



“Leading from the Black”: How Black Women Lead Even When Ignored
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Being a Black Woman In a Trumped America

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The Quest for Basic Needs

Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs” is a psychological theory often presented as a pyramid sliced up into five basic sections. The largest portion—the base—signifies the most fundamental of needs, and each stage escalates to a higher level of needs. There, however, is one major rule of elevation: the most basic levels of need must be met before transitioning to secondary and higher levels. And how one’s needs are met determines what motivates them—or simply put what dominates their existence.

The most basic level within this framework are psychological needs: Air. Water. Food. Clothing. Shelter. Sexual instinct. According to Maslow, the absence of these basic physical requirements is a threat to survival. So when I hear of a recent study where one in three Black adults (35 percent) has reported experiencing brown water coming out of their taps at homes, I wonder what it would take to satisfy this basic requirement: clean water¹. What would it take to move from meeting our basic psychological needs, and transitioning to the next stage on the pyramid: Safety, which includes personal and financial security, health and well-being.

But what type of existence are we in when the next anticipated stage is also compromised? Research from several think tanks, including the Center for Policing Equity, have found what many have testified to for generations: Blacks are far more likely than Whites and other groups to be the victims of use of force by the police, even when racial disparities in crime are taken into account.² And when it comes to Black women,

¹ “The Lives and Voices of Black America,” Perry Udem Research Firm, September 2017, https://view.publitas.com/perryudem-research-communication/black-american-survey-report_final/page/6.

² See “The Science of Justice: Race, Arrests, and Police Use of Force,” Center for Policing Equity, July 2016, http://policingequity.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CPE_SoJ_Race-Arrests-UoF_2016-07-08-1130.pdf.

lawyer and author Andrea Ritchie in her recent book *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color* highlights a very ignored fact: sexual assault by police officers is the second most frequently reported form of police misconduct. One study found that a police officer is caught in an act of sexual misconduct every five days.³ Considering only one-third of all assaults are ever reported, the exact rate of sexual violence towards Black women is harrowingly unknown.

And there are so many areas where the safety of Black women is compromised:

- 30 million affordable housing units in the United States have significant physical or health hazards, including inadequate heating, gas leaks, and lead paint;⁴
- Black women are 35 percent more likely to experience intimate partner and domestic violence than white women;⁵
- The long-term emotional impact of continued exposure to violent environments further compromise safety for young girls, increasing the likelihood of PTSD, depression, anxiety and substance misuse;⁶
- According to the CDC, Black women are 243 percent more likely to die from pregnancy or childbirth-related causes than White women—one of the widest of all racial disparities in women’s health. Black women are also 22 percent more likely to die from heart disease and 71 percent more likely to perish from cervical cancer.

“Equity” has become somewhat of a buzz word in policy spaces, but the reality is with rates barely improving for Black women compared to their counterparts, the challenge has not been how do we get closer to an equal state, but rather how do we ensure that basic human rights are honored and the status quo for all. The installation of Donald Trump into the White House was not the origin of this dystopic state of structural inequity. Yet his platform, leadership appointments, and proposals to date, all indicate that the physiological and safety needs of Black, Brown and marginalized families will continue to be compromised.

³ Spina, Matthew, “When a Protector Becomes a Predator,” Buffalo News, November 2015
<http://projects.buffalonews.com/abusing-the-law/index.html>.

⁴ Ross, Tracey, Chelsea Parsons and Rebecca Vallas, “Creating Safe and Healthy Living Environments for Low-Income Families,” Center for American Progress, July 2016, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/reports/2016/07/20/141324/creating-safe-and-healthy-living-environments-for-low-income-families/>.

⁵ Hutchinson, Sikivu, “The Wars Inside: Black Women and Deadly Intimate Partner Violence,” May 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-wars-inside-black-women-and-deadly-intimate-partner_us_58f0644fe4b048372700d72a.

⁶ See Sherman, Francine and Annie Balck, “Gender Injustice,” 2015, http://www.nationalcrittenton.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Gender_Injustice_Report.pdf.

So what can be done in a *trumped* up society—especially when legislative options are not currently viable? The opportunity is ripe for more internal buttressing and organizing, seeing voting as one of many tools towards achieving equity, but doing more work in-between the vote. I propose more activism around the following five spaces:

1) Establishing that (Black) Women’s Rights Are Human Rights

When the famous statement by Hillary Rodham Clinton was proclaimed that “women’s rights are human rights and human rights are women’s rights,” the statement did not fully embrace the different experiences of women—especially through a racialized lens. Imagining a different vision for Black women and destroying our normalized suffering means fully establishing that we are human. I suggest a “Truth & Reconciliation” forum identifying the long chain of invisible and ignored events that have shaped our existence in American society.

2) Uncover the Invisible Threats

Of particular concern is the revelation of the FBI’s characterization of Black civic engagement, activism and organizing as “Black identity extremists,” raising flags within the Black community of unconstitutional practices used against some of our revered civil rights icons. Considering that Black women have been the catalyst of recent movements in light of unjust shootings and killings by law enforcement, this move by the Trump administration puts a target on Black women organizers, change agents and political strategists. Couple this with a man who ran on a message of “Law & Order,” Trumps Nixon-esque dog-whistling opens up a door that was starting to budge—even if just slightly—under the Obama Administration.

It is important for policy makers and advocates alike to draw the parallel between Trump’s law enforcement policies and the threat to Black women organizers—especially since such activism has led to increased political engagement of disenfranchised and marginalized communities.

3) Centering Black Women’s Experiences as the Policy Norm

It’s really not rocket science—caring for the “least of these” ensures that all are accounted for. As much as progressive spaces tout our contributions to all aspects of society—including political spaces—no candidate has run on a pure “Make Black Women Great” platform. The data suggests, however, that centering the experiences of Black women would dramatically improve conditions of not only their counterparts, but

communities of color at large. We must train voters to demand from candidates an equity plan that specifically addresses the conditions of Black women and their families.

4) *Black Women Local Government Staffer Pipeline*

Having served in senior leadership in city government, I can't underscore enough how important it is for Black women to be in policy decisions on a local level. In addition to encouraging Black women to vote, it is equally important that we create parallel tracks which open up opportunities for appointed positions, civil service leadership, and even voluntary task forces and committees.

5) *Elevating Hidden Figures*

Recently, two young girls—Ashawnty Davis and Rosalie Avila—took their lives after enduring the pain of bullying. While there were tweets and some articles surrounding their deaths, I couldn't help but notice the lack of attention from elected officials, on a local and national level, especially in light of the layered policy considerations triggered. From mental health to culturally-competent teachers and parent engagement strategies, elevating our stories is crucial to our survival and the addressing of our lifespan challenges.

I conclude with leaving a short list of Black women who, in spite of a trumped America, lead with conviction and should not be ignored. We must engage in the practice of daily elevation of the talents and labor of Black women. Thank you, Sisters!

DeJuana Thompson, co-creator of #WokeVote

Amber Goodwin, creator of Community Justice Reform Coalition

Ashley Blackwood, creator of sports summit "The Majors"

Monifa Bandele, MomsRising VP of Equity and Building Power

Chloe McKenzie, creator of financial education firm BlackFem

Vilissa Thompson, creator of #disabilitytoowhite and Black Disability Syllabus

Bryanta Booker-Maxwell, creator of youth political training bootcamp, Girls Wisdom, Inc.

Nina Smith, creator of impact messaging and PR firm, Megaphone Communications

Vivian Anderson, creator of #EveryBlackGirl

Tiffany James, visionary of “Acting with Tiffany”

Tambra Raye, founder of food justice platform #IamWANDA

First Lady of New York Chirlane McCray, recently launching #SistersThrive to combat mental health stigma