Title: Challenges Facing Women in US Higher Education: The Case of Faculty of Color

Abstract

Despite a myriad of challenges, the slow pace of rising to the top, and the low compositional diversity in most university leadership, women of color are increasingly becoming visible in top positions in higher education. This paper investigated the phenomena of increasing numbers of women in top positions with the aim of debunking the myth of invisibility of black women in leadership positions in higher education. The findings indicate that although women in the US earn the majority of postsecondary degrees and 26.4% of college presidents are women with 4.5% of them being women of color (White House Project, 2009)), they still have a long way to go before they can be on equal status with men. Theories and practices of leadership now focus on competencies that have classically been associated with women and not considered great leadership competencies. The question on my and many researchers’ mind however, is why 50 years after the civil rights movement, Title VII, many years of access and diversity advocacy, women and faculty of color in American Colleges and Universities are still faced with the road block of having to prove themselves unlike their counterparts. Why is their style of leadership only quietly accepted but not fully acknowledged? An increase in female academicians is an advantage as they bring their way of knowing, pose different questions and share different experiences than their male counterparts and also act as role models and mentors for younger females. Yet their stories are hardly factored into policies and decision making systems (Madsen 2012).

Key words: Leadership, Women of color, Higher education, Workplace bias, Disparity
Introduction

This article sought to explore and describe the challenges faced by women of color in higher education after they complete their doctorate degrees and join the positions of faculty in US Universities. Identifiers such as Black/African American, Latino, Hispanics, or African were taken as one dimension of women of color.

The World Bank defines social inclusion as the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of people, disadvantaged on the basis of their identity, to take part in society while social exclusion is described using its many contributors that include race, income, employment status, social class, geographic location, personal habits and appearance, education, religion and political affiliation. Gender disparity is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of socially constructed gender roles and norms (WHO, 1998).

The World Bank also identifies six core governance indicators which are voice and accountability; political stability and absence of violence; government effectiveness; regulatory quality; rule of law and control of corruption. The invisibility of women in leadership is tantamount to exclusion and denying of voice to women which indicates lack of full accountability.

Breaking into the Concrete Ceiling

In 1995, The Glass Ceiling Commission had categorized barriers to the success of women and minorities being appointed to the top positions of leadership as societal, governmental, internal business, and business structural barriers. Of interest to this article are the societal barriers associated with opportunity and attainment, prejudice and bias, cultural, gender, and
color-based differences. The Commission observed that since most organizations promote internally, white dominated organizations such as Universities may fail to comply with the governmental affirmative action laws and not be detected or penalized for creating business structural barriers on their recruitment, progression, compensation and social outreach strategies.

Gender discrimination cases are too many to cite. The increase in settlement cases and fines have not deterred workplace gender bias as indicated by continued racist attitudes that still exist in 2014, more than 50 years since the women’s right became human rights and were enacted into law. Universities are no exempt for example Louisiana State and University of Kentucky among others who have been involved in discrimination cases recently.

Organizations around the country too have not changed much. The Texaco $176 million settlement case of 1996 which had dragged on for 2 and a half years, did not serve as a lesson or deterrent. In 2004, an arbitration panel found Merrill Lynch guilty of racial discrimination and settled at $ 2 million and again in August of 2013 at $ 160 million. Even a federally-insured financial institution like Bank of America is not exempt in the art of stalling settlement cases and in 2013 was fined $2.2M in a racial discrimination case and also ordered to extend job offers, with appropriate seniority of position, to 10 black individuals when the judge determined that the bank had applied unfair and inconsistent selection criteria in the hiring process.

Although female academicians including those of color are increasingly becoming visible in top positions in higher education, what they have to contend with to get there is no mean feat nor is it for the faint hearted. Most challenges cited in literature included gender and racial bias at work and the effect of indicators such as the number of racial discrimination settlement cases.
Even with affirmative action and tokenism, gender bias is evidenced by law suits and settlement cases that are still rife.

Data and Methodology

Twenty articles, seven book chapters, four peer reviewed journals focusing on higher education and women of color and several newspaper articles were selected for this paper using key words such as women in higher education leadership, women of color, higher education, workplace bias, disparity among others. This was hoped to adequately help the researcher investigate and describe while getting a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by women in higher amidst problems such as gender disparity and to specifically describe the challenges facing women of color in the workplace in regard to being left out of leadership positions and developmental social networks, how they judge their lot in life, and further describe the way women of color make meaning and sense of their situation, how they cope and their self-change strategies and to gain such information for use to create a generalizable meaning.

Stand Up and be Counted

There are only 494 female University Presidents out of the 2,148 bachelors awarding institutions of higher education. Some of these are Presidents of ivy league colleges which does not amount to much given the over 50 years they have had to fight to get there. Some women of color Ivy League Presidents and Deans have had to step down while others are hanging in there and doing their best as they know how such as Ruth Simmons of Brown University, and others such as those at University of Maryland Eastern Shore; University of Pennsylvania; Virginia Union University; Florida A&M University; Alabama University; Fisk University Nashville;
Kentucky State University; Spelman College Atlanta, Georgia; Morgan University Baltimore, Maryland; Jackson state University; Kalamazoo College, Michigan; among others.

Most studies indicated that most women leaders have experienced exclusion, condescension, isolation, dismissal, communication challenges, being taken advantage of, and of doing something and not receiving credit for it. Linden (2012) posits that women of color would have been more successful if organizational and national systems and processes did not prevent them from advancing professionally proportionately to their increasing numbers and high education levels.

Wilson (1998) identifies four factors that she attributes to the invisibility and disparity, which are “wage gap, institutional kinship, the old boy system, and the role played by prejudice” (p.20). Unlike their Caucasian counterparts, Combs, (2003) says that women of color have to contend with the duality of race and gender and the bias that goes with each of them if they are to improve their organizational standing and career advancement opportunities to make it to the top.

Two more challenges identified by Vanderbroeck, (2010) are the assumption that the success of women and men leaders is based on the same qualities and the belief that imitating white male behavior is the key to success” (p.765). Vanderbroeck argues that these traps are reinforced by measuring instruments designed by white male dominated panels and then used in white male dominated organizations.
Findings and Discussions

The Rollback on Women’s Rights

The recurrent themes in the condensed literature review emphasized that women faculty of color have unique challenges compared to their White and/or male peers. For example most authors cited that because women faculty of color are neither male nor white they subsequently do not have access to the privileges inherent in male and/or white group membership (McIntosh, 2012; Neville, Worthington, & Spanierman, 2001).

Linking feminism and human rights, Crenshaw (1989), argues that discrimination against women of color is legally invisible due to poor definition of what it is. Positionality in society also makes it easy for the legal system to defend Caucasian women and not women of color.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, although prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, does not define what constitutes discrimination and neither does it describe how to identify subtle forms of discrimination such as negative feelings, demeaning comments and exclusion from organizational social networks. In higher education, Title IX gets violated enough times without detection when linked with academic excellence and authorship and cases get thrown out like in the case of Louisiana State University and Northern Kentucky University in 2013 among others.

Even Title X is used against women who rise to top positions instead of protecting them. Those who get pregnant have to take unpaid maternity leave while those with children get passed for promotion. It is no better for those who have none either. They get described as wenches and bitches or secretly assumed to have benefitted from Title X by using it not to have children.
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 aimed at excluding some groups of people from opportunities and benefits thus undermining black women’s lives and rights and eroding their self worth.

Catalyst (2004; 2005; 2007) cited a number of barriers to advancement that they termed components of the glass/concrete ceiling that include not having an influential mentor or sponsor; lacking 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’s 2013 study describes gender imbalances as grounded in behavioral differences and asserts that due to women’s low self esteem, they undersell themselves and fail in interviews for top positions or do not seek them at all. How they determined that women have low self esteem is not conclusive since the variables used were more aligned to the white male prototype.

**Recommendations**

The Global Gender Gap Report provides a framework for capturing the magnitude of gender disparities around the world and 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. While governments have an important role to play in creating the
right policy framework for improving women’s access and opportunities, it is also the imperative of companies to create workplaces where the best talent can flourish”.

Most researchers found out that workplace bias manifests itself in a variety of ways including demeaning comments and gestures, disregard and disrespect of one’s contribution, exclusion from informal/formal networking opportunities, unfair performance evaluations, being denied promotion or advancement, being treated differently than peers, limited access to information and resources which eventually negatively affect one’s ability to perform successfully, according to Johns (2013).

**Conclusion**

The question of invisibility and its dimensions such as disparity and its answer can be easily found in the organizational hierarchy especially at middle management where the largest proportion of women are and where they also begin to drop in terms of upward mobility (Linden, 2012).

This article concludes that although minorities and women seem to have gained entry into many and varied aspects of the workforce, inequities in promotion and career progression, retention and equal pay persist as indicated by the Department of Labor 2012 statistics on table 37. It is further supported by Cappelli (2006) who reports from numerous sources that although women’s enrolment in business and law schools has greatly increased, more women are moving away from higher education into elite fields like investment banking and consulting.

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 at the workplace so that the organization can demonstrate how it values individuals and intergroup differences, alleviates the needs of disadvantaged groups without creating a culture of entitlement and corrects discriminatory hiring procedures right from inquiry phase all the way to interview, performance and compensation.

The dimension that was mostly cited that affected faculty of color most was that of being forced to ignore their identity, beliefs, cultural competencies and values to fit into a white male prototype to succeed. This is poor governance as it undermines people’s lives and rights and erodes their self-worth.
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Challenges facing women faculty of Color


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