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# Book Review: Too Much to Ask: Black Women in the Era of Integration

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## Book Review

**Too Much to Ask: Black Women in the Era of Integration.** Elizabeth Higginbotham. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC. 2001, 290 pp. (paperback) US\$19.95.

Reviewed by Sheila T. Gregory, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Higginbotham's *Too Much to Ask: Black Women in the Era of Integration* (2001) provides a powerful and enlightening message about the lives and pioneering experiences of 12 middle-class and working-class women who helped to integrate American higher education in the post-civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. The book is based on a study that followed the paths of 56 Black women who graduated from predominantly White colleges between the years 1968-1970. The women were contacted 6-8 years after graduation to complete follow-up surveys. Higginbotham focused her book on interviews with twelve out of the 56 women. At its heart, *Too Much to Ask* is poignant and compelling as it explores how social class, family practices and expectations prepared and influenced the lives and educational outcomes of Black women in the 1960s.

In the preface, Higginbotham writes about her experience in an era of integration as a working-class Black woman in 1971 while attending Brandeis University Graduate School. Higginbotham recalls that she was the only African American student in her class. The author briefly introduces the twelve interviewees, and notes that they had attended predominately White colleges in the same city in the 1960s.

Higginbotham states that her primary goal in writing the book is to "examine the complex lives of these women and develop a perspective that can help readers ask a series of questions to better understand the alternatives these women faced and to examine how people moved within varying social structures" (p. xi). These questions were: 1) What did being a Black person in a time of shifting racial dynamics mean for the course of these women's lives? 2) What was it like to be a pioneer in a predominately White college as the college attempted to change how it operated? 3) What obstacles and supports did social class differences create for women in their journeys through childhood, into college, and into their early adult lives? and 4) How did gender impact Black women raised with certain expectations within the Black community and exposed to different expectations in predominately White colleges?" (p. xi). The background and experiences of these women were different. But they all shared the common experience of being outsiders. As Higginbotham writes, they were "looking for a way through the institutional and interpersonal obstacles to their successful passage through the educational system" (p. xii).

Organized in 10 chapters, *Too Much to Ask* allows the reader to discover the lives of these trailblazing Black women. The first four chapters provide the foundation for understanding the lives of Blacks growing up in working-class and middle-class backgrounds in the 1950s and 1960s, and dealing with racial prejudice and discrimination. Higginbotham also explores how economic differences can result in residential and educational alternatives. In Chapters 5 to 7, the author discusses how family practices and resources influenced how these women

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addressed specific challenges and provided different kinds of support during high school and as they prepared for college. Chapter 8 examines how social class shaped their expectations of college and what adjustments they needed to make in the 1960s to survive and succeed in predominately White colleges. Chapter 9 turns our attention to how these women balanced their academic careers with their personal lives. To examine the sacrifices they made and the successes they achieved, the final chapter provides a reflection of where these women were in 1976, particularly on issues of race, social class and gender.

Chapter One introduces four of the 12 Black women who were college-bound students. Two of the women are from working-class families and the other two are from middle-class backgrounds. This chapter discusses the new educational opportunities available to Black students in the 1950's and 1960's. For example, there were 141,000 Black and other students of color between the ages of 18-24 enrolled in college in the United States in 1960. Social changes--including the 1957 admission of 9 Black students into Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas--had opened the doors for Black students to begin attending predominately White institutions. Although institutionalized racism and discrimination still existed, education provided an additional resource in the fight for equality.

The second chapter examines families' social class backgrounds. Middle-class is defined as those whose parents had some college experience, and worked in professional, technical, administrative and managerial positions. Higginbotham explains how the members of the middle class enjoyed social class privileges, both within their communities and often in the wider society. Their positions enabled them to secure educational goals for their children and allowed their children to enjoy the social aspects of college life. By contrast, working-class families consisted of parents who worked as clerical workers, skilled craftsmen, as well as those in manual occupations. The majority of their parents had completed high school. Working-class parents viewed education as a way of becoming economically independent, and therefore, college was not seen as a social setting. Working-class families faced obstacles deal with both race and class obstacles. They faced additional barriers in the high school and college curriculum.

Chapter Three explores the role of socioeconomic status and the problems created by racial segregation. Some of these problems include unequal services to its residents, inner-city schools with a disproportionately high number of inexperienced teachers with high turnover rates, fewer supplies, and older, often unsafe physical facilities. Since inner cities received poorer city services, many of the Black parents strived to live outside of these areas. They believed that if their children had access to education from an integrated school, this would increase the likelihood of college admission and attendance. Black middle-class parents were able to move to White areas in search of better schools.

The ones who remained in the central city often relocated to integrated sections where schools may have been a little better. However, the families still felt socially isolated as a result of Whites' continued treatment of them as "inferior". Some middle-class parents remained in predominately Black sections and chose to send their children to private or parochial schools, even though this choice often resulted in additional financial burdens on the families' resources. Regardless of the choice made by middle-class families, they were often successful in providing a good education for their children who were better prepared for college life. On the other hand, Black working-class parents had fewer options. Due to the financial constraints, many of them remained in Black communities where they lacked the freedom to choose and the access to better schools. Some were forced to work two jobs in

order to afford the price of home ownership. Others lived in rental housing and were forced to move on a regular basis.

The fourth chapter explores the overall issue of racism and its effects on Black families. Higginbotham describes how parents had to socialize their children on the realities of racism and how to work around it, by stressing the importance of a positive self-esteem along with teaching skills needed to negotiate through this environment. Parents believed that education was the key to helping their children succeed. One participant in the study said, "My father wanted to give me an education, because that is something no one could take away from me" (p. 66). Parents valued education and believed that their children would complete college. The primary goal of the working-class parents was to send their children to college. All of the middle-class parents assumed their children would go to college and the only question that remained was which institution.

Middle-class and working-class parents differed in their expectations of a college education. Middle-class parents expected their daughters to earn a high-status professional position, while the working-class parents held expectations that their daughters would work in traditional, female occupations. Their degrees would enable the women to support their spouses or become the major breadwinner. Reading was seen as fundamental to school success. Therefore, books were more important to some of the working-class families than having new clothes. Another important tool towards future success was supplementing the school experiences. Many of the middle-class families could afford private lessons, particularly music and dance. In addition, they would take vacations to expose their children to new experiences. Since the working-class parents were not able to afford these luxuries, they relied upon community resources including museums and zoos, concerts in the park, free plays, and church events. Parents tried to prepare their children to always strive for excellence, based on the belief that Blacks would have to be twice as good as Whites to gain the same recognition and respect. Along this same line was the value to give something back to the community. These women were also taught to act independently. Self-direction was critical as these women interacted with competitive White students. They learned to stay focused on the goal of acquiring a strong education. To keep their daughters focused on this goal, many of the parents limited their dating experiences and closely supervised their daughters' activities and friendships. Racial barriers were a common component of their lives. Daughters were instructed to confront racist actions and, if necessary, question authority figures. The skills and values that their parents had instilled in them enabled them to successfully survive in a hostile educational setting.

In Chapter 5, Higginbotham builds connections between public high school experiences and social class as a key factor in the amount of encouragement each woman received from teachers and school officials. Higginbotham asserts that the placement in different curriculum tracks was also correlated to social class backgrounds. This includes racial inequalities in our society which limit educational opportunities. Lastly, gender bias existed within school structures. Students enrolled in predominately Black high schools had high levels of performance and these schools were staffed by both White faculty and highly qualified Black teachers who became role models for these young women. Social class was not a critical deterrent to education in these schools.

Students were placed into appropriate classes based on their individual needs. All the women in Higginbotham's study who attended these schools reported being strongly

encouraged to attend college. Black women, who attended predominately White high schools, faced many special challenges. Although they gained better academic preparation, they reported feeling socially isolated and often viewed as “tokens” when schools were forced to integrate. They also reported feeling that school personnel were ambivalent about their presence and that there was little emotional and social support offered. Racial tensions were also exacerbated. These women stated that social class played a key role in the amount of encouragement they received. Higginbotham explained that schools were classified as integrated if the population consisted of between 15-50 percent Blacks. While these settings were often the first choice of Black families, in reality, they did not always provide a supportive environment. Social class and race played important roles. Middle-class women were more successful. Working-class students had difficulties gaining access to college-prep courses and once they gained access, encouragement to pursue a college education varied.

The sixth chapter explores the elite institutions. These are defined as either private, parochial, or honors high schools. Elite schools had high levels of academic preparation and the majority of graduates continued to attend four-year colleges. Private schools were most often accessible only to the Black middle-class families. Specialized high schools were open to qualified students based on test scores and were often the only option for working-class families. They were predominately White, varied in size and were either coeducational or single gender schools with a rigorous curriculum to prepare students for college. Middle-class students in these schools were conflicted as they were forced to negotiate between their White, elite high schools and their Black community. It was seen as their responsibility to bridge this gap, but there were enormous social and racial tensions. Working-class students also felt racial discrepancies. They reported being treated as smart people who were ‘exceptional’ for their race (p.130). This often resulted in a lack of recognition of Black students for their talents and accomplishments. Another obstacle was an attempt to negotiate between the two worlds which revolved around resources. Black families sacrificed to afford to send their children to these elite schools. Little money was left for other luxuries, such as travel, that would give them greater exposure to cultural and educational activities. Working-class women also reported having trouble accepting the competitive nature between students. They had been taught by their parents to share resources and to treat everyone with respect. While they valued the education they received, they were critical of some of these schools’ practices.

Chapter 7 defines and discusses adult-sponsored and child-secured mobility. Higginbotham contends that “adult-sponsored mobility” occurs when parents or other adults are active in providing critical assistance that positions young people for college and aids them in the transition from high school to college (p.143). Middle-class students received tremendous parental support and their parents were knowledgeable about college. Therefore, these students did not rely completely on the advice of guidance counselors who often encouraged them to attend state colleges and traditional Black institutions. Middle-class women were more likely to live away from home while attending college. Higginbotham defines “child-secured mobility” as parents providing emotional support and acting as their child’s advocate, while seeking various financial resources (p. 143). This type of support was common in working-class families because parents lacked first-hand knowledge of college. These women were dependent on the advice of school counselors or had to research specific colleges for themselves and then decide where to apply. Economic concerns were the main factors these women considered when choosing a college. They were aware of the cost of

college and were dependent upon financial support. They worked hard to secure scholarships. Most of the working-class women had no expectations that they would live away from home while attending college.

The eighth chapter explores the expectations and the realities of college life. Higginbotham argues that working-class women focused on the academic side of college. They had few expectations regarding a social life and believed a college education would expand their employment options upon graduation. On the other hand, middle-class women viewed college as a means of acquiring knowledge as well as life-long friendships. The middle-class women, who attended predominately White colleges, confronted certain issues. These included racism and the views of some faculty who felt the admission of Blacks were signs of the college lowering their standards. The working-class women who decided to attend non-elite colleges experienced some racism and were required to work part-time to finance their own college education.

Chapter 9 articulates the survival strategies these women employed to successfully graduate from college in the 1960s. A number of the women in Higginbotham's study were co-founders or charter members of African American student organizations on campus which created spaces for these women to share their experiences and build a critical mass to affirm their racial identity. As a result of these actions, changes within the school administration occurred. New recruitment programs were initiated, resulting in greater Black faculty and staff hires. Additional services for minority students emerged as well. Providing support and socialization, Black peer groups were viewed as opportunities for growth and exposure and a chance to examine class and race dimensions in a safe setting. Higginbotham asserts that middle-class women began to think about marriage and children as graduation grew closer. Although the working-class women also had expectations about their future lives, they were unable to think about marriage and kids while in school.

The final chapter titled, "Struggling to Build a Satisfying Life in a Racist Society," examines the lives of these Black women beyond college and the costs of their successes. Higginbotham argues that while the college degrees, particularly from predominantly White institutions, enhanced the participants' options for advanced schooling and employment, many women continued to face the same struggles and challenges stemming from continued institutionalized racism. Roughly 20% of the women in the study were involved in graduate or professional training, and nearly 8% left working environments to raise children. And finally, the working-class college graduates moved up the social scale through their employment as they joined the Black middle-class.

In the epilogue, Higginbotham argues that social class impacts the routes that Black women take to college and professional jobs. She also contends that educational values and goals were nurtured by their families and formed in cultures of resistance. Therefore, as racial ideologies continue to exist, so do counter-images from the Black community. Higginbotham concludes by arguing that these differences must be resolved so that mobility can continue.

*Too Much To Ask* is a well-written and timely addition to the small, but consistently growing body of literature on the influence of race, class, and gender in the lives of Black women in the United States. Higginbotham's tremendous contribution is unique in that it provides a rare bird's-eye view of the lives of working-class and middle-class women in the post-civil rights era. Through the use of supporting research from other studies, Higginbotham creates a mosaic of personal, social, economic, and academic evidence that serves to reinforce her primary contention about the price Black women had to pay for an

education. However, the book does not allow the reader to hear the experiences of these women in their own voices. Higginbotham weaves in and out with summarized stories, rather than quotes, which does not allow the reader to truly understand the decisions made by these women. I personally came away from the book wanting to know what the career paths of these women had been, what jobs they were offered, and which they had accepted?

Perhaps the most important questions left unanswered were what choices these women made and why? These answers, beginning with their grade school choices, would have drawn in and invoked feelings from the readers. The data Higginbotham presents in this book is flawless and her conclusions are plausible, but readers will not feel connected to these women because their lives are not followed in sequence of experiences or depth. While Higginbotham provides insightful summaries, she often switches her conversation from discussing working-class women to middle-class women and vice-versa. It sometimes loses the reader. However, readers will appreciate Higginbotham's attempts not to over-generalize the experiences of Black women during this era. Rather than rely on the historical context, she creates and summarized testimonials of the struggles and successes of these Black women. In conclusion, Higginbotham clearly and convincingly demonstrates that Black women and their families did whatever was necessary to receive an education and achieve their goals, even though the price Black women had to bear was often "too much to ask."