Center for Research on Women

Work and Survival for Black Women

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BY

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The women's movement and recent feminist scholarship have made unique contributions to social change. Women voicing feminist sentiments have challenged many basic assumptions about social life and institutional arrangements. Their insights have promoted our understanding of sex and gender roles and the sexual biases we have been taught to accept as natural. The subjects of empirical work used to generate new theories are white women. There is some historical scholarship which details the lives of working class white women, but many of the contemporary analyses are of females who are white and middle class.\(^1\) Thus our understanding of sexism and its damaging impact on women is frequently derived from the experiences of women who face only one dimension of oppression.

Many women of color recognize the merit in feminist theories, and indeed have built upon the concepts. Few women of color have embraced the notion that sex is the primary source of oppression for all women (Hooks, 1981). The majority of Black feminist scholars have critiqued the concept of "sisterhood" and elaborated on the role of class and race in shaping women's experiences and their subjective visions of their predi-

\(^1\)This is often not explicitly stated in research and theory, as authors work from the premise that they are discussing generic "woman." This is the case in Nancy Chodorow's work on mothering, Carol Gilligan's work on the moral development of women, Lillian Rubin's exploration into intimacy between males and females, and so forth.
cament (Davis, 1981; Dill, 1983; Lorde, 1984). In fact, many Black women are deeply disturbed by pleas for "sisterhood" from white feminists, while the same women brush over, ignore or simply downplay the critical differences which are rooted in race and class. As they strive to secure an education and make a living, Black women face sex and racial barriers. In their everyday life, Black women are devalued as women and as Blacks. And as women of color, they watch their parents, siblings, husbands, and children suffer in the face of a racist society. Their experiences do not neatly fit into paradigms developed to capture white women's experiences. Instead, Black women find sexism to be meshed with racism and class oppression resulting in restrictive barriers which are quite different from the forms of sexism with which white women contend. An understanding of sexism in the lives of Black women must begin within the context of racial oppression.

The meaning and impact of sexism for Black women cannot be contained in this small paper. Volumes of research are necessary to detail the "double jeopardy" Black sisters face in specific areas of social and institutional life. Here I want to call attention to the work Black women do outside their homes. What have been their roles in paid employment, market work or public labor?

The world of work is an important topic for research on Black women. Too frequently Black women's participation in the labor force is overlooked as researchers and the media focus on their roles in the family. One contribution of feminist scholarship has been to draw our attention to the spheres of women's lives outside the home. As we do that for Black women it is possible that a perspective on employment can be developed which could help researchers generate new and different questions about Black females' family roles.
A model which will shed light on Black women's positions in this nation must tend carefully to both race and gender (also social class, but that is too intricate to address here). We have to acknowledge and address similarities and differences in the structure and impact of racial oppression on males and females. Racism defines many of the parameters which will shape gender roles for Black women. This does not suggest a hierarchy, but a plan for viewing the intersection of gender and race. An examination of the work of Black women outside the home provides insights into that intersection. Throughout the history of this nation, the labor of Black women and men have turned many a profit for owners, employers, business people and the state. At each historical point the labor of Black women was a sharp contrast to the social and economic position of white women. Even today, when there are more similarities in employment patterns, there are still dramatic differences in the options available to Black and white women—and thus the nature of sexism for Black women reflects those differences.

Slavery

The sociologist, Cheryl Gilkes (1983) reminds us that Black women began their history in the U.S. with a 100% labor force participation rate. Indeed, young African girls and women were brought to this nation to work. They worked in settings and positions defined as appropriate for Blacks. Black women were subjected to the same conditions of work and binding life circumstances as Black male slaves. They either worked alongside men in the fields or faced arduous labor in the big house where they were virtually on call 24 hours a day. In field and farm work, research indicates that there was no attention to traditional gender roles in designating tasks for slaves. Masters did make decisions based on sex in assigning household chores, but
the majority of female slaves did field work (Jones, 1982).

In slavery, Black women and men were individual units of labor. They were property expected to do long and difficult work for a master. During this era, Black women were recognized as female when white males felt the need to satiate their lust of increase their census of slaves through breeding. The protections afforded white women, today defined by feminists as restrictions, were not shown to Black women (Davis, 1981). The sanctity of the family, pivotal to the subjugation of white women, was not granted to African and Afro-American families. This left Black women vulnerable to both economic and sexual exploitation.

Black women began their work history in this country with a pattern of serving the market first and only then laboring for themselves and their families. They labored from dawn to dusk in the fields and/or big house. And then they returned to the slave quarters to care for family members. While family and household responsibilities were viewed as sacred tasks to which white women were forced to devote most of their time, Black women's labor for their own families was given a low priority. Black women were not shrouded in the cloak of the patriarchal family, but shoved into the brutal face of pre-capitalist and capitalist exploitation outside their homes. This pattern was established in slavery, but replicated in other eras. Black women were forced (initially by brute power during slavery and later by economic necessity) to leave their homes and work for outsiders. They were denied the option of staying home to care for children and the household. Instead, these concerns were only tended to after the fields, kitchens, and factories of others had been served.
Free at Last

With the formal ending of slavery, Black families attempted to alter the
direct economic and sexual exploitation of women, which had been the pattern
of slavery. To achieve this aim they sought to establish a new sexual
division of labor, one more similar to independent farm families (Gutman, 1976).
Women were kept closer to home. They were active in domestic chores, child
care, raising and tending farm animals and vegetable gardens (Jones, 1982).
This patriarchal arrangement promoted greater subsistence for poverty stricken
families and also afforded Black females some of the protections denied them
in slavery. These were the goals of Black families, but they were limited in
their efforts to attain them by the actions of landowners and the southern
economy.

Along with freedom, reconstruction brought a long struggle to re-establish
the cotton economy. Securing a disciplined labor force was critical to
stabilizing the Southern and national economies (Steinberg, 1981). Thus,
landowners and agents of the Republican administration worked together to
institute sharecropping. Within this new labor system, landowners were
able to remedy their labor problems caused by the withdrawal of Black women
from the fields. Sharecropping gave landowners the leverage to shape the
conditions of agricultural work for Black and white families. Families
were not eligible for credit unless all family members agreed to work in
the fields. Under these circumstances Black women and children were forced
back into the fields. Thus, the sharecropping system undermined the family
division of labor Blacks established after slavery.

Sharecropping was an exploitative labor system, under which Black families
fell deeper and deeper into debt. As sharecroppers and tenant farmers Black
men and women labored as they had in slavery. Women labored for the landowner
first and later did work for their families. Their labor outside the home was essential for the family's survival, but it left women with little time to enhance the quality of that survival. Homecrafts declined during this era as more time was devoted to crops (Jones, 1981).

As we approached the 20th century, cotton declined as a crop and was not as lucrative as previous decades. Landowners insulated themselves from economic hardship by demanding fixed rents for land, whereby tenant farmers had to pay a certain amount in cash or crops rather than a portion of the crop. For already struggling Black families this meant greater debt and difficulties. One economic solution open to families was to release young girls from farm work and let them work in the homes of white families. Frequently girls would live in, but many did day work. Their earnings were contributed to the family and frequently this was the only cash accessible to families (Jones, 1981). Yet, Black females were outside the home and vulnerable to economic exploitation in the homes of white families. Sexual harassment was a primary occupational hazard these females faced. Private household work, the only paid employment available to Black females in many areas, jeopardized many of the hard won protections families had struggled to maintain. Thus, Black women entered the 20th century strongly tied to work outside their homes. Their economic contributions were critical in helping families stay afloat and frequently bringing them out of debt. But the cost of such work was often felt by the women personally and in terms of the level of care they could provide for their own families.

**Urban Employment**

Beginning with the end of slavery, Black people slowly started moving to the city. There were small Black communities in many northern and southern
cities, with the former growing significantly during World War I. In these cities, Black women developed an employment pattern radically different from native born and immigrant white women. Many people are quick to assume that women have always worked, but there are important distinctions between the women who do work. The dominant pattern for white women has been to work as single women and leave the labor force to give birth and raise children. In fact, research indicates that there were few employment options for married white women. Widowed white women had difficulty seeking employment, because factory owners and other employers favored white working class daughters who were supplementing family incomes and would leave the job when they married (Tentler, 1979). The 1920s will see increases in the percentage of married white women in the labor force, but they were decidedly missing early in the century. This was not the case with Black women. "In 1900 the rate of wage earning was 26 percent for married Black women and 3.2 percent for married white women" (Pleck, 1979, 367). Thus, as they entered urban areas Black women continued their pattern of doing both wage and family work. They often were found in wage labor 4 to 15 times more frequently than immigrant women.

Black women, whether single or married, were forced by economic circumstances into wage labor. But they found their employment options were limited by sex and race. Only certain jobs were viewed as appropriate for women, but often employers had white women in mind to fill such positions. This was especially the case in clerical and sales jobs. These positions were "traditional women's jobs", but discrimination against women of color was rampant. Black women did not make serious inroads into much of "pink collar" employment until the 1960's.

As they entered the urban labor force, Black women found jobs at the
bottom and at the top. The majority were employed in private household work. As industrialization created new job options for white women, Black women had access to the old positions white women no longer wanted. Domestic work, once the most common occupation among all women, fell on immigrant and Black women in the early 20th century (Katzman, 1978). This work also declined in status and working conditions. Private household work was back breaking, poorly paid, isolating and also continued to put Black women at risk in terms of sexual harrassment. Currently, more Afro-American women are leaving domestic work, but many older Black women continued to do "day work." And the nation's private household work is increasingly being done by undocumented workers and new immigrant women—especially West Indians, Chicanas, and Asian Pacific people.

Around World War I, Black women began entering the service industries. Early in the century many worked in commercial laundries, which were preferred over private household work because women made more money and had better working conditions. While an improvement over domestic work, employment in laundries rarely resulted in economic security. In recent decades, Black women have entered many new arenas. A significant number are employed in hospitals, especially as nursing assistants, kitchen workers, and custodial workers. Black women have also entered commercial janitorial services, cleaning offices, stores, and factories at night. And the growth of new fast food industries has meant many new jobs for Blacks, especially younger Black women. And many Black women have moved into factory work, but primarily in female dominated low wage industries like textile and garment industries and light electronics.

In the 1960s the rigid discriminatory barriers in clerical and sales jobs were finally challenged. Thus, many Black women and men entered the
ranks of clerical workers as clerks, tellers, office machine operators, mailhandlers, and so forth. In 1980, 34.8 percent of all employed Black women are clerical workers, with the largest numbers employed as cashiers, typists and secretaries (Westcott, 1982). Even in the last decade, Black women have made significant gains by entering these "traditionally" white female occupations (See Table 1). Yet, sexism limits those gains. Female clerical and kindred workers generally earn 59.1 percent of the earnings of men in these same jobs (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1983). Thus, Black women in the labor market continue to experience the restrictions of race and sex.
Table 1. Occupational Distribution of Fully Employed Black and White Women, 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>White Women</th>
<th>Black Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, technical, and kindred</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers and administrators, except farm</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales workers</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical and kindred workers</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craftworkers, foremen, and kindred</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operatives, except transport</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport equipment operatives</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laborers, except farm and mine</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private household workers</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service workers</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers and farm managers</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm laborers and foremen</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Data not shown where base is less than 75,000

All these jobs are on the bottom of the wage scale and frequently do not enable families to escape poverty. The current clustering of many Black women in service work, operative positions and low wage clerical work results in median earnings which are 54.2 percent of median white males earnings (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1983). Many Black women working in these positions make significant contributions to their families' earnings because Black males are also caught in low wage sectors of the economy. In many working class\(^2\) Black homes it takes the incomes of both spouses to keep the family out of poverty, but their combined wages are often insufficient for home ownership, college educations for their children, and other aspects of the American dream.

Professional Black Women

While most Black women find the job market limited in its remuneration, there are a few Black women with more secure and better paying jobs. These are Black women with college educations and/or advanced degrees who work in professional administrative and managerial positions. This group, about 20 percent of all Black employed women, is often exaggerated in its size and its affluence. While 20% of employed Black women hold such positions, the population of Black women have very high rates of unemployment. Only 22.7 percent of fully employed Black women have median earnings over $15,000 and this drops

\(^2\)Frequently researchers categorize Blacks employed in "white collar" positions such as clerical work as middle class, but those are status rankings. Objective social class criteria are used here to designate clerical work as "working class occupations." For justification see Braverman, 1974 and Cannon, 1984.
to 6.4 percent when considering the numbers who make over $20,000. You can see the degree of affluence among this group when you compare them to white males, 46.5 percent of whom earn more than $20,000 a year (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1983).

The overall statistics on this population do not look good because Black women's choices of even professional occupations have been severely restricted by race and sex. We do get some small changes today, but there are still racial and sex barriers educated women confront daily. Black women who work as professionals are overwhelmingly primary and secondary school teachers, nurses or health workers, and social workers. A small but growing number are found in higher status, traditionally male dominant professions (like physicians, engineers, lawyers, and accountants). And a few are entering new, gender neutral fields, like computers (Westcott, 1982).

Historically, professional Black women worked in segregated settings. Black nurses assisted Black doctors and worked in Black hospitals with Black people. Black social workers had Black clients and were employed by Black social service agencies, like the Urban League. In the South, schools were legally segregated, thus Black schools had their own faculty and administrators. In the North, cities vary in their policy on de facto segregated schools. A few cities hired Black faculty to staff predominantly Black schools, but many cities did not hire Black teachers at all. If cities had a "progressive policy," Black women were found in primary and secondary education working with Black people. Although slightly modified, this pattern persists to this day.

The New Deal and the War on Poverty brought the expansion of the public sector and many Blacks found employment in human services agencies supported by government funds. Thus, Black professional women are most
likely to be public service employees. And today, in "desegregated facilities," Black female social workers are found in predominantly Black service organizations. Black teachers are increasingly teaching children of color. And other professionals are found in agencies and hospitals located in Black communities and serving predominantly Blacks, Latinas and other people of color.

In many cases, Black professional women enjoy being able to serve people of color. But they can be considered "colonized professionals." They are devalued as women and racial minorities, thus finding many options for employment in certain segments of the professional labor market. They are captured in the public sector during an era of fiscal crises and cutbacks. The limits on public service budgets are dramatically altering the nature of work in schools, hospitals, welfare agencies, day care centers, public health centers and other agencies. Professionals are being asked to serve more clients, frequently with reductions in staff. Furthermore, public sector salaries have been hurt by budget cuts. And even with the so called "improved economy" salaries of professionals employed by the state do not keep pace with those of professionals in the private sector. These factors profoundly shape the nature of "success" for professional Black women.

Conclusion

Black women's long history of work outside their homes reflects a unique combination of racism and sexism. Black women were never granted protections, but forced to perform work and family roles in a society that twice devalued them. They have been physically driven out to work by masters and overseers, and they have looked outside the home for labor to bring wages
into financially unstable homes. As daughters, sisters, wives, mothers and grandmothers—Black women have had to integrate the dual roles of wage worker and houseworker. These demands, frequently spared white women, have taken a toll on Black women, their families and the larger communities of which they are a part. During their whole history in this nation, Black women have been forced, compelled or pressured to do two jobs. This directly impacts on their thinking about their oppression as Black women—members of sex and racial groups which still confront many barriers in their daily routines.

In looking at Black women's participation in the labor market we find a great deal of activity and few financial rewards. Social scientists often point out that Black women can always find work—even when their men cannot. The same researchers pay little attention to the low wages, working conditions, and hazards of this work. Yes, many Black women can find work—but their labor often comes with some high costs. As they seek employment, Black women find that racism is one rationale keeping them in low-wage, dead-end jobs. And they also see that sexism is an additional justification for denying them access to better paying jobs and actually providing them little remuneration for the services they are permitted to render. Even a college education is not a guarantee for decent salaries for Black women.

A long history of lack of options is evident in Black women's patterns of employment. Their sexism does not begin in the home, because they are not solely dependent upon men, as white women have been. The typical image of the American patriarchal family has only been possible for a few Black families. Black women and men are employed in about equal numbers, a fact which is very different for the white and Hispanic populations (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1984; Report #711).
For Black women sexism is evident in their exploitation as workers, in the personal violence directed against them, and in the lack of child care and humane social welfare facilities to assist them with family roles. Racism and sexism are woven together to produce a particularly painful web of life constraints for them. We need more research to untangle the web and develop policies and strategies for change. We also need to understand the impact of multi-layers of oppression to give Black women the abilities to ask new questions of what is even possible for their own lives. We want more than to just work and survive, we want full rich lives where we use all our talents and share many aspects of ourselves with those we love.
Bibliography


