



“Leading from the Black”: How Black Women Lead Even When Ignored
Congressional Caucus on Black Women & Girls Roundtable
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Black Women, Movement Building, and Intersectionality

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The surprising Democratic victories in Alabama, Virginia and elsewhere have exposed an open secret in contemporary electoral politics. Black women are the key demographic who, if properly mobilized, can reverse the disastrous course of an irrational, irresponsible, and indefensible policy agenda that has already compromised the future of our nation. Yet despite their capacity to stand and deliver, neither the issues that shape their lives, nor the barriers to their political leadership, have risen to the level of prominence that their centrality to the future of the nation warrants. Black women are all too often afterthoughts in the agenda setting discourses of communities and institutions that rely on them for support.

Whether it is racial justice agendas that exclude women and girls, gender justice discourses that overlook Black women’s pioneering efforts against sexual harassment and abuse, or politicians who willingly collect their votes but forget their issues, Black women have been the constituency that gives, but rarely receives. But, the mood is changing among Black women in America. As their unmet demands drive them to the polls and to increasing levels of leadership, the time for trickle down solidarities, feminist cooptation and thankless labor has come to an end. For the past three years, the African American Policy Forum has been listening to Black women in town halls all across America, learning about the ways that not only race and gender but class, age, disability, sexuality and gender identity, geography and more are shaping their lives. Black women are tired of being tired. They want and expect more, and they are mobilizing to get it.

Thus, the time could not be more propitious for the visionary leaders of the Congressional Caucus for Black Women and Girls — Representatives Bonnie Watson-Coleman, Yvette Clarke and Robin Kelley — to advance a fact-based legislative agenda that reflects the concrete needs of Black women and girls. As proud partners in this convening, it is important herein to highlight the ways that addressing Black women and girls directs us to think intersectionally and act comprehensively.

When we talk about the struggle to address state violence against Black women, or the exclusion of Black women from policy discourse and political leadership, or Black women's systematic denial of access to adequate health care and education, it is imperative that we understand the intersectional dimensions. Now is not the time to run away from the specificity of the fight for Black women's equality. Instead, it is time to embrace it. The better we understand how identities interact with various power structures, the less likely our movements for change are to fracture.

A Black women's agenda must first start with the repudiation of damaging myths, first and foremost being that Black women are so resilient that they can handle almost anything thrown their way. As much as Black women have been valorized for their strength, we must recognize the elements of this myth that constitute relics of slavery. The indestructibility of Black women has long been an excuse for overwork and underprotection, a rationalization for our exploitation and abuse that has morphed into a dangerous stereotype that we have all too often internalized. These assumptions gravely imperil and undermine Black women's health, mental and physical, leading to shortened life spans and higher rates of heart disease, strokes, and maternal mortality.

Black women are also disproportionately subject to various deleterious conditions, such as poor-quality environments in impoverished neighborhoods, food deserts and a lack of access to healthcare — conditions that make them more susceptible to life threatening diseases such as HIV and cancer. Moreover, there are drastic gaps in access to culturally-competent healthcare for Black women, meaning the diseases they contract are more likely to be lethal. While Black women have a lower rate of breast cancer diagnosis than white women, they have a drastically higher rate of mortality as a result of the disease. According to a 2016 American

Cancer Society report, the breast cancer death rate for Black women is 42% higher than for white women. As the data show, Black women's health in the US is in a state of crisis. Simply put, Black women die earlier deaths than their white counterparts because they are women who are Black.

Intersectionality alone, however, cannot bring invisible bodies into view. Ideas alone won't change the way that some people — the less-visible members of political constituencies — must continue to demand leaders, decision-makers and others to see their struggles. Otherwise, they will be ignored. It's in the DNA of this country, and Black women know it. Reyc Taylor knew it too — after 6 white men kidnapped and raped her after church in 1946 and no Alabama court would convict them. Today sexual violence disproportionately affects Black women, and yet the growing movement to combat it has never placed Black women at its head.

It is not only Black women, but Black girls as well, who are at risk, consistently overlooked, and underprotected. Black girls' social position corresponds with a host of vulnerabilities that reinforce their marginalization. From a very young age, they face a number of specific harms and dangers. Schools, in particular, are often sites of danger for them. The School to Prison Pipeline is not, as many purport it to be, the exclusive domain of Black boys. Instead it pertains to Black youth of all genders who suffer disproportionate risks of punishment and push-out. In fact, as judged against their respective racial counterparts, Black girls often face greater racial disparities in comparison to their white female counterparts than boys do. As we noted in our 2015 report *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected*, Black boys are three times as likely to be suspended as white boys — according to Department of Education statistics. However, Black girls are six times as likely to be suspended when compared to white girls.

In fact, upon closer inspection of New York City — a supposedly progressive city — the severity of the policing facing Black girls becomes shockingly apparent. While they make up 34% of female enrollment in public schools, they account for well over half of all disciplinary actions against female students. Moreover, for the 2011-2012 school year in New York City 90% of all of the girls expelled from schools were Black. No white girls were expelled that year at all. In order to dramatize the disparity through a statistically sound ratio, we'd have to imagine just a

single white girl being expelled which would still make the Black/white ratio among girls 53 to one. The omission of Black girls in conversations concerning violence across the dimensions of race, socio-economic status, and gender has established an implicit assumption that allows their basic needs to be overlooked. But, it's far too late in the day to encounter race-based initiatives that don't address girls, and gender based initiatives that do not specify race.

All our girls deserve better. But, until we can fully envision and hear the voices of young women who also suffer from the overwhelming police presence in public schools, we will miss how vulnerable our children are across gender lines. Consider Niya Kenny, who as a high school student was handcuffed, jailed and prosecuted for a “disturbing schools” violation — a misdemeanor charge carrying up to 90 days in county jail or a \$1000 fine. Niya was punished for standing up for her classmate Shakara who was thrown across the room by a school resource officer. And, she never went back to her school after being arrested. But, her courage and determination have not undermined her future. Now an intern at the African American Policy Forum, she has forged a new future out of that adversity, working to elevate the voices of young people of color. Unfortunately, many other Black girls are not able to overcome the long term consequences of their separation from school. As the National Women's Law Center [reports](#), failing to graduate imparts a longer lifetime burden on women's wages than men. When we consider that Black families are disproportionately dependent on women's wages, it becomes abundantly clear that the push-out of Black girls is at once a gender issue, a racial justice issue and a community well-being issue.

The question, then, is *what can be done?* We know that Black women and girls are strong. Their strength, however, should not be the answer to being underserved and overburdened. We know that Black women have been the heart of both the racial justice and gender justice movements in this country. We know that they continue to play a crucial role in these movements, even while — as the title of our panel indicates — they are often ignored. But, simply put, Black women shouldn't have to wait for a world where both anti-racist and feminist movements are comprehensive, affirming and empowering. It is now time for us to move from the back of the bus to take a seat in the front.

After all, when Black women are ignored, the consequences are profound, not just for Black women themselves, but for the country as a whole. Imagine what the world might look like today, for example, if there had been a march on Washington to defend Black mothers and to protest the evisceration of the social safety net that left millions of women and their children economically vulnerable? What would the mortality rates of Black women look like, if the historic choice movement included not only the right to terminate a pregnancy, but the right to have a child and a right to the basic necessities of life?

What would youth programs look like today, if we had mobilized our concerns and resources around all the children and young adults who have been gunned down? What if Renisha McBride was as visible to us as Trayvon Martin; Aiyana Stanley-Jones was named in the same breath as Tamir Rice? What if we knew the name India Beatty as well as Eric Garner, or if we understood that both Maya Hall and Natasha Mckenna are as much casualties of the war on Black bodies as Mike Brown and Philando Castille? When Black women are seen and heard things change. When we don't see them, credit their testimony or listen to their life experiences, our movements falter and we pay the consequences.

Consider the Me Too! movement today. What if we had recalled that the Justice for Recy Taylor committee was a critical formation that ultimately led to the women-centered infrastructure that supported the Montgomery Bus boycott? What if the story about Rosa Parks began not with her sitting on that bus, but with her work years before investigating the sexual assaults on Black women and demanding justice? What if the names of all the Black women who helped make sexual harassment a legal concept long before Anita Hill came forward were known in the Black community?

Perhaps no one would say that sexual harassment didn't happen to Black women, or that the concept had nothing to do with the struggles of African Americans. Perhaps the ultra conservative Justice Clarence Thomas might not have been confirmed, and, in turn, his vote would not have enabled the gutting of the Voting Rights Act or campaign finance reform. And, those two rulings might not have contributed to the outcome of the last election, and to the current occupant of the White House. And today, in the face of a global MeToo! movement, if

we believed Black women, they wouldn't be afterthoughts in the way the nation thinks about a social problem that they lifted up into a national debate.

Building an agenda around Black women is not difficult. Every statement offered by the roundtable panelists here offers concrete ways that the invisibility of Black women can be reversed, and the compelling reasons why we must do so. In March, AAPF's Fourth Annual Her Dream Deferred series presents another avenue to continue this work. Throughout the course of a week, AAPF will host talks, panels and performances all aimed at addressing the current state of Black women and girls from a variety of angles with the intention of further developing the Black Women's agenda.

This year, AAPF has also begun developing a Black Women's and Girl's Report Card to address not only how they fare in the United States, but also how successful our leaders and government have been in supporting them. We often say that without being able to see a problem we cannot fix it. Without the voices and leadership of Black women we will be unable to see, let alone begin to address these concerns. In the words of Symone Sanders, "Black women have been attempting to save American since the dawn of time." It is time to step up and support them in that project.