Challenges Facing Female Leaders of Color in U.S. Higher Education

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Abstract

Despite a myriad of challenges including the slow pace of rising to the top and the low compositional diversity in most university leadership, women of color are becoming increasingly visible in higher education leadership. This paper investigates the phenomena of the growing numbers of women of color in top positions, with the aim of debunking the myth of the invisibility of black women in leadership positions in higher education. The findings indicate that although women in the U.S. earn the majority of postsecondary degrees and 26.4% of college presidents are women, with 4.5% of them being women of color, women still have a long way to go before they have equal status with men in university leadership positions. Theories and practices of leadership now focus on competencies that have typically and traditionally been associated with women, and not valued as workplace leadership competencies. An advantageous increase in female academicians means these women bring a different level of knowing, pose different questions, and share different experiences than their male counterparts. Unfortunately, female academicians' experiences do not yet factor into public policies and decision-making**.**

Keywords: *leadership, women of color, higher education, social inclusion, workplace bias, disparity, social exclusion, social barriers*

Although female academicians of color are increasingly visible in leadership positions in higher education, the challenges that they contend with in order to achieve this status are not for the faint of heart. Challenges described in the literature include racial and gender bias at work. Even with affirmative action and tokenism, the number of racial discrimination settlement cases and unequal pay cases brought against corporate organizations and universities evidences gender bias and unequal pay.

Identifying aspects of women of color in higher education are *black, African American, Latina, Hispanic,* or *African*. These identifiers of women of color present a barrier to social inclusion even after completion of doctorate degrees and acceptance of faculty positions in U.S. universities. The World Bank defines social inclusion as the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of people who are disadvantaged on the basis of their identity to take part in society such identity markers as race, income, employment status, social class, geographic location, personal habits, appearance, education, religion, and political affiliation. The bases for social exclusion include race, income, employment status, social class, geographic location,

personal habits, appearance, education, religion, and political affiliation. The definition of social inclusion emphasizes the relationship of dignity and well-being to the impact of exclusion and identity formation as well as ability to take part in society.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines gender disparity as any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of socially constructed gender roles and norms (WHO, 1998) and views gender disparity as an intersection of economic inequality and racial or ethnic hierarchy. Social categorization often generates judgments about an individual's capacity to function effectively, even though, Blustein (2006) indicates that these phenotype results in "no inherent meaning" (p. 154). Ongoing entrenchment of and repeated exposure to social categorizations fortifies social barriers against women of color's access to leadership positions. The few women of color who leap over these hurdles find pushback from additional barriers related to their performance, interpersonal relations, and ability to network.

The World Bank identifies six core governance indicators. The governance indicator of voice and accountability hold particular relevance to this discussion of women's access to leadership roles. The invisibility of women, and specifically women of color, in academic leadership is tantamount to the exclusion and denial of women's voices, which indicates lack of full accountability on the part of leaders. Without audible voices, women cannot expect their issues and concerns, innovation and intuition, to receive thorough exploration, value assessment, incorporation, and resolution.

In 1995, The Glass Ceiling Commission (TGCC) categorized barriers to the appointment of women and minorities to top leadership positions; TGCC identified these categories as societal, governmental, internal business, and business structural barriers. Of primary interest to this examination are the societal barriers to opportunity and attainment, which include prejudice, and bias, and culture-, gender-, and color-based differences, and which are demonstrated in the report as wage disparities and slower promotion rates. The TGCC observed that since most organizations are Caucasian-dominated within their structures and they promote from within, organizations such as universities may fail to comply with the governmental affirmative action laws by creating business structural barriers within their recruitment, progression, compensation, and social outreach strategies, without detection or penalization.

Gender and racial discrimination cases are too profuse to cite here; for example, in 2013 alone, the *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission* and Fair Employment Practices Agencies reported over 300 cases. The increase in settlement cases and fines nationally has not deterred workplace gender and racial bias as indicated by prevalent racist attitudes in 2014, more than 50 years since women's rights became human rights and were enacted into law for example Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Universities are not exempt, as demonstrated by the many cases of discrimination and sexual harassment reported by the American Association of University Women (2014) and the *U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission* (2012). That said, in 2004, an arbitration panel found a famous financial institution guilty of racial discrimination and settled at $2 million, and again in August 2013 at $160 million. A federally-insured financial institution was not exempt in the settlement cases, and in 2013 was fined $2.2 million in a racial

discrimination case, and was ordered to extend job offers, with appropriate seniority of position, to ten black individuals when the judge determined that the institution had applied unfair and inconsistent selection criteria in the hiring process (*USA Today*, 2013; *Los Angeles Times*, 1996; Dyer, 2004).

Barriers and Exclusion

Most studies indicate that a majority of women in academic leadership positions, especially women of color, have experienced exclusion, condescension, isolation, dismissal, communication challenges, lack of validation or appreciation, and failure to receive due credit. Linden (2012) posits that women of color would be more successful if organizational and national pay guidelines, reporting and arbitration procedures, internal recruitment, and promotion and development systems and processes did not prevent them from advancing professionally proportionately to their increasing numbers and higher education levels. In for-profit business organizations, women do not represent a significant number of leadership roles and therefore cannot access the legitimate power necessary to gain substantial leadership, which then positions them to access more legitimate power to advance organizations through their leadership, and so on. Currently, for-profit organizational leadership depends on male-dominated leadership teams to develop new business, secure top clients, and produce increasing profits from their male-dominated clients and business networks. Women and women of color are a reluctant acquiescence in these male networks and decidedly underestimated for the unique and diverse values they provide.

Wilson (1998) identifies four barriers that contribute to the invisibility and disparity that women of color face: the "wage gap, institutional kinship, the 'ole boy' system, and the role played by prejudice" (p. 20). The wage gap and prejudice are uniquely common to women of color (Women's Bureau, 2012). Combs (2003) writes that, unlike their Caucasian counterparts, women of color have to contend with the duality of race and gender, and the associated biases toward both, if they are to improve their organizational standing and career advancement opportunities. In the case of for-profit corporations, opportunities for professional development, inclusion in informal networks, beneficial mentoring, and sponsoring are out of reach for most women, especially women of color. Sponsoring, which occurs when a senior leader with legitimate power and high financial resources offers continuing support and provides access to informal networks, helps to dissolve barriers and creates inclusion, whether within academic or for-profit organizations.

Further barring women's access is the assumption that female and male leaders' success is based on the same character qualities, and that "imitating white male behavior is the key to success" (Vanderbroeck, 2010, p. 765). Vanderbroeck argues that current measurements for success designed by white male-dominated panels and used in white male-dominated organizations, reinforce these two assumptions. Similarly, the scholars and theorists who observe these disproportions often come from affluent, privileged, highly educated, and often white, male-dominated backgrounds, making it again challenging to build research literature and support for public policy initiatives (Blustein, 2006).

The Increase in Numbers

Obviously, not every qualified academic leader can be a college dean or president, but current numbers are low when compared to the increased doctoral degrees awarded to women of color in recent years. The trend indicates that of all doctorate degrees awarded to people of color in 1999, there was a 61% increase to those awarded to the women of color and a 65% increase in 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012, Indicator 47). Data from the American Association of University Professors indicates there are 494 female presidents out of the 2,148 four-year degree institutions positions. Some of the universities led by women of color include Brown University, University of Maryland Eastern Shore, University of Pennsylvania, Virginia Union University, Florida A&M University, Alabama University, Fisk University, Kentucky State University, Spelman College, Morgan University, Jackson State University, and Kalamazoo College, among others.

Data and Methodology

Twenty business articles, fourteen government reports, seven books, four peer-reviewed journals, and several newspaper articles that focus on higher education and women of color contributed to the research for this paper, as found through key words such as *women in higher education leadership*, *women of color*, *higher education*, *workplace bias*, *disparity,* and *diversity*. The goal was to review research that demonstrated the best representation of pertinent events and experiences to provide a deeper understanding of how women are becoming visible in top positions. Additionally, the researchers hoped to describe the barriers and challenges still facing women of color in the workplace, and the lack of access to leadership positions and developmental social networks from a refreshed perspective since global diversity initiatives have been on the rise. This information leads to generalizable interpretations in the conclusion.

Findings and Discussion

In the condensed literature review, recurrent themes emphasize that female faculty of color have unique challenges compared to their white and/or male peers. For example, most authors cited that, because female faculty members of color are neither male nor white, they do not have access to the privileges inherent in male and/or white group membership (McIntosh, 2012). Linking feminism and human rights, Crenshaw (1989) argues that discrimination against women of color is legally invisible due to its insufficient legal definition. Social status and privilege facilitate the legal system's defenses for Caucasian women while failing to defend women of color. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, while prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, does not define what constitutes discrimination, nor does it describe how to identify subtle forms of discrimination such as negative feelings and exclusion from organizational social networks. In higher education, Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Equal Opportunity in Education Act, is violated so often without legal detection because it is linked with academic excellence and authorship. Reported

discrimination complaints are frequently thrown out before they become legal cases (Department of Education, 2014; Dyer, 2004).

Phillips (2012) argues that "gender and race have been a profound determinant of one's political rights, one's location in the labor market, and one's sense of self identity" (p. 1). Racism is therefore not a simple collection of beliefs and attitudes, but a conscious, systematic strategy and process of social and political control and stratification aimed at excluding some groups of people from opportunities and benefits, undermining people's lives and rights, eroding their self-worth, and upholding the degradation of their global consciousness.

The organization Catalyst Women (2004; 2005; 2007) cites a number of barriers to advancement that it terms "components of the glass and concrete ceiling," which include the following absences: lack of an influential mentor or sponsor, lack of informal developmental networking opportunities with influential colleagues, lack of company role models who are members of same racial/ethnic group, and the lack of high visibility assignments.

Princeton University's 2013 self-study describes gender imbalances as grounded in behavioral differences and asserts that women undersell themselves and fail in interviews for top positions or do not seek them at all due to low self-esteem. How Princeton University's self-study determined that women have low self-esteem is not conclusive since the variables used are more aligned to the white male prototype.

The Global Gender Gap Report opens its 2013 report with the observation that "countries and companies can be competitive only if they develop, attract, and retain the best talent, both male and female" (p. 1). It is imperative that global governments create public policy frameworks designed to improve access and opportunities for all women and develop effective workplaces where the best talent succeeds (Global Gender Gap Report, 2013).

Researchers have discovered that workplace bias manifests itself in a variety of ways, including derogatory comments and gestures, disregard and disrespect of an individual's contribution, exclusion from informal and formal networking opportunities, unfair performance evaluations, denial of promotions or advancement, different treatment from peers, and limited access to information and resources that eventually and negatively affect the individual's ability to perform successfully (Johns, 2013).

Barak (2005) reports from her studies that employees of color "who are more included in the organization's decision-making and information networks are more satisfied, committed to the organization and feel more productive" (p.1). She suggests a model for implementing diversity in the workplace so organizational leaders can demonstrate how they value individual and intergroup differences, alleviate the needs of disadvantaged groups without creating a culture of entitlement, and correct discriminatory hiring procedures immediately from the inquiry phase all the way through the interview, performance, and compensation phases. The findings are further supported by Cappelli (2006), who reports from numerous sources that the reason women's enrollment in business and law schools has greatly increased is because more women are moving away from higher education jobs into competitive fields that are becoming more inclusive like investment banking, consulting, bioscience, and engineering.

Although the for-profit corporate world is witnessing an increasing number of new female graduates eager to enter its ranks, the coveted positions from entry-level professionals to top leadership positions still remain less accessible to women of color. According to Cappelli (2006), recruiters at top firms seek women to fulfill diversity initiatives, but women, and particularly women of color, are not the face of money. Top executives, determined to increase profits and ensure the longevity of their organizations, feel less compelled to usher women into chief financial, operational, and decision-making roles (Cappelli, 2006).

When women occupy top leadership roles in for-profit industries, these roles tend to be in human resources or marketing (Blustein, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2003; Johns, 2013). Women who assume such positions are torn between serving the organization and being true to their collaborative and developmental character. In competitive industries such as investment banking and corporate law, traits associated with traditional feminine leadership can be have negative impact on a female executive's career.

The challenge that most affects female faculty members of color is the pressure to ignore their identity, beliefs, cultural competencies, and values to fit into a white male prototype in order to succeed (Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013). Such ineffective governance undermines the lives and rights of women of color and their role in academic success, erodes their self-worth, and ultimately perpetuates dysfunction in the global marketplace.

Conclusion

Opportunities for advancement for female faculty members of color have increased; however, a deeper level of exclusion persists. The final frontier of gender and racial equality resides in access to informal networks apart from cronyism and the demystification of white male leadership dominance. The simple practice should be the best person for the leadership role. When social inclusion, gender and racial equality, and recognition of best talent and best performance are the accepted academic standard and business practices, the diverse and innovative outcomes from these practices will benefit the advancement of student education and role modeling through the university system, producing a global academic community whose primary focus is on the best results and solutions for higher education.

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