



“Leading from the Black”: How Black Women Lead Even When Ignored
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The State of Black Women: We Will Not Be Ignored

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The Invisibility of Black Women & Our Issues

Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm once said, “if they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.” That sentiment has long personified Black women and our persistence to lead despite being marginalized and ignored. From Sojourner Truth to Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, Dorothy Height and many more, Black women have continually shown our willingness to speak truth to power and demand action around issues affecting us and our community. Not only have we worked toward our own equitable positioning in this country, but we have had to evade invisibility while doing so, adding to the weight of our circumstance. As Audre Lorde said in the essay “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger” in her anthology *Sister Outsider*, “We are Black women born into a society of entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female. We are strong and enduring. We are also deeply scarred.”¹

While Black women and our issues have historically been neglected in both race-based and gender-based movements, we continue to demand the centering of our voices in advocacy, policy making and the broader conversations about correcting oppressive conditions. Specifically in the traditional feminist movement, the focus has been on White women achieving equity, while ignoring the various issues and aggravating factors women of color face that create even greater levels of inequity. In the anthology, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, White activist, Ellen Pence wrote an essay called, “Racism - A White Issue”. In the essay, Pence says, “As white women, we continually expect women of color to bring us to an understanding of our racism. White women rarely meet to examine collectively our attitudes, our actions, and, most importantly, our resistance to change.

¹ Lorde, Audre. “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press, 1984, p. 151.

The oppression of men toward women is in so many ways parallel to the oppression of white women toward women of color.”²

As we examine the State of Black Women, there are many issues that provide an opportunity for corrective action toward equity and increased advocacy. Among the things we need to address are healthcare and reproductive rights, education, economic empowerment, leveraging our political power, environmental justice, violence and safety, and workers rights. Tying all of these issues together is the need for greater visibility. We cannot solve the issues impacting us unless the issues are first acknowledged. Black women serve as pillars within our community and we need to remove the shackles of invisibility and to fully utilize our power to create change.

Centering Women of Color

The night of the 2016 Presidential election, a White grandmother from Hawaii who was frustrated by the results posted to Facebook that there should be a march on Washington. The next morning she woke up to 10,000 messages regarding the march. Across the country in New York and Tennessee, other women were also planning marches and two days later, these women decided to combine forces to create one united march. The great majority of women who came together to organize the march were White. From the outset, this created feelings of exclusion among women of color, particularly Black women who have a long history of being ignored within the women’s movement. Increasing the tensions, was the fact that the original organizers were calling the march, The Million Women March, despite the fact that almost 20 years before, Black women had a march of the same name. Early on, one of the organizers sought to bring in women of color and soon the march leadership would be made up of women of color, including two Black women: Tamika Mallory and me. From the very early days of organizing, we were focused on centering the voices of women of color and bringing to bear the inequities that impact us at higher levels.

From then until now, these “daring discussions” within the Women’s March movement have served to both educate White women about their role in the oppression of women of color and about the ways that they can use their own privilege to the greater advancement of all women. We continue to underscore, when we achieve justice and fairness only for some of us, we are still faced with exclusion and oppression. As an example, we see women of color being left out of the #MeToo Movement, despite the fact that the woman who started the Me Too movement 10 years ago, Tarana Burke, is Black, and Black women are some of the most vulnerable victims of sexual violence and harassment. Consider that while Black women are

² Pence, Ellen. “Racism - A White Issue.” *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*, 2nd edition, edited by Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, Barbara Smith, Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2016, p. 45.

roughly 7% of the US population³, we represent nearly 19% of the reported rape cases and approximately 40% of reported sexual victimization and abuse cases by the age of 18⁴. When we ignore those who are most impacted, we leave them vulnerable and miss the opportunity for lasting change. It is important to note that our current sexual harassment laws were created in part due to cases involving three Black women. Those victories helped create protections for all women that have made it possible for us to build on during the current movement to eliminate sexual harassment and assault. By centering the voices of women of color and women who are marginalized in other ways, including disabled women and LGBTQIA women, we are able to ensure that our work to achieve equity is truly achieved. We will continue to elevate the inequities within the women's movement, while advocating for change for the most marginalized among us.

Silence is Violence

Black women and girls are often overlooked in the conversations related to the school-to-prison pipeline, police violence, sentencing disparities and other criminal justice system issues. Additionally, there is an underreporting of instances when Black women and girls go missing or are abused. This highlights the huge vulnerabilities for women and girls and silences the victims of these injustices.

A recent report by the National Women's Law Center details the exclusion of Black girls from the conversation about the school-to-prison pipeline, despite being disproportionately targeted at young ages and experiencing higher rates of harsh disciplinary actions in schools. For example, in the 2013 - 2014 school year, Black preschool students represented 46.2% of students with one out of school suspension, 53.4% of students with more than one out of school suspension and 36.2% of students who have been expelled from school. However, Black girls represent 54% of the girls suspended from preschool.⁵ The report also showed that overall, Black girls are more likely than any other student to be suspended. Unfortunately, that is not reflected in the narrative around the preschool-to-prison pipeline and therefore any solutions to the problem may miss the group of students who are most at risk. These challenges begin at an early age and exist throughout the educational system. Additionally, when students face such harsh punitive actions, it creates long-term challenges that further impact their educational attainment and hence, their life potential.

Criminal justice reform is a hot button issue these days, with many people in the Black community finding it as one of the top issues to advocate for. Additionally, there is a desire

³ <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmm>

⁴ <https://endsexualviolencect.org/resources/get-the-facts/women-of-color-and-sexual-assault/>

⁵ Onyeka-Crawford, Adaku, et al. "Let Her Learn: Stopping School Push Out for Girls of Color." National Women's Law Center, 2017, p. 13.

within Congress to make changes to the current criminal justice system. However, when talking about how the criminal justice system interacts with the Black community, the narrative seems to be focused on Black men. This misinformation ignores that Black women are still more at risk for police violence than their peers. The African American Policy Forum Report, Say Her Name, highlighted that in New York City, Black men were 55.7% of all men who were stopped by police, while Black women were 53.4% of all females stopped by police.⁶ Although this represents one city, there are many other disturbing factors making Black women nearly as vulnerable as their male counterparts. These are challenges that cannot be ignored and at every turn, we need to adequately support women and girls as we address the issues impacting education and violence, among others. When we stay silent on these issues, we are putting women and girls of color in harm's way and making them more susceptible to violence.

While these are just some of the challenges impacting Black women and girls, there are many others that keep Black women in an uphill battle for equity. The Congressional Caucus on Black Women and Girls is primed to create more visibility for the issues impacting Black women and girls across the country, while giving us the support we need to create lasting legislative change. Despite the many issues we face, Black women have always had resilience. That spirit, passed down through generations, is what allows us to continue our fight for equity and inspires us to lift our collective voice to ensure that we will not be ignored. It is present in each one of us and because of it, we will find a way to push forward.

⁶ Crenshaw, Kimberlé and Andrea J. Ritchie. "Say Her Name." African American Policy Forum, 2015, p. 5.