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The Plexiglass Ceiling: Exploring Systemic Racism and Sexism in Public Leadership Positions

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The Plexiglass Ceiling:
Exploring Systemic Racism and Sexism in Public Leadership Positions

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Abstract

 The numbers of black women who hold leadership positions within public institutions are not correspondingly reflective of their overall numbers within public institutions. The focus of this study is to examine how race and gender discrimination prohibits black women from obtaining leadership positions in public institutions.. I propose a new theory Workplace Intersectional Infringement Theory (WIIT) to increase the efficacy of the study on black women in Public Institutions. Using snowball sampling, I conduct interviews with 11 black women who hold leadership positions across a variety of public institutions within the United States. I found a majority of the participants lacked interest in the higher-up positions within their companies. The conclusion is that race and gender discrimination along with newer subtle aggressions are still a factor into Black women's experience in the workplace, but there's no indication that it is the cause of the limited numbers that we see today.

Dedication

I dedicate my master's thesis to…

My family, you guys have always inspired and pushed me to reach for the stars. You are the foundation for this thesis.

My mom, who raised me, as a single mother, to stand up for everything that I believe in and be proud of it. You are brilliant, strong, and compassionate, I love you.

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Preface

El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcom X) once said, "the most disrespected woman in America is the Black Woman", and this sentiment continues to hold in the year, 2021. Growing up, I watched countless Black women in my family, community, and schools be overlooked by their peers for all of their accomplishments. Even at an early age, I attempted to ascertain their tireless attitude after coming home from seemingly long days of work. Once I got older, I thought I began to see the truth. Black women work relentlessly for employers who are perfectly comfortable with never giving them the promotions or recognition that they deserve.

The conversations that I have overheard, if I am being candid, made me terrified to enter the workforce. Fearful of the antagonistic coworkers or running myself into the ground for a company that would replace me in a heartbeat. The reality of what I might encounter in the workplace is an idea that I dread. Then, what seemed like the impossible happened, there is now a woman of color acting as Vice President of the United States. So, what I thought I knew as a child, what I learned as an undergraduate, and what I continue to read about now; are all very dark contrasts of one another but what I aim to receive is a better understanding of the lack of representation of Black women holding leadership positions within public institutions, or at least start the conversation.

Initially, I wanted a study that would give Black women the opportunity to answer specific questions that would help me determine if race and gender are the causes and how has discrimination manifested in the 21st century. What I came to realize, this was an opportunity to allow the participants to express their challenges, experiences, frustrations, and what they think will be the tipping point in their favor. This is why the study was conducted using snowball sampling, this way, it allowed the participants to recommend Black women whom they thought

could best answer my questions. In doing so, I interviewed twelve women who gave me more perspective than I ever could have imagined.

In this thesis, I present an analysis of not only Black women's history in public institutions but how it evolved over the decades with the chance of better understanding if it's the cause of the continuously low numbers of representation that we see today. Especially, during a time when oppressed groups, such as women, immigrants, and people of color, are progressively working towards the life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that they were promised.

Introduction

In every historical context, Black women face prejudicial behavior because of their identities as both black and women. The mantra "work twice as more and twice as hard" is an austere attitude that is instilled into young black girls at a very early age (DeSante, 2013). This is a mental tactic that older Black women use to prepare their children for the upcoming hard life challenges that await them. This safeguarding tactic has been passed down from generation to generation. Within the United States, society has created a cleavage for race and gender that has become so deep that black women arguably are no closer to social and gender liberation than they were a few decades ago.

The complexities of the Black woman's identity cause her to be on guard at all times, even in predominantly black areas. According to Smith (2014):

> If a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination, but it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm (p. 4).

Whether it be coined as black feminist theory, biculturalism, or intersectionality, Black women have a permanent seat in the middle of the race and gender discriminatory crossroads. Smith cites Crenshaw's arguement "that Black women are discriminated against in ways that often do not fit neatly within the legal categories of either "racism" *or* "sexism"—but as a combination of both racism *and* sexism" (Smith, 2014, p. 3). Because of this overlapping, there appears to be a continuous fight to find what it means to be truly liberated.

This constant fight for liberation is what 400 years of systemic inequity looks like for not only Black women but Black people as a monolith. Micro/ macro aggressions, reverse racism, and unconscious biases are all just reinvented forms of blatant racism; if they appear, on the surface, more subtle, then they can be easily overlooked due to their seemingly harmless new look. The intent and motivation behind them are still the same, although the actions may be different. "Today 'New Racism' practices have emerged that are more sophisticated and subtle than those typical of Jim Crow era, and yet, as I will argue, these practices are as effective as the old ones in maintaining the status quo" (Silva, 2014, p. 7). Bonilla- Silva find that the attitudes that Black people experience in America today are inherently more dangerous than the overt behavior that was displayed in the past. "Although racism has been part of the experience of Black Americans for hundreds of years, the face of contemporary or aversive racism is significantly different from blatant acts of hostility and discrimination" (Holder, Jackson & Ponterotto, 2015, p. 185). Aversive or subtle racism plays a significant role in groups of color overcoming white supremacy. Thus, making it even more difficult for minority groups whose identities overlap, such as Black women.

Black women are plausibly the most overlooked group of people in the United States, and this notion has not been at the forefront of study that have been conducted on people of color. The United States has taken many superficial strides to fix arguably one of its biggest flaws, racism. Yet, racism has now progressed in ways that have flooded the systems as well as the institutions while the country has failed to eradicate its original errors. Due to this continuous mishap, Black people are finding themselves, in the present day, fighting for access to positions that have been hard to obtain since the first reconstruction.

Black women have even more of a challenge to thrive in any environment that is determined, now in a covert as well as a hostile overt manner, to make sure they remain at a disadvantage. Bonilla-Silva's study suggests that these post civil right attitudes are more dangerous because its born from the thought that the United States' has entered a post racial environment. These dangerous attitudes can now be found in all environments and within all spaces within the United States. Bonilla-Silva argues (2014):

> First, as I have argued elsewhere, relying on questions that were framed in the Jim Crow to assess whites' racial views today produces an artificial image of progress. Since the central racial debates and the language used to debate those matters have change, our analytical focus ought to be dedicated to the analysis of new issues (pg. 5).

What is yet to be determined is if these attitudes permiate from the original overt practices or have they now manifested into something even more sublte than the covert behaviors that we see today. The strides white people have taken to move past racism over the last 400 years are superficial, at best. Black women have the skillset, the experience, and the education that not only qualifies but over qualifies them for these positions. This leads to the analysis of this paper 1). are the continued low numbers of Black women in leadership positions within Public Institutions due to race and gender discrimination? 2). What are the ways that discrimination in the workplace manifest for Black women in the 21st century?

Black women and their positions within public institutions started with their leadership experience in private spaces that advanced to lower positions in public institutions which leads to what we see today. Black women holding leadership roles in public institutions but not at a desirable rate. "This underrepresentation has been described as the glass ceiling; a term coined by the Wall Street Journal to denote the apparent barriers that prevent women from advancing to

the top of corporate hierarchies" (Weiss, 1999, p. 85). Black women across the country continue to break barriers daily but I also argue that race and gender will always be a factor for Black women. Likewise, this study strives to identify factors that impedes Black women's institutional mobility.

Literature Review

The origin of Black women in public institutions is very important to this study. Public institutions have not always been the seemingly diverse arenas that we see today, where Black women are allowed to operate, comfortably. "Public institutions provide the infrastructure for collective action elaboration and because they acquire the status of social conventions, they are never questioned" (Thoenig, 2007). It is an important topic to explore because of the historical implications of Black women in public institutions and after they were legally allowed to work within these spaces, there was a tremendous amount of pushback from their white counterparts, and because of this, they learned beforehand how to advocate for themselves as well as other marginalized groups. "Early in their lives, the women received messages from family, church and community members that concurrently affirmed their multi-dimensional talents and directed them to assume personal responsibility for addressing political and social advocacy issues "(DeLany & Rogers, 2004, pg. 94). Using these messages and operating out of these spaces, Black women swiftly transformed the places that were available to them as a means to grow. Where public institutions made it impossible for Black women to grow as leaders, places such as the church and community encouraged this form of leadership advancement.

The church is a known staple in the Black community and is used as the basis for grooming young Black women to be leaders, even when the world around them made it nearly

impossible to do so. They took up leadership positions on the usher board, assuming the position of choir director, and in some instances, some of these women were ordained and became preachers of their churches. "These pioneering Black women preachers were tempered in that they were toughened by their experiences in the Black church; they were composed and resisted reactions that would break ties with the church; yet they were courageous and passionately committed to fulfilling their call to ministry" (Ngunjiri, Grambi-Sobukwe, & Williams-Gegner, 2012, pg. 87). Pioneers, such as these Black women preachers, paved the way for other Black women to comfortably step out on faith, remain dutiful to the Black community, and also overcome obstacles that were placed in their way. "To advance both missions simultaneously, Black women deployed tactics that sustained their relationships within the Black community while overcoming the obstacles institutional hierarchies presented" (Ngunjiri, Grambi-Sobukwe, & Williams-Gegner, 2012, pg. 88). Meaning, the church serves as a space for their growth as leaders as well as put them in a position to lead while learning to fight sexism, even with their male counterparts.

Due to the constant fight against sexism and racism, Black women often create spaces of their own, to act, perform, and execute any of their needs, without any hindrance. White women benefit from the system that upholds white supremacy and capitalize on the privilege. Feminism is indeed the advocacy of women's rights based on the equality of the sexes, but white women historically used the movement to better their causes. The Combahee River Collective (1997) stated the following:

It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop

a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those

of Black and white men. (p.4)

While there was another active feminist movement, just like most other spaces within the

country, Black women weren't being represented and their needs were not being addressed; so,

they created something that would become a pillar of empowerment for all oppressed groups.

"We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class

oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice

based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (Combahee River

Collective, 1997, pg. 3). Black feminism was created to fight for every oppressed group not

solely to fight for rights that benefited Black women.

Likewise, Weems wanted to create a space that is entirely free of the white feminist

movement and has its own original values. "Like other Afrocentric theorists, Weems believes

that theory-both its naming and contours-naturally grounded or centered and identified with

people of African descent" (Alexander Floyd & Simien, 2006, pg. 72). While Weems coined the

term "Womanist" that is originally black and is derived from a holistic black approach,

Alexander Floyd and Simien (2006) argue that she only created an additional subcategory to the

original white feminist movement. The movement that Weems has openly detested in most of

her works. Weems wanted a space that completely embodied the experience of a Black woman.

This means that although the narrative was already established, there needed to be a space that

was inclusive of elements that encompassed black feminist elements and original. Weems

created a space for women to be black first, and woman second, furthering the sphere for Black

women to just be. Whether it be black feminism or womanism, both spaces were created and

shaped to operate outside the bounds of racism and sexism, because there were times in their histories that could not be unapologetically black or a woman without being reprimanded.

There is handful of literature on Black feminism, its origin, and how to utilize it but there are very few studies on incorporating this space into the workplace but organizations such as the Congressional Black Caucus serves as both a space that Black people have created because they were pushed out of the original but also space created just for people of color. The Congressional Black Caucus is the union of a created space and the workplace. "The Congressional Black Caucus has been committed to using the full Constitutional power, statutory authority, and financial resources of the federal government to ensure that African Americans and other marginalized communities have the opportunity to achieve the American Dream" (Congressional Black Caucus, 2020, para. 3). And organizations such as the Congressional Black Caucus, the church, and National Pan-Hellenic Council became essential to Black women sustaining their need to develop leadership roles (DeLany and Rogers, 2004).

The literature suggests that the intersection of race and class will always be at the forefront, but due to the ever-evolving times, other factors such as sexual orientation or class may be another component to consider. Calls for research on the "triple jeopardy" where the intersection of race, gender, and other attributes such as class or sexual orientation; are the objects of the study (Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black & Burkholder, 2003). An abundance of the literature suggests when matters of oppressed groups are concerned, there are always other elements that can be explored. "Gender is tied to race and class; gender's importance is not as a sole source of domination but as a lens that enables one to see things that other lenses miss" (Bearfield, 2019, pg. 384). Therefore, Crenshaw's theory that intersectional exclusions are intertwined for all people of color.

Women and racial minorities are underrepresented among political science faculty in the United States and internationally (Mershon and Clark, 2015, pg. 459). Black women who work as faculty in the political science field make up about 1.7% nationwide, which even at first glance, is a quaint percentage. To date, there have only been 11 African Americans to serve in the United States Senate, only two being black women. "Women have been under-represented in positions of leadership in most arenas, including corporate, education, government and the non-profit sector around the globe" (Ngunjiri, Grambi-Sobukwe, & Williams-Gegner, 2012, pg. 85). Race and gender discrimination were once a prominent factor in why black women could not obtain these leadership positions within public institutions, but now the literature eludes to there being unforeseen factors.

There's a shortage of studies on this topic because unfortunately for Black women and other women of color, they combat the 'glass ceiling' on several fronts." Various equality questions appear including in the numerous public bureaucracies; women's underrepresentation in specific government professions and agencies; sexual harassment in the public workplace; the need to create family-friendly public workplaces; and the presence of a 'glass ceiling" (Bearfield, 2019, pg. 384). Glass ceiling implies that although there is a barrier, it can easily be shattered. Women of color find a harder time breaking through that glass barrier, making cause for something more durable, like plexiglass. Plexiglass seems hard to break, but it just needs the right amount of continuous applied pressure. Before when racial attitudes were allowed, it could be seen as plain and overt, but now the covert behaviors are systemic and embedded within these institutions' foundations. This makes it seemingly more difficult to break through barriers in institutions that uphold policies and behaviors that reinforce racism and sexism.

Public institutions act as the glue in the grand scheme of racism. Public institutions have such a broad meaning, and in this case, it is intended to be just that, broad. Public institutions can range from governmental offices to universities. Black women in public institutions are more generalized and allow more room to examine Black women who work in a variety of different fields, and as a result, the data will hopefully give a more diverse set of answers.

Theoretical Frameworks

When the subject of Black women are being studied, scholars often utilize the same theories for their research. The traditional bulk of those theories include Black feminist theory, intersectional theory, critical social theory, and biculturalism theory.

The Black feminist theory allows the reader to be more conscious of the black woman's value to society. "Collins sums these four themes by saying that Black feminism is a 'process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community" (Taylor, 1998, pg. 235). Ngunjiri, Sobukewe and Williams-Gegner cites that Collins argued "that Black women in the US have historically produced knowledge, but that knowledge is subjugated in the academy" (Ngunjiri, Grambi-Sobukwe, & Williams-Gegner, 2012, pg. 86).

Critical social theory helps Black women to view institutional practices and their positions as black women in the United States. "For African American women, critical social theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a collectivity" (Collins, 2002, pg. 8). Black women's unique relationship with oppression allows them to acknowledge institutional practices and as a result, foster a sense of activism.

Before Crenshaw created intersectionality, it was hard to understand or determine exactly what Black women experience. "Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and ethnicity" (Crenshaw, 2018, para. 1). Intersectionality employs the audience to view Black women not as separate entities but as two identities colliding. "This concept helps to account for the complexity of the Black woman's lived experiences, recognizing that race, class, and gender are markers of power creating intersecting lines or axes used to reinforce power relations and forms of oppression" (Alston, 2005, pg. 677). Think of it as a Venn diagram, there's no Black woman who is identical to the next, but at their centers, identities such as race, sex, class, and religion, will overlap.

The biculturalism theory gives a unique perspective into Black women's experiences in their communities as well as the workplace. "For African-American women, biculturality, or moving from one cultural context to another, requires that they shape their careers in the white world while shaping other dimensions of their life in the black community" (Smith & Nkomo, 200, para. 5). Giving them the duality to function in both environments, while using one context to strengthen the dimensions of the other. This becomes a great resource, but what happens is this becomes a stress indicator, only adding to their already full plates. Bell- Smith and Nkomo conclude (2001):

> Bell reports that because of bicultural stress, professional black women have unusually complex life structures with inordinate amounts of responsibilities and obligations in all dimensions of their lives. Consequently, these women must manage dual roles and social responsibilities within both cultural contexts, often without adequate social support in either (para. 5).

I found a gap in the literature when I was creating the theoretical framework for this study. There are theories for Black women's inherently invaluable position in society. Intersectionality gives you the ability to study aspects of a person's combined social and political identities and from there study the different levels of discrimination or privilege. The bicultural theory examines this stress factor that Black women experience because of their dual identities in the workplace as well as in their individual lives. All of these theorize the experience of the Black woman, but what about a theory for the combination of these theories being applied in the workplace. Which led to the creation of the Workplace Intersectional Infringement Theory (WIIT). WIIT is the theory that someone is more likely to be limited or undermined in work environments due to their interconnected nature of class, race, and gender.

WIIT allows the researcher to examine Black women in the workplace, as well as what they experience. It gives them language for a concept that has been already been created, but applied in a new area of study. Hopefully, WIIT will lead to a decrease in the shortage of studies that we see on Black women in public leadership positions.

Data & Methods

To test both research questions, "Are the continued numbers of Black women in leadership positions within Public Institutions due to race and gender discrimination?" or "What are the ways that discrimination in the workplace have manifested for Black women in the 21st century?"; I created an original set of interview questions. The questions ask about their positions, challenges, and if they believe that race and gender discrimination have an impact on these challenges, but a special focus on why they are met with so much resistance. Focusing on their experiences and anticipation of specific answers will give us not only a first-hand recount of the day-to-day atmosphere created for a Black woman but to also answer one or both

questions. While there are a standard set of questions, participants who answer the question, "do you think these challenges that you've faced are due to race and/or gender discrimination?" or "Do you see yourself advancing in this role or are you happy? —with a no, have separate follow-up questions than a participant who answers with a yes. Although Black women have this unique position in society to experience discrimination on both fronts, alternative questions were created to eliminate all assumptions and create a sense of wonderment beforehand.

The data for this study was collected using snowball sampling method. With snowball sampling, the participants that are interviewed provide referrals for the upcoming participants. "The data obtained using a snowball procedure can be utilized to make statistical inferences about various aspects of the relationship present in the population" (Goodman, 1960, pg. 148). I interviewed participants that reside in different states, within different public institutions, and therefore, provided different experiences. Snowball sampling provides the opportunity to conduct a study that will provide those details. Black women who were vastly different were ideal for this study. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and video recorded. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes and the names of each participant will remain anonymous.

Table 1. Participants' Positions

Participants	Position	Location of Position
1.	Head of Training Division	New York, New York
2.	Department Chair	Fayetteville, Arkansas
3.	City Council Woman	Marion, Arkansas
4.	Associate Director	Fayetteville, Arkansas
5.	Lead Customer Service Representative	Memphis, Tennessee
6.	Director of Human Resources	Horn Lake, Mississippi
7.	Director of Rape Crisis Center	Fayetteville, Arkansas
8.	Public School Principal	West Memphis, Arkansas
9.	Director of Information Technology	West Memphis, Arkansas
10.	Assistant Dean	Fayetteville, Arkansas
11.	Public School Teacher	Little Rock, Arkansas

Coding

Based on second-hand experiences and the literature that was gathered, I categorized each interview into five categories to help organize each unique interview but to also create a sort of road map to better understand the potential causes of this gap. The five categories are as follows: 1) racial aggression 2) gender aggression 3) social isolation 4) nepotism/favoritism 5) mentorship/sponsorship.

Each category is representing either a manifestation of the discrimination that Black women see in the positions or embodiments of historical racial and gender discrimination. Since racism looks different from what we have seen in the past, both covert and overt behavior need to be observed and documented during the interviews. A breakdown of each category is provided below.

Table 1. Interview Categories

Racial aggression	Gender aggression	Social Isolation	Nepotism/ Favoritism	Lack of Mentorship/ Sponsorship
Covert behavior	Sexual harassment	Ignored by co-workers during office hours	Hired due to connections with a higher-up	Lack of encouragement
Overt behavior	Maternal harassment	Excluded from social groups after hours	External hiring/ Started at the top	Unfulfilled dreams/ No ambition
Questions of competency due to race	Questions of competency due to gender	Often behind due to communication	Early promotions	No one to recommend them for promotions
Only POC on that level	The only woman on that level	Numerous minute write-ups	Openly praised for work	Office confidant

The point system goes as follows, whenever one of the women recounts a time that she was discriminated against, a point will be added to the final count. Points will be given if participants express that it ultimately caused her to leave the position, ask to be relocated, or resulted in termination. A point will also be added if the participant expresses a time that they were just unhappy and it caused them to leave, even if this reaction was not instantaneous; the nuance of these answers provides a magnified look into two similar but completely differing experiences. Black women undoubtedly face more than five different encounters in the workplace, but this study primarily focuses on the perceived main five categories.

…said they experienced racial aggression
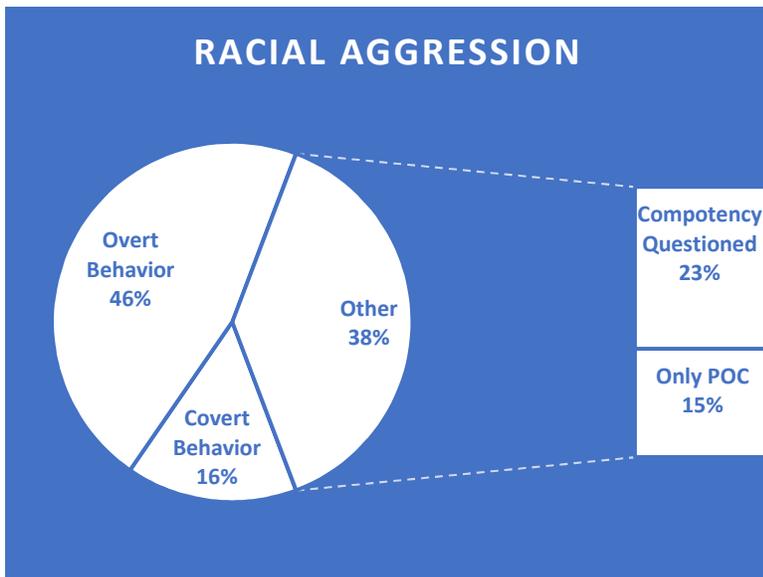
Figue 1. Breakdown of interview results

…said they experienced gender aggression

GENDER AGGRESSION

Maternal
Harassment
0%

Sexual
Harassment
10%

Other
90%

Compotency
Questioned
70%

Only Woman
20%
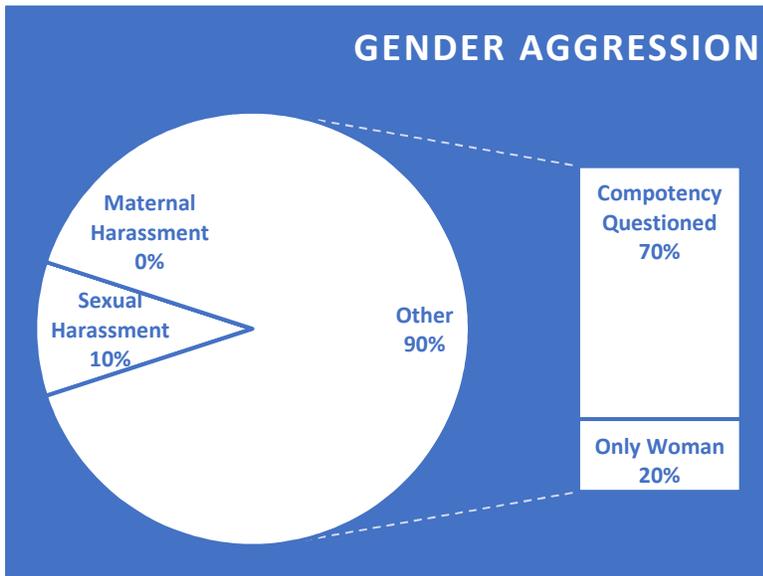
…expressed that they were socially isolated

SOCIAL ISOLATION

Excluded
0%

Ignored
33%

Other
67%

Lack of
Communicati
on
40%

Numerous
Write-Ups
27%
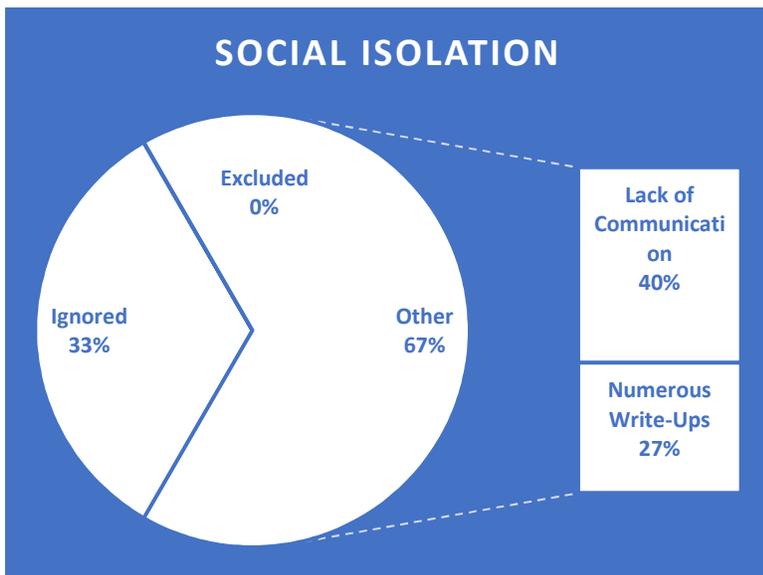
Figue 1. (cont.)

…encountered resistance because of

FAVORITISM/NEPOTISM

- External Hiring 33%
- Hired Due to Connections 17%
- Other 50%
- Early Promotions 17%
- Openly Praised 33%
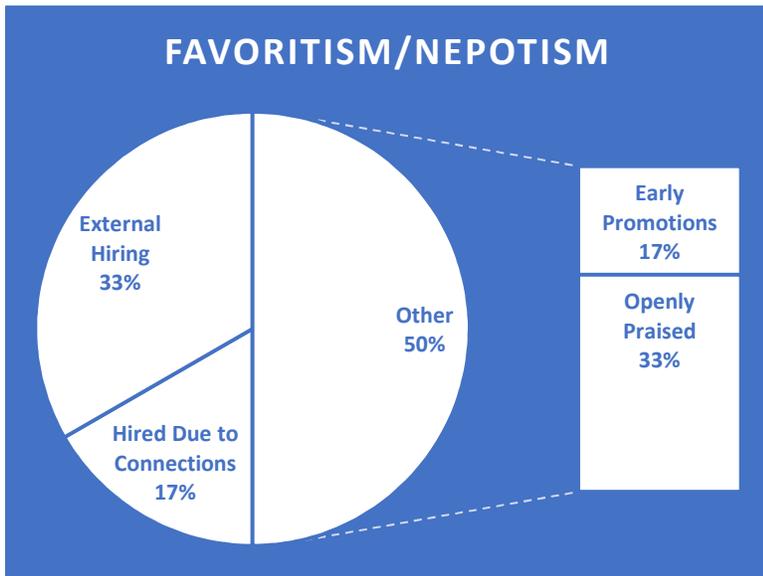
…never promoted or left due to

LACK OF MENTORSHIP/ SPONSORSHIP

- Unfulfilled Dreams 22%
- Lack of Encouragement 64%
- Other 14%
- No Recommendations 7%
- Office Confidant 7%

Figue 1. (cont.)

The questions varied based upon participants' answers. There are not many variants of the interview questions but alternatives in case their experiences led them to have different opinions and in return, the following questions would be rendered useless. Although the questions varied depending on the participants' answers, there were three questions that needed to remain the same throughout each interview.

When asked if advancement was desired-or if they were satisfied with their position they stated:

> *"I went to apply for advancements elsewhere and in other departments and the responses came back as a negative. They said, 'if my 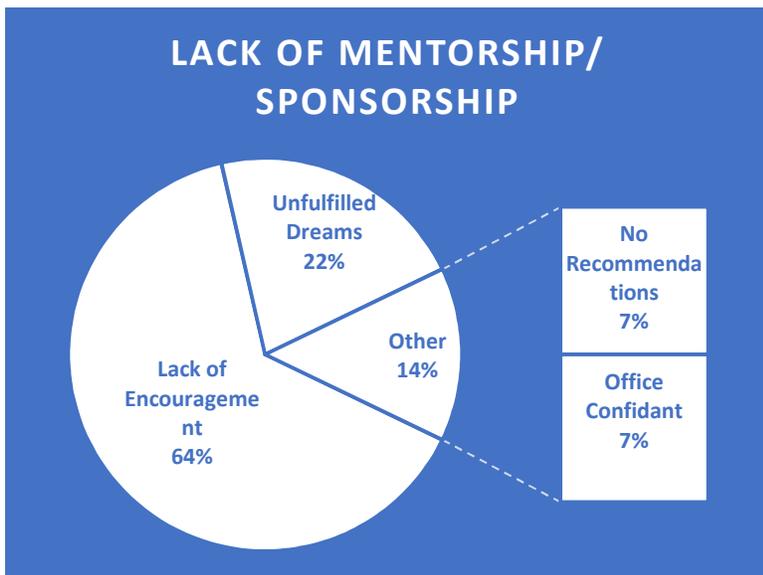employer didn't see fit to advance me, why should they give me the position.' These are things I've had to live with and after those responses, I learned to become my advocate, starting with myself in the mirror every morning"* – Assistant Dean, Participant 10

> *"I took a huge pay cut to come work for the University. I came in as one of the highest-paid program directors, and people who were making a little less or doing the equivalent of what I was doing, I heard and felt that resentment, but I earned everything I was making. That was an initial challenge coming here, I had to deal with white men and women who thought they were my equals, education, and experience-wise, and they weren't. I went from a 6-figure job to working here because the flexibility that was offered was what's best for myself and my family."* – Associate Director, Participant 4

> *"I see myself remaining here, in this position as principal. The reason being that we are now a title one school and I foresee our school being a blue-ribbon school but if I leave this position, it will only add to those challenges that are already present. So, for right now, I would like to stay here and see that transition through"* – Public School Principal, Participant 8

To say the answers about advancement varied is an understatement. Despite knowing advancement would quite literally advance their status, their career, or their incomes; some of the participants saw advancement as an option, not as a necessity. It is interesting to hear their perspectives on the word "advancement" and what it means to them. Some wanted advancement to escape their terrible bosses, while others saw it as a means to an end. All the participants agreed that advancement is something that was desired at some point in their career but as time

goes on, different factors have to be included, and being advanced in their institutions may no longer be the goal or what it looked like 10 years ago.

When asked about challenges that kept presenting themselves, they stated:

"Back before I was chair, the chair before me left the department. They didn't want to name me (then the vice-chair) as chair, the department wanted to have this full open process again. What was interesting about the process is the person who ran against me, was a full professor white male who never ran. Even when the department asked him to run, he refused to run. Here it is, I'm running and now he wanted to run. I considered this man a friend, an ally in the department. He advocated for me on some issues and even co-authored so papers together, but he decided to run against me." – Department Chair, Participant 2

"Being the second black woman in this position as an administrator. A lot of times, you have to be a little bit more vocal about your stances on everything. This is because even in 2021 most administrators, even in predominately black areas, are still males, white or black. So as a black woman, often when I make a stance, I have to be more vocal, and it has to have evidence or research to back my stance up. You have to give the rationale behind wanting things to go a certain way, and I know my male counterparts don't have to do the same. –Public School Principal, Participant 8

"I've been referred to as one of those people, and I learned after a while that if I didn't speak up, they didn't hear me. So, to a certain degree, for a while I was voiceless. I've always had to have research to back up my position. No one took me at face value about what I was saying unless I had evidence to back it up. when I didn't have research, I was excluded for decisions that directly affected my office or was shut down when I told them we needed to know if it impacts our office so that we could make decisions. – Assistant Dean, Participant 10

"The men at my job, no matter their race, are never questioned and are always considered as right, and women who are not African American are promoted at a much faster rate with much less work experience" – Lead Customer Service Representative, Participant 5

Through these interviews, I was able to gain an invaluable perspective into their lives and the challenges that black women have to overcome in the workplace, but this question in particular did the heavy lifting. Although their responses varied, almost every participant had the same answer to this question. Their challenges originated from everyone second-guessing their stances. Whether it be questioning if they were sexually harassed, or if they were fit to run for

chair of the department; all of them have been asked to prove their competency in one form or another.

When asked why they thought there weren't as many black women in leadership positions versus their white or male counterparts, they stated:

"In my opinion, few black women hold leadership positions in this field because when it comes to hiring and or promotions; it's not what you know, it's whom you know. The playing field would be more level if promotions and hiring practices were truly based on merit, education and work history." – Lead Customer Service Representative, Participant 5

"One, they have a choice now. They have the option to go to corporate America where they have the opportunity to be paid a lot more. The other is, black women, climb the brick wall, but they look for holes to put their fingers in because they don't see how they will make it to the top, and making it to the top will be the push from a mentor and that's something that just isn't practiced in public institutions. They don't have in-house mentoring programs. Or potentially they just see us as superwomen. We will get everything done, even jobs that aren't our own, but they think we don't care about promotions and without that mentorship, sometimes we just don't go for it." – Assistant Dean, Participant 10

"I want to be the creator of my destiny and I am not comfortable working for someone for the rest of my life. I think that a lot of black women don't think it's possible for them. They don't pursue their dreams because they don't think it's possible for them, they keep it at just that, a dream. But until we are empowered to see beyond what people tell us we can and cannot do, we won't go out for those positions. We won't start our own businesses and we will always do what we've been limited and told we can do." – Associate Director, Participant 4

Results

Table 1. Interview Category Results
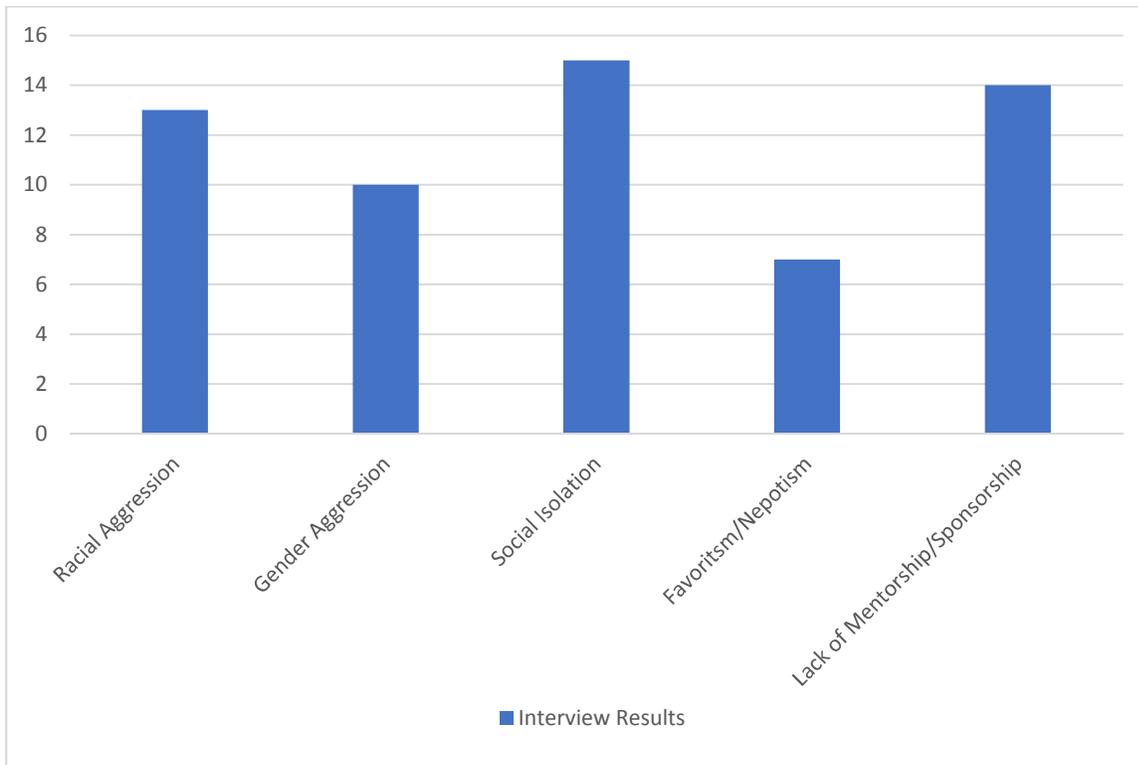
The results of the interview in Table 1 show that the majority of the participants experienced social isolation in their positions and return, which may be an indicator of why Black women are underrepresented in these leadership positions. The majority of the participants expressed that reasons such as social isolation, gender aggression, and lack of mentorship are what caused them not just to leave previous positions but also caused them to resent their current positions. Besides the category favoritism/nepotism, most of their experiences for racial aggression, gender aggression, social isolation, and lack of mentorship/sponsorship were eerily similar. What we know from this interview, is that despite having authority status in public institutions, black women experience WIIT regardless of the title that they hold.

Summary

There is a multitude of challenges that Black women experience in these leadership roles. One challenge that reoccurred throughout the participants is that the company, their bosses, and often, their coworkers labeled them as incompetent and often insisted on evidence to back their claims. The literature suggests that rendering Black women voiceless is intentional. Collins cites Williams' "The colored girl . . . is not known and hence not believed in; she belongs to a race that is best designated by the term 'problem,' and she lives beneath the shadow of that problem which envelops and obscures her" (Collins, 2002, p. 3). Perhaps, the numbers for Black women in leadership positions will start to increase once black women are allowed the chance to do all that they are hired to do.

The data that was gathered for this study is only the starting point for understanding why there is a lack of representation amongst Black women in these leadership positions. The categories created to better understand their experience are only the start to a very long history of Black women in the workplace. However, the categories created for this study and the reoccurring themes of participant responses will provide an adequate amount of information for future research on this topic.

Conclusion

According to the study, race and gender discrimination will subliminally or blatantly always factor into the experience of the black woman. Their position in society guarantees that for the foreseeable future and regardless of their career titles, this discrimination crossroads will still be their cross to bear. However, Black women's unique situation in society provides them with the knowledge to recognize the scrutiny and fight for better recognition and treatment in

places like the workplace. Despite there being an overflow of literature and research done on topics such as black feminism and intersectionality. There needs to be more research on these concepts in the workplace and how we can begin to see an increase in representation in the high positions.

When I began this analysis, I assumed that Black women were just being overlooked for these positions. I assumed that Black women were being treated unfairly and kept out of the upper-level positions because that is just the history of the United States. While in many aspects this assumption proved to be true, the workplace environment has developed something more permanent and seemingly more threatening. Those very blatant overt attitudes have manifested into covert behaviors that subconsciously have been embedded into this workplace culture.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Interview Questions 1

1.	How long have you been in this field?
2.	Why did you originally want to go into this field?
3.	What are some of the challenges that you've faced in this role?
4.	Do you think that those challenges are due to your race and/or gender?
5.	How does being a black woman affect your role within your company?
6.	Do you see yourself advancing in this role or are you happy?
7.	Can you tell me about a challenge that has reoccurred?
8.	In your opinion, why do you think there are limited numbers of black women in leadership positions?

Appendix B. Interview Questions 2

1.	How long have you been in this field?
2.	What are some of the challenges that you've faced in this role?
3.	Do you think that those challenges are due to your race and/or gender?
4.	Can you tell me about a challenge that has reoccurred?
5.	Do you think you experience resistance because of your position?
6.	Are you aware of any differences in treatment between you and other employees on your level?
7.	Do you see yourself advancing in this role or are you happy?
8.	In your opinion, why do you think there are limited numbers of black women in leadership positions?

Appendix C. Interview Questions 3

1.	How long have you been in this field?
2.	Why did you originally want to go into this field?
3.	What are some of the challenges that you've faced in this role?
4.	Do you think that those challenges are due to your race and/or gender?
5.	Can you tell me about a challenge that has reoccurred?
6.	Do you see yourself advancing in this role or are you happy?
7.	What barriers do you think might prevent you from achieving those goals?
8.	In your opinion, why do you think there are limited numbers of black women in leadership positions?

Appendix D. IRB Approval

UNIVERSITY OF
ARKANSAS.

To:	Najja K Baptist BELL 4188
From:	Douglas J Adams, Chair IRB Expedited Review
Date:	12/21/2020
Action:	**Expedited Approval**
Action Date:	12/21/2020
Protocol #:	2008278933
Study Title:	Race and Gender Discrimination and Its Lasting Effects on Black Women in Public Administration- working title
Expiration Date:	11/12/2021
Last Approval Date:	

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Kaylin D Oliver, Investigator