusively? Am I paying attention to ESG (Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance)? Am I setting the company up for success to be sustainable to be here in in 10 years’ time or am I falling back into the status quo? If you maintain the status quo and are blind to the new factors in your environment, both internal and external, then I think you're risking the survival of your organization.” Jeffery also underscores the importance of collecting self-identification demographic data to be able to get a complete picture of the different experiences that employees across various identities and lived experiences may have.

Aftab Erfan spoke of the possibilities for workplace affinity groups and addressing the need for interpersonal connection. “It feels so much more essential now, because we don't have the in-person interactions. It's a very helpful social infrastructure to build for doing equity work, or any form of leadership work,” said Erfan. She also underscored the need to be inclusive with the definition of caregiver, and how it doesn’t exclusively mean caring for your children. “For a lot of people, caregiving is not only their kids or their parents, but it's a close friend, or non-traditional families, or polyamorous families, like that is not a part of the picture. I have seen some much more difficult conversations for colleagues who find

themselves in those kinds of arrangements and having to make a case for why it is that I need to take time off for a friend who is in need, or time to grieve the passing of somebody who was not in my immediate family but is family to me.”

Nikki Fraser echoed the need to expand our understandings of “caregiver”. “Instead of just focusing on me being a single mom, I am also aware that there are single dads. Single parents and caregivers, we all kind of blanket under this blanket approach of being self-sacrificing to ensure that other people’s needs are being met too.” Fraser also shared her previous difficulties managing accessible transportation in Kamloops, and how the opportunity to work-from-home would have helped with this. “I kind of fell under the umbrella where I had no transportation, and this organization didn’t know that. It’d be great if I could work from home, it gives me an opportunity to ask my sister to use her vehicle less.”

Authenticity

“Emerging leaders need to understand who they are and how they show up in the world.”

Kiana Alexander-Hill

The ability to be authentic in your work: to bring your whole self to your projects and to do work that aligns with your values. These aspects of connection and purpose will be critical in providing women with organizations and roles that fulfill them and makes them inclined to stay.

Pamela Jeffery reflected on her early career experiences as a working mother, and the importance of creating spaces where women leaders can be authentic and empower each other. “That led me to create the Women’s Executive Network, made up of women who were in management, executive board and professional roles. I was then enabled to empower them, and give them a voice to share their stories, share their lessons learned. And we did that nationally for years and years. I felt, by empowering what grew to be 22,000 women who were members in three countries, that is when I felt empowered to be able to make the right choices for me as a working mother. I could put in the right policies for my team, which was largely made up of women, so we could be a family friendly workplace. But I had to do it myself.”

Kiana Alexander-Hill emphasized the importance of understanding who you are as a leader. “I think emerging leaders need to understand who they are and how they show up in the world, and spaces for them to find their voice. The rest stems from there, but that’s the foundation of all of the work that you do. It’s the foundation of understanding your values, its foundation of understanding how you lead and why you lead,” said Alexander-Hill. She also considered the ways the pandemic has amplified existing issues for women:

“I think this idea of no matter how organizations move forward, understanding that these are all the roles that women have always played in their lives. And so how do we create schedules and ways of being and relating and working together that, instead of pushing those aside, actually acknowledge that we all hold them? How do we actually create spaces that support that, rather than require energy from women to try and compartmentalize those things? Because as we've seen in COVID, that's just not possible. It never was possible, but it's been amplified in this in this case.”

Ellen Woodsworth spoke about the difficulties of balancing paid work, family work and community work. “I didn't have time for my immediate family, and I think that's true for a lot of women. If you make the decision to run for elected office, there's no childcare. There's no eldercare. There's no safe public transit. There's nobody who says you go home now it's five o'clock. You know, there's very little support if you're in elected office, and I think that's probably true for a lot of women in leadership positions generally. They are forced to make a choice between their paid work and their family work, their community work, and once they're elected, or once their move into a greater level of responsibility, it's the family that that doesn't get the attention. And that can be pretty hard, both on you as an individual, but also on your family.”

Aftab Erfan reflected on the elevation of ‘feminine’ skills in leadership. “Whether it's more people learning to facilitate and hold space in the online environment, or, as we're setting up these affinity groups and employee resource groups, the leadership of them requires a kind of personal touch. This kind of emphasis on relationship, which I don't think is necessarily at all limited to women, but to me, it has kind of a feminine energy, if you will. And I think it is a time of elevating the status of the feminine in that way. And probably along with it, elevating women.”

Humaira Ahmed emphasized the need for self-reflection as leaders and identifying purpose. “I think we need to really think about what's in it for us as leaders, why are we doing what we're doing? And it sounds pretty poetic, but really, you know, for me, I have a huge reason to do what I do - not just for me and my community, but for my girls,” said Ahmed. “I think just even knowing who you are, where you come from, where you want to go, and then making sure that the work that you do aligns with that.”

Justice

“Young racialized, Indigenous, Asian and other marginalized women are looking for things to get engaged with. We have to make those organizations work for them. We have to give them the tools to build new movements that includes them.”

Ellen Woodsworth

Justice is the cornerstone of a feminist COVID recovery and underpins the basis for this entire report.

Ellen Woodsworth cautions against wishing to go back to ‘normal’, understanding that ‘normal’ never included women in the first place. Woodsworth emphasizes the importance of using a gendered intersectional lens in all approaches and analysis at every level. She calls upon government to have women at all recovery tables, not as individuals, but as women who represent women’s organizations who have done the work and will ensure solutions use gender-based analysis. Woodsworth underscores the severity of the moment, and the potential for change in recovery:

“We really are in a very serious point where we either come together or we're really going to be facing a world that's much worse than what we're facing right now. And it's pretty dire right now. We are losing generations of women’s rights. We need to come together and build the organizations. Women must be at all the recovery tables. And how do we get there? How do we build those coalitions so that we can actually create the change necessary that is going to include all of us?”

Pamela Jeffery is committed to addressing the inequities and burdens of unpaid work:

“I wish that we had had a societal conversation, and an acknowledgement that 76.2% of unpaid work is done by women, and women come home to do the second shift¹. And I wish there'd been a much, much more embraced way, which was, if both mom and dad are working outside the home, then both mum and dad need to work inside the home equally. Instead of doing a second shift at home, the number of unpaid hours of work that is done by women who are working moms, eclipses a number of hours of time, put in at home by working fathers. And that makes it extraordinarily difficult for women to be in the workplace, and we pay a very high price for that as a country.”

Through the Prosperity Project, Jeffery is calling on employers to introduce more flexibility for their workers who are parents, as well as recognizing the importance of maintaining the representation of women before COVID and increasing representation going forward of women in their workforce. They are also calling on government to lead the way to the creation of a national childcare system. “I hope we learn that for Canada to thrive and for the economy to prosper, that we recognize the important role that women play. I hope that there's much

¹ According to the International Labour Organization’s 2018 report ‘Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work’, 76.2 per cent of the total amount of unpaid care work is performed by women.

more awareness of the importance of keeping women in the labor force in order to keep a strong economy.”

Tamara Vrooman believes that change takes commitment, not time. Vrooman emphasizes the need for retraining and education, in addition to flexibility and supports, to help address the growing shift in employment from traditional industries into higher value-add ones that require more training. “But the fact of the matter is, women's work is undervalued and so until we can correct that by putting the right supports in place, we won't get at the really the core issues that prevent women's full participation, retraining and education.”

Nikki Fraser echoes the calls for skill training and advocates for it to be offered to everyone in an organization, not just those in mid-to-upper-level positions. Administrative and secretarial positions skew heavily as a feminized role, and employers would be remiss to neglect the people in these positions as they attempt to grow the skills of their workers and promote in-house. “Now that everything is online, it would be great if that if organizations supported women, and in furthering their skills, or knowledge or education, or whatever it may be. Because if they're working from home, they may have the opportunity to also do a class online or are getting more knowledge.”

Aftab Erfan reminds us of the context of women's participation on the frontlines of the pandemic, and what a just recovery could look like for these workers.: “There's this whole other area of so many women who are in the front lines and in service jobs, they are the teachers at my kids' school, nurses. I think they're not untraditional roles for women, but I think this is also a moment of elevating them and giving them the respect that they have always deserved and have been denied. Traditionally feminized roles actually are just so key in a moment of crisis like this and need to be recognized and compensated,” said Erfan. “I think this is a common tension in the feminist movement: are we about keeping the system and moving people past the glass ceiling? Or is it really about redefining the system? I think it's the redefinition of the system that has the potential to make the biggest change for people who are here now. And I think in a way I'm less interested in efforts that are essentially making women more like men, so they can succeed in this hierarchical pattern, and more interested in some of that inversion which makes typically feminine traits valuable again.”

Key Findings

For Individuals

- Mentorship is reciprocal, and there is plenty to learn from a younger generation.
- Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, it's a sign of strength.
- Bringing your whole self to work is in service of the work, not taking away from it.
- Understand the importance of finding work that aligns with your values and goals.

For Organizations

- Emerging women leaders need good feedback, tailored support and access to people like themselves in leadership positions.
- Demonstrate appreciation for your employees and providing opportunities for growth and upskilling.
- Give people the flexibility to do their best work when they can, where they can.
- Collect self-identification demographic data to be able to get a complete picture of the different experiences that employees across various identities and lived experiences may have.
- Identify whose perspectives and lived experiences are reflected, and not reflected, in your organization, and adjust moving forward.
- Ensure diversity and inclusion work is done sustainably and can be supported long-term with resources in place.
- Leadership must lead by example. Ensure the tone at the top is consistent with values of inclusion.
- Expand understandings of 'caregiver' beyond the nuclear family.
- Elevate feminine skills in leadership, alongside elevating women.
- Introduce more flexibility for workers who are parents, not just moms.
- Recognize the importance of maintaining the representation of women before COVID and increasing representation going forward of women in their workforce.

- Traditionally feminized roles, with particular attention to the feminized frontline workers of the pandemic, must be recognized and compensated.

For Government

- Use gendered intersectional lens at every level and analysis.
- Women's organizations must be at all recovery tables.
- Create a national childcare system to alleviate stresses on working parents.
- Invest in retraining and continuing education programs.

References and further reading

Throughout the pandemic, several organizations with a focus on women and labour have compiled a number of reports and recommendations pertaining to a feminist economic recovery. We hold this report in conversation with the work of these groups, and encourage further reading from the reports below:

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