

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the systemic challenges faced by women in corporate workplaces, with a particular focus on the intersectional experiences of Black women. It examines how occupational stereotyping, implicit bias, and outdated workplace norms continue to hinder women's mobility in their companies as well as continuing to perpetuate gender inequalities in leadership. Examining existing research on gender discrimination, racial discrimination, and microaggressions, this paper highlights the two major intersecting identities of Black women, race and sex, and how these marginalized identities create unique experiences mostly towards Black women only. As a result of this unique marginalization, Black women must develop coping strategies such as code-switching, reliance on mentorship, and emotional strength to navigate predominantly white, male-dominated industries. The metaphor of the "concrete ceiling" illustrates the compounded barriers Black women face, going beyond the traditional "glass ceiling" experienced by White women. Additionally, the paper discusses the benefits of diverse leadership teams, with notable evidence that suggests companies with higher female board representation see improved performance metrics. Lastly, this paper concludes with a call for intentional structural change, arguing that workplace diversity is not only a matter of representation, but also a vital component of the company's success.

Intersectionality of Black Women in Corporate Workplaces

INTRODUCTION

In modern corporate workplaces, the path to success is often shaped by forms of human bias and structural inequality, factors that disproportionately affect marginalized communities. While some progress has been made in gender representation, women continue to encounter systemic barriers that limit their opportunities for advancement and fair treatment in corporate workplaces. For Black women in particular, these barriers are amplified by intersectionality, which fosters a unique and more challenging experience. The intersection of a Black woman's race in congruence to her sex, both marginalized identities, inevitably heralds backlash and continual microaggressions from white individuals in the corporate setting. The corporate world, predominantly occupied by white men, reinforces traditional stereotypes that portray women as less capable leaders and undervalue their contributions. This creates an uneven playing field where women must constantly navigate microaggressions, biases, and limited mobility towards executive positions. Honing in on research into stereotyping, workplace discrimination, and intersectional experiences, this paper explores the realities of Black women in the environment of corporate workplaces. Additionally, this paper examines coping strategies of Black women, the importance of diverse leadership for both women and Black individuals alike, and frameworks for institutional change that center around representation.

BLACK RACIAL IDENTITY

Racial identity is one of the two intersecting aspects of Black women that impacts their experience in corporate settings. For one, corporate America is mainly dominated by White men,

especially in senior and executive positions (Cornileus, 2016). Black women comprise a significant portion of the workforce, being approximately 60.5% of women working in America (Harris & Davis, 2023). However, Black women typically represent merely 1.3% of senior leadership roles in contrast to 29% of White women within S&P 500 companies. Being the minority within the corporate work environment allows for Black individuals to experience unique racist experiences that aren't as blatant as expected. One of these unique experiences, particularly for the Black community, is the modification and manipulation of natural hair that is usually kinkier and curlier than non-Black hair types. In the article, "Wear Your CROWN: How Racial Hair Discrimination Impacts the Career Advancement of Black Women in Corporate America," authors Clynessia Harris of Northcentral University and Deanna R. Davis of National University dive into a peculiar form of discrimination through the use of hair. They begin by elaborating on hair regulations and policies that corporate companies can utilize to prohibit black hairstyles. Black textured hair is commonly underrepresented and misunderstood in corporate workplaces, hence the reasoning for these prohibitions of hair being "unprofessional" or "too exotic" in corporate workplace culture. Rather than donning hairstyles such as afros, braids, locs, etc., Black individuals tend to be encouraged by employers to assimilate towards the corporate workplace's Eurocentric cultural beauty standard of straighter and silkier hair. This often requires the cutting of hair, covering hair, or the use of alternative styling such as wigs, relaxers, etc.. In fact, Black women are sent home 1.5 more times in comparison to White women due to their hair. Those who dissent from these standards, commonly referred to as the "dress code," ultimately face negative performance evaluations, overlooking for career advancement, or even termination. Within a white dominated space, hairstyles that are different from the majority culture will inevitably be perceived differently and consequently create a distinct experience for

those who identify themselves with the Black minority identity. While interviewing multiple Black women in corporate workplaces, authors Harris and Davis (2023) found, in general, a common theme was expressed. This was the changing of hairstyles in order to progress in their respective careers. In fact, all 10 of the interviewees had changed and manipulated their hair in some form in order to gain access to career advancement opportunities. To combat this, the Creating a Respectful Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act was passed in 2019. This act entailed new protections against the discriminatory grooming policies targeted towards Black individuals and removed verbiage relating to race in these policies. Essentially, the CROWN Act provided further clarification on racial discrimination in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In short, Title VII prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin (*Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964*, n.d.). However, Title VII did not elaborate on the various forms of discrimination, which in this instance, the racial discrimination of hair. What the CROWN Act does is it provides protections for Black hair and the right to preserve one's cultural identity through their hair (Harris & Davis, 2023). Interestingly enough, studies have shown that productivity is increased when Black individuals are allowed to wear their natural hair. By allowing Black individuals the freedom to not worry about their appearance conforming to a Eurocentric standard, they in turn, become more productive as a result and are able to dedicate more time to their work rather than their appearance. Companies may be negatively impacted by the continual implementation of discriminatory hair policies. Employee dissatisfaction actually correlates to a decrease in workplace production, resulting in economic losses for both the organization and its employees. Harris and Davis also found in their study that the standard of “neatness” is subjective to employers. Taking into consideration the cultural background of individuals, these standards of being neat may vary. For example, white

individuals may prefer straight hair as an acceptable standard due to a more Eurocentric cultural background. Whereas, a Black individual could more commonly prefer braids, freshly retwisted twists/locs, or weaves/wigs as having their “hair did” and as an acceptable standard of neatness. With whites being the majority in senior leadership positions in corporate America, their subjective standard of neatness trickles down to their subordinates. Consequently, the cultivation of a culturally ignorant work environment will inevitably introduce and reinforce negative stereotypes geared towards Black individuals.

Stereotypes towards Black individuals cause great harm in their acquisition of employment in corporate workplaces. Simply put, stereotypes are generalizations about a group of people that often results in stigmatized individuals within organizations (Smith & Joseph, 2010). A study conducted by researcher Kenelly explored the thought process of white employers who relied on stereotypes to guide their hiring decisions for unskilled positions. One particular White woman communicated her thoughts, saying that Blacks were “belligerent” employees who would be more likely to challenge policies set forth by management. Meanwhile, another participant characterized black women as single mothers who tended to prioritize their children over their work. Aside from these instances, it is also implied that in some cases, discrimination isn’t always intentional against racial and ethnic minorities. Rather, these employers may have unconscious biases towards individuals who hold a likeness to themselves. Discrimination is interpreted as the limitation and/or denial of employment opportunities based on the protected class characteristics of persons (Smith & Joseph, 2010). Smith and Joseph from Winston-Salem State University conducted an intriguing study, interviewing a sample consisting of 42 respondents employed in corporate workplaces. These respondents consisted of equal parts black men and women, as well as white men and women. A general theme highlighted

throughout the interviews was that organizational culture has the biggest impact on the overall workplace experience. Discrimination and stereotyping are concepts that are ingrained within predominantly white organizations; some remain ignorant to these disadvantages, whereas others tend to acknowledge it. One of these respondents, Susan, a White woman with only a high school diploma, was hired at the same time and at a higher level as her black counterpart, who held an undergraduate degree. Susan was quite impartial and shrugged off instances such as these, considering them as the “usual”. She didn’t see or realize that her promotion over a more qualified black woman seemed unfair or even an issue to begin with. Will, a Black man, expressed his frustrations with his organization's culture and how he's battled with it for almost 30 years. He felt his will to fight the status quo was slowly departing from him. This coincides with bicultural stress, and its correlation to lower job performance, higher turnover intentions, and less of a positive attitude towards the organization. 52-year-old Joyce, a Black woman holding a PhD, describes her experience in corporate settings and talks about the difference of treatment she encountered for being Black. She recounted a time where a white colleague accused her of only receiving a job at their institution only due to being Black. Her analysis of the situation was that many of the people who assumed that she was a diversity hire, likely only got the jobs themselves thanks to their father working in the same company prior or some sort of relation to the president of the company, either by blood or marriage. At first, corporate leaders and their management teams may not be able to take into consideration the variability of positive and negative workplace experiences exhibited from constituent to constituent. Oftentimes, this is ascribed to the foundation of the workplace culture itself. Where exclusion and superiority was the norm and where change and diversity were foreign. Hence, the justification of stereotypes and unequal treatment being described as the, “standard way of doing things” or, “just the way

things go”. The existence of racial biases towards Black individuals, even when one doesn’t want to engage in it, was a huge realization for white male city government manager, Steven. Saying that individuals who claim to be “colorblind” or “don’t see color” are out of touch with themselves and/or genuinely dishonest. He expounds upon this reality for Black individuals and seems to be exhibiting signs of Helm’s 4th stage of pseudo-independence, which is essentially when a white individual begins to attempt an understanding of racial, cultural, and sexual differences and may reach out to interact with minority group members (Ponterotto, 2006). Steven continues on, stating that he tries his best to be as impartial and unbiased as possible, but concludes that everyone still has some form of racial bias, no matter how hard they try to not have them. Overall, Smith and Joseph's findings show that of all the white participants in their study, none identified race and/or gender when recalling organizational setbacks. Additionally, they attributed their outcomes to organizational issues of culture when they were inhibited, and to their own abilities when they were successful.

THE FEMALE SEX

Sexual identity is another crucial aspect to examine when discussing the intersectionality of Black women in corporate workplaces. Being the latter of the term “Black woman”, it is important to note that Women make up 47 percent of the overall labor force but only account for 6 percent of corporate CEO’s (Matsa & Miller, 2011). Women today still earn about \$0.70 compared to every \$1.00 made by men and hold approximately 37.9 percent of all managerial and professional occupations (Smith & Joseph, 2010). With the current top executives being predominantly male, they often tacitly discriminate and/or stereotype female applicants (Matsa & Miller, 2011). On the other hand, researchers Matsa and Miller found that firms with more

women on the board of directors tended to have more female top executives. In their research they analyzed and measured increases in women hiring rates in corporate workplaces, women in executive positions, and women on the board of directors across a broad sample of S&P 1500 companies. They also paid keen attention to hirings and promotions being the result of other women within the same company. This examination of “women helping women” allows for us to understand that representation matters, especially in the workplace. They found that each 10 percentage point increase in women on the board increases the chances of having a woman among the top five executives by the following year by 0.9 to 1.5 percentage points.

Additionally, companies with female CEO’s tended to have gender spillovers from board members to executives. And although female CEOs are rare for larger companies, the estimates project a 10 percentage point increase in female board membership and a 0.2 to 0.4 percentage point increase in probability for female CEO’s. Overall, Matsa and Miller found that there was a great impact in promoting more women to top positions in companies since those women will serve as role models and mentors for other lower-ranking women in their respective companies.

The stereotyping of women in corporate workspaces also contributes to the unique experience they inhibit working in a predominantly male-dominated industry. Smith and Joseph touch on previous research done on the stereotyping of women's occupational perceptions and how this impacts women in corporate settings. Society often perceives occupations through a gendered lens, largely due to historical and structural inequalities that shape workforce expectations and roles (Smith & Joseph, 2010). For instance, roles such as waitress, receptionist, or secretary are frequently associated with women, while leadership positions and those involving authority, decision-making, and power are more commonly imagined as being occupied by men. These gendered occupations that are ingrained in workplace and societal

culture are what allow for potential discrimination and unfair treatment for women, especially in corporate workplaces.

In 2016, there was a reported number of about 26,834 charges of sex-based discrimination that was received by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) (Dworkin et al., 2018). Of the reported cases, there were two general categories displayed. The first of which being intentional discrimination, and the second being disparate impact claims, largely based on “practices that are fair in form but discriminatory in operation”. The majority of modern claims tend to be the latter of the two, largely due to the decline in overt and blatant sexism and rather the increase of microaggressions and less explicit forms of discrimination. Due to corporate businesses already putting women in the minority, these forms of discrimination can usually already be deeply set into workplace culture, creating harder pathways towards leadership positions for women as compared to men. Women also typically try to avoid losing out on career advancement opportunities when they finally start climbing the corporate ladder. This usually takes the form of remaining childless and/or spouseless. On the other hand, 74 percent of men on Wall Street had children and were still working their regular jobs, without losing out on advancement opportunities. This implies the normalization and enforcement of the societal role of women being the primary caretaker of the household. Where she forsakes her own personal ambitions as well as career goals and opportunities for her family, whereas males will typically forsake their family for career gain and advancement. Additionally, women, on average, are equally, if not more educated than men and enter the workforce with similar numbers to men. However, the issue isn’t education or experience when it comes to hiring or advancing women, it’s the personal bias of the employers and higher-ups. As mentioned prior, employers tend to hold a bias towards individuals who hold likeness to themselves (Smith &

Joseph, 2010). In an industry dominated by white males, this bias becomes increasingly clear, which is all the more reason as to why diverse boards are crucial in the resolution of increasing female representation in corporate settings. In fact, S&P 500 firms with female directors outperformed boards without women directors by two percent in the average returns on assets, representing an opportunity cost of \$567 billion (Dworkin et al., 2018). Studies suggest that progress such as this won't be replicable if there are only one or two token female board directors. In actuality, companies with the most women board directors outperformed those with the least by approximately sixteen percent on return. Essentially, greater inclusion of women presents a financial boom to companies.

In order to further company success through the use of diverse board members and women executives, companies must firstly promote women. Research shows that women are typically less vocal as compared to men in the workplace. For example, women usually aren't as comfortable negotiating with employers for a higher wage or salary as compared to men. When it comes to rejection, women also experience a different response than men. Men cannot take "no" for an answer and will generally combat and advocate for themselves, whereas women tend to be more submissive in this area. This reluctance exhibited by women can also contribute to the already ongoing issues of stereotyping and discrimination in the workplace. By giving women promotions in the workplace, employers empower women to feel like their voices and opinions are taken seriously. Furthermore, the promotion of just one or two women wouldn't suffice at all. On average, women are interrupted more often than men in meetings. The ideas these women propose are often credited to men who regurgitate their ideas later on in the same meetings. This common behavior and workplace culture plays a role as to why women don't feel the need to speak up and advocate for themselves. Boards with three or more women however, have an

increased space for women to fully express their ideas and concerns whilst still being valued and heard. There is strength in numbers when it comes to this form of diversity, as studies show women are more comfortable speaking up and advocating for themselves when there are other women around them to support. This further supports the reasoning behind “women helping women” mentioned earlier. The representation and support of women who are higher up in companies are crucial to the growth, mentoring, development, and investment in lower-ranking women.

INTERSECTIONALITY OF BLACK WOMEN IN CORPORATE WORKPLACES

Whether it be through race or sex, this unique intersection of marginalized identities creates a distinct experience for Black women working in corporate settings. As a Black individual, they may be seen as unqualified for their work. As a woman, they may be perceived as insignificant and ineffective. The toll of these experiences in their daily lives in the workplace is tremendous and eventually Black women will develop mechanisms to cope with these experiences. Researchers Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto studied this exact phenomenology undergone by Black women. Black women currently represent the largest female minority group to receive educational degrees and that number is only increasing (Holder et al., 2015). Specifically in corporate settings, these Black women cultivate sophisticated adaptive skills by virtue of their biculturalism. This adaptability is ultimately what drives their mechanisms of coping with the discriminative stress of their institutions. White women for example, will describe their workplace advancement difficulties as a “glass ceiling”. Whereas Black women's experience is often attributed to a “concrete ceiling”. For a glass ceiling, you can still see through the ceiling and breaking the glass is a likely possibility; it will take more effort than what is

normally done but regardless, it is possible. Concrete ceilings on the other hand, are opaque and extremely difficult to penetrate, requiring maximum effort just to hope the ceiling breaks. This illustration isn't meant to demean and diminish the oppression and difficulties White women face in the corporate setting, but to highlight the intersecting areas of both privilege and oppression for these two groups, and how some identities require more effort to break the ceiling.

Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto analyzed the experiences of 10 Black women, asking them two questions. The first being about their experiences and anecdotes. And the second being coping mechanisms these women would use in adverse and discriminatory situations. The resulting study arranged six themes of coping strategies commonly exhibited by the Black women participants in their study. The first coping strategy is religion and spirituality. This coping strategy utilizes prayer and meditation as common practices in the event of adversity. Religion and spirituality introduces a higher sense of empowerment, protection, and forgiveness of aggressors for Black women. Serving as a reminder that microaggressions in the workplace are trivial compared to the many other problems out in the real world. Armoring is the second coping mechanism found, where individuals take pride in themselves, their family, and their culture. By being content and secure in who they are and setting their own standards, they don't feel the pressure or need to conform to the hostilities of a microaggressive workplace. The third coping strategy is known as shifting, which is essentially a strategic adaptive response to racial and sexual discrimination. For example, Black women commonly shift perspective, body language, and diction, otherwise referred to as code-switching, to counter stereotypes and to foster a more comfortable atmosphere for whites who may be more hostile towards alternative identities. One participant notes that by emphasizing racial and ethnic differences, she effectively

avoids being the spokesperson for all Black women. Shifting keeps colleagues guessing as to who a Black woman is as an individual, rather than a specific race or sex. Support networks are another coping mechanism utilized by Black women. Typically, these are spaces at work where a Black woman could address these issues with other trusted colleagues, usually other Black women. It is here that specific action is drafted and revised in a way that won't negatively impact the company at large, but rather present a growth and learning opportunity for both parties. Sponsorship and mentoring is the fifth coping strategy, which entails the consultation of more experienced and higher-up individuals, who tend to be either a Black man or woman or even a White individual who is a close mentor. The encouragement to push forward by elder mentors in the corporate workplace further empowers Black women to push through. Lastly, self-care is the final coping mechanism exhibited by Black women. This strategy includes the usual activities such as physical exercise, vacations, and family time as destressors and places for one to relax and recharge. However, many participants noted that seeking therapy was often the last resort in dealing with microaggressions. Additionally, researchers noted that even Black women who are in the most senior-level positions aren't exempt from experiencing microaggressions and persistent racist experiences.

In response to the systemic workplace discrimination experienced by Black professionals, researchers Isaac and See developed the T.E.A.M.S. model, which stands for Technology, Education, Access, Mentoring, and Support (Isaac & A, 2001). This framework offers a strengths-based approach aimed at dismantling institutional barriers and workplace violence through multidisciplinary collaboration and culturally competent strategies. Isaac and See define workplace violence as acts without institutional integrity and transgressions imposed on human beings, and they base their model in a way that combats this specific behavior. It is not an

inexpensive model, as it employs the services of a multidisciplinary team of highly educated consultants and psychologists who are all knowledgeable about human behavior, formal organizations, and education. T.E.A.M.S. utilizes technology to call meetings for black executives of Fortune 500 companies, assess the hostile work environments black individuals face, and conduct research on black executives who have been fired, demoted, or transferred. Education will be used for “surviving and thriving”. This is where Black executives will be educated on career planning, skill development, and corporate politicking. Access is a module designed to keep Black individuals within the loop, practicing effective communication, and gaining information through networking. Mentoring is the following module and is quite crucial in corporate workplaces, especially for Black women. T.E.A.M.S. allows for black people to find other Black mentors digitally within the T.E.A.M.S. organization, whether they be part of the same company or a different one. Lastly, the Support module will be dedicated to having a community to rely on when a Black individual takes action against racism and microaggressions in their workplaces. Companies tend to pick off dissenting voices within their ranks, but with the entirety of the T.E.A.M.S. organization, this would be more difficult for them to accomplish.

The experience of the Black woman in corporate workplaces is multifaceted and highly complex. Intersectionality plays a significant role in the experience of Black women in a predominantly white-male industry. With this unique set of identities, Black women are more prone to corporate violence, microaggression, and discrimination. With these factors being brought into light, it is imperative that corporations take an initiative to hire more Black women executives and board members, so that a more diverse and equitable environment may be fostered for the Black women who are still climbing the corporate ladder only to peak at a concrete ceiling.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of the corporate workplace for Black women can't be severed from the social, cultural, and historical narratives that play a role in workplace norms. Stereotypes about leadership, gender roles, and racial competence continue to shape how both Black individuals and women alike are perceived and treated, often forcing them to develop extensive coping mechanisms in order to cope and persevere in environments not built with their success in mind. While the glass ceiling may still exist and apply to White women, Black women more commonly encounter the metaphor of a concrete ceiling, which more accurately captures the immovable weight of discrimination and intersectionality (Holder et al., 2015). Yet, despite these challenges, Black women persist and excel, often becoming overqualified and overlooked in corporate settings (Smith & Joseph, 2010). Ultimately, creating an inclusive corporate workplace culture is not just a moral necessity but also a strategic advantage (Matsa & Miller, 2011). Companies that invest in diverse, representative leadership stand to benefit not only financially, but culturally, cultivating a workplace that sees and experiences the voices, talents, and leadership potential of Black individuals and women alike.

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