

Black Canadian Women Leaders in the Academy

In Their Own Voice; An Intersectionality of Race, Gender, Class

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Les femmes dirigeantes des groupes racialisés continuent d'être sous-représentées dans l'enseignement supérieur. On sait peu de choses sur les expériences que celles qui occupent des postes de direction vivent dans ces rôles. Ce texte met l'accent sur les voix des participantes pour interroger le manque d'opportunités des femmes noires dans les postes de direction, et pour plaider en faveur de l'avancement de cet enjeu dans un système complexe et à plusieurs niveaux. La recherche a examiné les facteurs historiques et sexospécifiques pour en arriver à des conclusions. La race et le racisme systémique, la classe sociale, le genre et d'autres marqueurs de différence ont été certains des facteurs qui ont entravé la mobilité ascendante des femmes noires dans le milieu académique.

Introduction

We as Black women, we are mothers. We are daughters. We are sisters. We are aunties, some of us are grandmothers. We are friends. We are people first. Our people also have needs, we have dependents. We have people that we take care of. We have people that rely on us (Kuumba's interview, 2020).

BUT: not all skin folk is kinfolk,

When we come to work and we are abused, we experience violence in the workplace, various kinds of violence. And we go home with that, and our families get less of us as a result. There's a real cost here that we're not compensated for. All these things need to be recognized, and all of these things need to be addressed absolutely (Kuumba's interview, 2020).

Canada prides itself in the rich diversity of its population, which has changed significantly since the 1980s. This diversity, however, has not been fully realized in leadership positions in Canadian academic institutions. Women leaders from racialized groups continue to be underrepresented in higher education (Verjee, 2013). For the few that hold leadership positions, little is known about their experiences in these roles. The focus of this paper is to interrogate the lack of opportunities for Black women in leadership positions, and to argue for its advancement in a multilayered and complex system. The research examined both historical and gender factors to come up with conclusions. Race and systemic racism, class, gender, and other markers of difference were some of the factors that have hindered the upward mobility of Black women in the academy. It is also important to note that the study of Black women in leadership in Education remains under-researched (Daniel, 2019) especially in a Canadian context. The goal of this research was an analysis of Black women's leadership experiences, in particular their reliability, resilience, strengths, and coping mechanisms. Portions of the literature consulted for this review do not primarily focus on education and/or leadership as it intersects with race and gender positionalities, but more broadly explore Black feminist thought, gender, race, and power in order to relate existing theories back to the study at hand. Importantly, it is precisely a lack of relevant academic scholarship within this area of research that conveys why this study is essential.

This paper is based on ongoing research on the marginal representation of Black women in leadership positions in Canadian academic institutions. The paper provides

in-depth insights on leadership experiences by documenting the leadership lives of four Black women out of the 30 who have been interviewed so far, namely: **Nia**, **Mwende**, **Imani**, and **Bidii**. Their names summarize who they are: **Nia**, which means someone with purpose, is in an institution where she is determined to succeed, despite the challenges she faced. **Mwende**, who is loved, wanted to see real change, and not lip service, while **Imani**, meaning faith, was focused on ensuring she pays attention to the needs of her community. **Bidii**, loosely translated, means hard work. Rather than focusing on their personal identifiers, the interviews centred on their stories as leaders; their achievements; the projects assigned to them if any; and how they navigated through tense moments of invisibility or dismissal of their contributions. As well, how they negotiated systems of power in their place of work. The participants' narratives captured their emotions, how they made sense of their working conditions, and how they coped with systemic and institutional racism in addition to everyday overt racism in the workplace. These sentiments are summarized by Bidii, who was a diligent worker; a woman who could have easily run her organization very successfully, if given a chance. Here is what Bidii said as a way of introducing herself:

Quite often when I'm at meetings, and these are higher-level meetings, I am the only Black person and Black female at the table. And when I speak, ... all eyes are on me. It's like there's a shift in the room. And if it's something that is political in nature... I'll get into... my spirit. Like this work that I do very much is in line with a spiritual component. So, it's not just merely from my head, and my, my thoughts, but my spirit is also my guide. And um there is also for me this knowing that my ancestors are with me. So, when I have a seat at the table, I'm never sitting alone. And that allows me to ground myself very confidently, very securely with both feet planted on the ground... I came into this knowing of my own Black female womanhood, and also Black female power, there's a base of power that for me really comes from my core, and it's rooted in my, my ancestry and my knowledge of that... gives me the strength to first of all have the courage to remind myself that my birthright allows me to be there... when I do have to speak, and when I am entering these spaces, there is so much that's happening for me simultaneously... my ancestors were slaves, and I and of course, my ancestors were more than slaves as well, when we go back, further back before um enslavement occurred and the transatlantic slave movement um for economic gains, which we did not benefit... this thing called

Blood Memory enables me to remember my past. It resonates with me in a way that I thought, it's such, I couldn't think of another way and a better way to really articulate what for me, I feel in my soul, and this blood memory that I live with, that encompasses me and gives me the courage to battle every single day, gives me the um. And so, when I talk about the birthright, my birthright, by birthright, I have a right to ask, I have a right to be here, I have a right to speak... but it's really about unearthing, unearthing, and challenging them respectfully, to go deeper, because they don't have to go deeper and they may not want to go deeper, but often enough, and the work that I have done with white administrators, and white educators, they have to.

The passage above confirms what research has shown. Even though Black women have made strides in academia, they continue to face personal, professional, systemic, and institutional challenges in reaching top leadership positions in universities in Canada (Cukier et al., "Women in Senior Leadership Positions" 1–23) Every single day that the women report to work, they have to mentally, emotionally, and physically negotiate their stand. They have to have a mental debate on how to deal with challenges, how to create different coping mechanisms, how to talk, and even when to talk. From Bidii's excerpt, the people around these women have no idea of what is happening to their own colleague. My hope is that an analysis of the various women narratives presented in this paper—women who embody multiple sites of talent in Canadian educational institutions—will provide benefit to Black women as they search for authentic ways and means of enacting diverse, inclusive, and equitable leadership models. To paint or bring balance in any discussion on women in leadership, the voices of Black women leaders are essential. An inclusion of Black women's leadership experiences and their contribution to the field provides a more complete picture on the impact of race and other markers of difference, and these women get to negotiate their place on the table despite their invisibility. I will also highlight insights into the successes and limitations Black women face as they navigate through the halls of these institutions. This paper adds an important element to leadership conversations and discussions.

I situate my arguments on Black feminist theory (Wane). The research employed a feminist research methodology (Brayton), and two research methods: in-depth interviews, and content analysis of documents. The paper is divided into several sections: locating myself; theoretical framework; literature review that interweaves with narratives of four Black women highlighted in this paper; and a conclusion.

Locating Myself

Being Black and a woman gives you several standpoints from which to articulate one's experiences in a leadership position in an academic institution. I can comfortably say, I have served on several leadership roles at my university and elsewhere, as a business owner, director of a centre, advisor to two senior vice-presidents, and chair of a department. As an owner of a community college, I created strategic plans for recruitment of students, faculty, staff,

ground, a connective tissue that runs throughout its multiple readings and boundaries. Black Canadian feminism (qtd in Wane 38) is

... a theoretical tool meant to elucidate and analyse the historical, social, cultural, and economic relationships of women of African descent as the basis for development of a liberatory praxis. It is a paradigm that is grounded in the historical as well as the contemporary experiences of Black women as mothers,

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growth of the college and centralized budget. Being a director of a centre (6 years), provided a lot of autonomy on what I could or I could not do. Within my tenureship as director of the centre, I developed research agendas on: Equity for Beginners; Factors that Contribute to Minority Youth Violence; and Decolonizing the Spirit Conference. Both Equity for Beginners and Minority Youth projects produced manuals that became a resource for teacher candidates at my university. The Equity manual provided basic knowledge and understanding on racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and disability for teacher candidates, graduate students, educators, and any other individuals who were beginners in equity studies. The Youth manual produced a body of knowledge on violence against youth minority in Toronto. Decolonizing the Spirit Conference became an international conference that attracted participants from different continents. Being an advisor to two senior vice-presidents enabled me to contribute to policy development on equity. Being chair of a department has provided me a chance to make sense of the complexity of being a minority on decision making, to know the importance of sponsorship and what it means to be tapped on the shoulder. I must say, I was never interested in researching or teaching courses on Black women in leadership positions, or focusing on this topic, until I found myself in one of these roles and being a minority. The section below situates this paper on Black feminist thought.

Black Feminist Thought

While Black feminist thought encompasses diverse and often contradictory meanings, there is still a common

activists, academics, and community leaders. It is both an oral and written epistemology that theorizes our experiences as mothers, activists, academics and community leaders. It can be applied to situate Black women's past and present experiences that are grounded in their multiple oppressions.

The above definition captures women's stories, their lived experiences, and their interpretation of what it means to be Black, female, and feminist. Canadian feminist thought has been conceptualized as a theoretical framework that illustrates the historical, social, political, cultural, and economic experiences of Black Canadian women. As Hill Collins highlights, the concern is not in the name, but in the importance of revisiting the reasons why Black feminist thought exists at all. As Black feminists, one of our commitments is to expose and lay claim to the vast contributions our mothers have made to this world; our eventual goal is the implementation of African/Black Women's Studies programs in Canadian universities. There is, in this commitment, an undivided focus. It is this distinctive force in Black feminism that makes our "lived theory" to be of relevance to all humanity. However, there are those who assert that "the term...Black feminist thought...has much less resonance" in the Canadian context (Dua 9). Black feminist thought is not simply "a term" for feminists/activists. It is a lived theory, which places Black women at the centre of analysis (Wane; Hill Collins; Steady; hooks; Davis) and simultaneously speaks to the various realities of Black women's lives. In short, Black feminist thought is more than a simple term. It is a theory, an epistemology, and it is action oriented. It is

the lived story of Black women's agency, and how they resist oppression to survive in a world that seeks to exploit, denigrate, and dehumanize their very existence. It is also a tool that has assisted Black women to critically examine themselves, as subjects of oppression, women of resiliency and determination. In essence, Black feminist thought challenges the hierarchy of power with an eye towards insurgency and social change. Throughout the conversations with Black women in my study, there was a feeling of empowerment, rejuvenation, and hope. Their voices

it has been tough; chose pieces to display; I cannot bring the total self in here; black; woman; immigrant; creating balance; finding myself; how to challenge situations; how do I navigate; was I hired to be a place-holder; being intentional; purposeful; organized; community expectation; not a luxury; have to manoeuvre; you have to figure out; your own stomach will tell you; find out what is the responsibility of your institution; takes energy; group voice; focus on positive; delegate; balance; know your priorities; the body tells tell you when the gas tank

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echoed the spirit of determination that lives on, that has been passed down from generation to generation, whose invisible thread that runs at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean is their connective tissue (Wane 25). The hope, the agency that these women embodied, is clearly encrypted in the literature review below, and is interwoven with narratives from my research study.

I would like to state from the outset that there is a dearth of literature on Black women in leadership positions in Canada. This is evident in most of the discussions or presentations on racialized women's leadership, and in diversity and inclusion literature in general. Alston (128) notes; "In the field of leadership the voices of the marginalized are not heard in the discussion or teaching of leadership theories, concepts, and research in general." The literature review in which I situate my arguments in this paper on Black women in leadership positions, examines a variety of global sources, inclusive of the United States of America, England, and South Africa. It also looks at Black women in the context of corporate Americas, educational leadership in the context of schooling, the academy, and home life. What this review does is to unravel the systemic barriers Black women face in terms of the intersectionality of gender and race, strategies of resistance, and coping strategies. In addition, I also reflect on the findings and reflections of the studies laid out here on a wider scale. To begin with, I will summarize the findings on the single words of the women, then examine the barriers women encounter in a leadership context, and subsequently Black women, and then delve into lack of mentorship, and finally coping mechanisms.

In Their Own Words

Change takes time; what are my battles; battles to pick; who are my allies; where do I find allies; proud moments;

is empty; spiritually centred; constantly learning; building strong relationship; reading articles for answers; being prepared; your spirit will tell you when to speak, when to be silent; when not to challenge issues; racism is like a concrete block that does not move; we need a solid front as Black people; this is not white people's work; how much do my people have to do before they pass the gate; before they are allowed in the boardrooms; journey filled with challenges; questioned; silently observed; victorious moments; great outcomes; no break in sight; my voice vilified; critique; voiced out; saliency of the colour of my skin; my presence not easy to control; energy; use data to trigger change; underrepresented; too few of us; educate if necessary; address racism; purposeful decisions; being intentional in hiring, recruiting; mentoring; coaching for succession; centre equity; dismantle racism; inauthentic self; authentic; wears you down; mental toll; takes a toll physically; sickness; we don't have a solid front at Black people; invest in our community; it is our work; experience of abandonment; demand you play multiple roles; exhausting; competing interests; if you're not given power, you make yourself powerful; determination; passion; I am an anomaly; I am aware of how I am being read; performance; have an armour; no armour; adjust; readjust; negotiating verbally and silently; survival mechanism; I can do some good work; create structural change that outlive you; create policies, frameworks, or programs; it is costly to take these roles; hanging on a cliff; develop diseases without a name; anxiety; my family is paying for it. Connecting with people; focusing on the mission that motivates you; listening to your body; taking breaks.

The decision to summarize here some of the findings in their own words, was to provide the reader with the gist of what the women narratives revealed. The women's words reveal their strength, power, tenacity, determination,

hurt, rootedness, and resilience. As I engaged with their words, I am conscious of their emotions from a physical, mental, and spiritual level.

Barriers Women Encounter in Leadership

Alison Cook and Christ Glass's study examined women in leadership positions in the workplace, particularly in *Fortune* 500 companies. The study focused on gender and the systemic barriers at play that kept women from achieving CEO-level positions. Cook and Glass referred to these barriers as *glass cliffs*. Cook and Glass go on to note that the glass cliff is where women find themselves on boards of corporations, and when not performing well, they were expected to rectify the situation. Cook and Glass's findings confirm both Nia's and Mwendé's experiences in the academy.

BIDII: I feel my abilities get called into question all the time a) because I'm black, b) because I'm female um is my belief and my experience. And um what I find is that on a daily basis, one of the key factors for me, and that incorporate the way in which I move through the world. Um and through professional spaces, including academia, is this idea of morphing.

And I must morph to adjust and readjust consistently. I'm consistently readjusting, whether it's the way that I speak, um whether it's the tone that I use, whether it is the way in which I make eye contact, or do not make eye contact. I am very cognizant of my body. I'm very cognizant of my thoughts, and I'm very cognizant of the feelings and emotions, that I'm also negotiating as I'm experiencing an interaction with an individual or a room full of individuals.

Bidii's narrative is supported by Mainah who stated: "Faculty members reported that in class they experienced students who doubted their ability to teach them effectively and others who mistook them for students or University support staff" (Mainah 92). Collectively these negative experiences can take a toll on their self esteem, networking, and access to opportunities (Holder et al. 165). Maseti speaks to the toll academia took on her own sense of well-being. Maseti speaks of being aware of the perceptions around her race and being ever cognizant of how she "performs her race" (Maseti 347). In her own words, she writes, "I perform my race differently in these white spaces due to the implicit expectations of how I should perform my race" (Maseti 347). In her work, Maseti refers to this pervasive feeling of "unbelonging." This feeling is understandable when one is subject to constant disrespect, scrutiny, and invalidation. She writes,

"These experiences of discrimination and marginalisation often lead to alienating feelings of un-belonging within academia" (344). The feeling of belonging fosters a sense of being valued, of feeling like the work you are contributing is meaningful, and also helps to foster community and decrease feelings of alienation. It increases feelings of well-being and job satisfaction. Furthermore, in the words of Maseti: "Another pressing struggle towards a decolonised university is that of belonging, a sense of being at home, and an ability to identify with the institutional culture" (348). This insight by Maseti is profound and powerful. It will take deeply transformative change for this to be a reality. Interestingly, Imani and Mwendé decided to focus on the lack of support to opportunities:

IMANI: So, my path was not laid out in advance... the leadership roles that I've gotten are largely, and, and my pathway to these roles have been in following my passion, making sure I'm an expert working collegially. I created organizations of what I do today, and my institution realized whoa, this person is going somewhere with these projects, and they joined me.

You know, when you realize that a lot of racialized faculty... are, very much underrepresented group, like Black and indigenous woman,... salaries, opportunities are reduced. And I noticed that I didn't have the mentorship that I needed in the areas I was passionate about... And the mentors that I had, um were either that I sought other black people who were perhaps going through their own struggles, that necessarily didn't have the social capital to help me but were helpful. Or I had white mentors who were well intended but didn't even know what I didn't know. So then, they couldn't help me with the unknown unknown. So, until I looked at that literature, and I became much more aggressive in seeking mentorship. I backed everything with literature. I did not want to personalize what I was facing... and it worked.

MWENDE: You have to remember, all the leadership roles I have occupied; I was the first one. I must come up with the structure of the role; strategic and financial plan for five years. I did not expect these institutions thought I would make it. I would succeed. I did succeed. I did very well. Sometimes I felt like I was hanging on a cliff. I employed a lot of my inner strength and determination to succeed. In one of my roles, I was given a big title, but no resources. My responsibility was to come up with an equity thing... I created resources where there were none. And so the institution as a whole had not seen the need for it. But the unit was forced to deal with it because it was a problem for them.

So, the position was created. So, I was this one person who had to deal with all equity issues. ... Um so what do you have to do with a big challenge like that with no resources is use your brain? I created a lot of um student leadership positions and student volunteer positions and used every possible resource around me.... The students became my resource...

Ironically, this goes on to show that women have multiple skills and are better able to manage and deal with crisis, and what many might think is impossible (Cook and Glass). Despite this great quality, few women, and in particular Black women, do not see themselves represented in success leadership stories, or even want to be in these roles, as Nia stated in her interview:

Many women don't want to be in leadership roles because I mean, you have to navigate racism all the time. Like I've had people walk in my office, and they walk in to meet me, and they literally stop in their tracks and look at me and say things like, "Oh, I wasn't expecting you." And I was, "Oh, okay, who were you expecting?" "No, I just wasn't expecting you." Right. So, they'll say that to my face, right?... Experiences like that, right. Um yeah, that you just see and most, most people don't want to have to deal with that. I would say black women are pushed out of leadership roles.

Right, because what we see is that many institutions are making initiatives to hire Black and Indigenous people, but they don't change the work environment, so that people would not want to work there. Right. So, I know many Black females that have more than enough skills to get into administration. Right. But why would you want to do that? When it just makes yourself more vulnerable? "Oh, my God."

While Bidii said:

I love my job, but I hate it... I don't hate it, I hate my working environment; I hate the everyday scrutiny; an occasional glance; when I say something, which is ignored; only to hear it being repeated by someone else around the table; and the loud applause for such a brilliant idea... I love my job; however, if I don't watch it, I will develop diseases without a name.... yes, anxiety; low self esteem... all because of this toothless title.

My experience has been over the last 10 to 15 years consistently, one whereby I am constantly negotiating and renegotiating the way in which I walk through spaces, the way in which my body encompasses um

a room, and the way in which people respond to the skin that I'm in. Ah there is no question about that. And what often gets called into question regardless of my class position, um by virtue of the colour of my skin, and then the saliency of the colour of my skin, and then we can get into the politics of the fact that I have natural hair and it's locked. Um what often gets called into question is my ability.

From Imani's, Nia's, Bidii's, and Mwende's narratives, Black women love and hate their jobs at the same time. Imani and Nia "created" jobs where there were none, but still the environment is very toxic. But in that toxicity, they see opportunities even when they are not given any resources to begin with. But as Mwende pointed out, "I see opportunities where there are none." And for Nia, she came up with projects that were of interest to both her institution and community. Holder et al. looked at 10 Black women who had moved up to leadership roles in Corporate America. The study found out that racism was a major road block for Black women aspiring to executive leadership. They write: "Although racism has been part of the experience of Black Americans for hundreds of years, the face of contemporary or aversive racism is significantly different from blatant acts of hostility and discrimination" (165).

In two other studies by Aaron, and Johnson and Fournillier, they examined the role of Black women in leadership and within the school context and found that: "Black women educational leaders have historically led with particular attention to individual students, families, faculty, and the community and implemented changes in schools to transform their communities into places of hope and not despair" (Aaron 148). Aaron's study that focused on women's experience, found out that participants worked from a place of "student-centered leadership" (148). Aaron notes that this commitment, dedication, and visionary capacity brings immense value into the schools they govern. Aaron goes on to state: "All of the participants in the study described and enacted student-centered leadership. The principals perceived and described their leadership as student-centered. From hiring and decision-making to taking care of others, they enacted student growth-centered leadership. The principals imparted that their leadership practices emanated from a deep care for students" (153). Johnson and Fournillier (9) found out women leaders focused on community. They knew that community played a pivotal role in leadership qualities of Black principals.

My research corresponds with the findings of the above studies. For instance, Mwende advocated for students as leaders in her institution. This is what she said:

I created this mammoth of students around me, ... I empowered students to solve their own problems. ... I knew the only resource I have were these students, I used students to empower them and expand my, my territory. Um so what I'm saying here is when you have challenges, you've got to use all the resources that you have, because at some point or another you have a bit of resources, including your brain.

In the Holder et al. (173) study, the participants discussed "...the value of having a circle of trusted advisors who could provide strategies and guidance for addressing racial microaggressions at work." In the Mainah (97) article, community was inclusive of trusted colleagues in their departments in addition to family members and friends.

MWENDE: When you're challenged, you must identify your strengths, your personal strength. We remember there is also strength in numbers, and people

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This dedication to students demonstrates that students were held dearly by Mwendu. Just like the study by Johnson and Fournillier who indicated, "... all four women spoke to 'answering the call' to lead and the sacrifices they made in taking the 'road less traveled' (15). "...Holding firm expectations was an enactment to respond to student needs and disrupt the structures of discrimination" (Aaron 155), and in particular for students of colour. It is important to delve into the coping mechanisms and strategies that Black women enact to be successful in such toxic cultures. Let me turn to coping strategies.

Coping Strategies

You can only begin to imagine the degree of exhaustion that I experience and I'm sure other Black women experience daily... my reaction is one where it's, I remain neutral, although inside other things may be happening, because I'm human. Um and this, these are very personal ah conversations that have real meaning. So, what I'm hearing will land on me in a certain kind of way. But I have a practice, a spiritual practice before engaging in these conversations, to really keep myself as safe as I can be, and as protected as I can be (Bidii, 2020).

There is a wide array of coping strategies that Black women leaders utilize to help them be successful in the context of patriarchal and white supremacist institutions. These coping strategies include, but are not limited to, identifying community, the importance of mentorship, self care, and the role of spirituality in bolstering one's spirit. Community was a coping strategy that was mentioned throughout the literature (Holder et al.; Johnson and Fournillier; Mainah).

you're more aligned with and allies. So, every time I join a new institution, the first thing I want to know quickly, and this is a survival mechanism, is who are my allies? Who are my real allies, because everybody is very super friendly there, so nobody really comes to your face for the most part, but not really everybody's an ally. So, you must identify who are the core allies, and how do you figure out how... I invite different people for coffee or lunch. Let's have a coffee or grab a lunch. And I will have as many appointments as possible within my first four months... One of the things I have learned to do is to speak from my gut, my stomach ... And for that, what are the core pieces that constitute that. I will greet you. I will say, how are you? How are your children, etc.? And say I want to know you, I want to know whether you have a partner, whether you have children, what grades are your children? What really matters to you? What games do they play? And by the end of that conversation, I can tell you are an ally or you're not. I want to know you because you're my colleague, and I want to work with you... but if you don't want to share; that's a different story... Let me tell you when you open up; what you give is what you get back. If you give an openness, a warmth, kindness, and a generosity, you will receive all that back. So, when you invite people by opening up... yourself... People take it. But when you go and create the boundary and be like them, because what I learned is I'll never be a white woman. I'll never, I will never act, I will not be, I don't belong to this culture. I need to understand it, I need to embrace it. That is how I have learned who to work with, who I can trust and who I cannot. You see, you must know

your enemies as well as you know your loyal friends. This is one of my coping mechanisms.

Mwende spoke very candidly about her coping mechanisms. Knowing whom she could trust or work with enabled her to be successful in her leadership. Another thing that she spoke of was not carrying heavy baggage.

MWENDE: This is Canada. We don't have a lot of outright hostility, of actual discrimination in that

adaptive response to racial and gender discrimination; in cognitive, physical, and linguistic ways, Black women shift perspective, body, speech, and attire to counter images of inferiority and stereotypes in the workplace (Holder et al. 173). In Mwende's case, people did not meet an angry Black woman; no, she presented herself as authentically as possible. And if the institution did not like that, then she left. Bidii, on the other hand, armoured always. She could not afford to be attacked:

Thus, Black women who are in leadership positions utilize armour as a means of protection, and a building up of self in destructive racist environments.

sense. But people don't also fight you overtly; it is the subtle microaggressions that you deal with every day, those happen at all levels, even in the board level, yeah all of them. Many days I doubt myself, but I have learnt the importance of resiliency, because I am doing this to create a path, a window for others who will come after me.

INT: So, you go armed, like you're armoured? You go ready.

MWENDE: I stopped being armoured, because being armoured, makes you tighten.... I don't go armoured. I go um relaxed, and I have learned that is one solution... being my true self. Like how much armour can you carry?... I think that people who go armoured don't even go far because they're pressing themselves down with a lot of weight. I shed all that. I bring myself to who I am a hundred percent. And I don't attempt to be anything else. And if you can't appreciate that, then I don't belong here.

What Mwende is advocating is supported by what Holder et al. called armour. According to Holder et al. (166), "Armour is a form of socialization where a girl child learns the cultural attitudes, preferences, and socially legitimate behaviours for two cultural contexts." Armour helps Black girls develop and maintain a sense of self worth, dignity, and beauty (Bell and Nkomo) in a society where Black women are often invisible and devalued because of their race and gender (Holder et al. 166). Thus, Black women who are in leadership positions utilize armour as a means of protection, and a building up of self in destructive racist environments. Shifting is another form of protection as well. Shifting is described as follows: "Shifting is an accommodating, yet strategic

I have to have my invisible suit on when I go to these places... otherwise, they can break your spirit... some days I doubt myself, or my confidence is low; I double my armour... but you just have to be resilient, because it is not about you... it is the system... and I have to think of others ... those to come after me,... paving the way ... it is heavy... always to think you are representing the race and your ancestors...

A conversation, as quoted above, always ended up with the narratives of self care and spirituality. The women turned to their spirituality and their religion as their strength and inner power.

Self Care & Spirituality

Self care was also cited in a couple of studies as a coping mechanism (Holder et al.; Mainah) as well as in my study. It is important to note that people hold different manifestations of what self care means to them and how they sanctioned it. What is similar across the board is its utilization to prioritize well-being within the individual. There are a variety of self-care strategies that were utilized in order to deal with toxic work environments where racial microaggressions were dealt with in the workplace (Holder et al.). All the four women had something to share about self care:

NIA: Part of my self care is holding on to my African roots. I know I have never been to the continent; but I read a lot. Especially Queen Afua's work. I pay attention to what I eat and what I read. Also, whom I associate with. Sometimes, we Black women can be your worst enemies, especially in the academy. Too

much competition... But don't get me wrong, I have very good Black women supporters; women that I can call and vent and pour my soul... but not here at work... we lack trust... When I am at work... it is all performance ... and as soon as I leave the office and get into my car Sometimes, I cry all the way home... I talk to myself—this is very helpful and say it out loud: I do not want to be like them ... aside from work, I need to be authentic. I am not myself when I am at work... Being conscious of who you are is part of my self care. Oh, I also wake up early in the morning and... go swimming a couple times a week. My soul is very unsettled in the winter. I hate feeling cold, and so I try to go to other places where it's warm... just that I can be away from the work.

MWENDE: I believe my self-esteem has been eroded. But one of my internalized self care is, I situate myself in a place where I have to start with my own inner strength of who I am. Of what I am, because... that's one thing that I cannot change, and if I don't situate myself within myself, then I am going to be everywhere, situating myself, where everybody wants me to go, and I can't. That's my strategy. But my family is everything to me. My children are everything. Their activities, their events, I never missed a game irrespective of anything... this energizes me... keeps me focused, like family is everything. I also work on community projects. They take me away from here—physically and mentally.

IMANI: ... for me mindfulness and meditation, faith, although I'm not like particularly religious but you know, just having a higher being, um you know I suppose a Christian adjacent because I grew up Christian, so I'll still fall back on that with my prayers. So, faith, meditation, finding purpose and meaning in my life. ... I think I'm... motivated for the vision that I have, that you know that I will be able to influence others who influence others, like that ripple piece because I've been influenced by others... one of my coping mechanisms is actually I imagine, um you know, a Black woman in North America 100 years ago, and I'm telling her, like, my frustration in the boardroom, and she just probably wants to slap me just to make sure that, are you kidding.... thinking about my history and where I come from... reflecting on... people who came before me, people to come after me, people around me, gratitude, so practicing gratitude. So ... being grateful for the things that I do have... I'm grateful for that, despite the challenges that I have. ...gratitude is a big thing. Because you can spend your day focusing on all the things that went wrong, there will always be things that go wrong. But

if you try to make a mental effort to think about all the wonderful things that went right, um then that's a beautiful thing. ... I try to do that.

BIDII: Every single day, I think what gives me the courage and the strength and the fortitude is everything that I've spoken about... I have spiritual practices for myself that I do in terms of self care, my dedication and commitment and understanding to what brings me to this work.... I'm drawn to healing. I'm drawn to health and wellness, um spiritual health, mental health, physical health, healing of the soul is just for me; it feels like my natural calling. And so in everything that I do, whether I'm standing in front of the classroom providing a lecture, when I'm sitting at a meeting, I really centre myself and speak from that place of warmth, understanding and being mindful of the choice of words that I use to say what I have to say, understanding my audience because I want to be heard, and I don't want my words to hit a wall and then fall flat.

Both my study and literature review indicated that seeking therapy was noted as a last resort strategy for coping with racial microaggressions. Some participants engaged in physical exercise such as swimming, taking vacations, and spending time with family, or creating community organization where they interacted with people outside their workplace. Nia went swimming every day or three days in a week, while Imani and Mwendu had created organizations that benefited their communities. These types of self-care mechanisms provided a break from the environment, and outlets, and these individuals felt loved and valued.

That's heavy work, because in that moment... when they are doubting me, my history, my ancestral legacy has been placed on the table. But at that moment, they are here... my ancestors are here.... I would have to quit a long time ago; I would have stopped.... I don't like to work in vain. But I don't see this as work in vain, and I don't see this as futile work. I see this as necessary work and um I think for me because I vibrate so spiritually. I just know that there can be more. And I know that I'm part of a group age, I understand fully in my body and my mind and my psyche, and my spirit and my soul, that that's a big part of the reason why I'm here. That I know for sure (Imani).

The literature spoke to value inherent in religion and spirituality. They were both viewed as coping strategies that enabled Black women in leadership positions to gain a sense of strength and empowerment in the face

of Patriarchy and racism in the workplace (Holder et al.). “Religion and spirituality were found to be core to the coping repertoire of the participants for dealing with racial microaggressions in the workplace” (Holder et al. 173). “Bloom and Erlandson found in their study of Black women principals that spirituality was a pivotal component of Black women’s leadership” (Aaron 149). Moreover, religion and spirituality often fell under self care (Mainah). In the literature, participants relied on spiritual and or religious practices that helped to centre them and distress. For example, Holder et al. wrote the following: “Prayer and meditation were noted as key practices. Religion and spirituality provided a sense of empowerment, protection, making sense of things, feeling grounded, forgiving perpetrators, and serving as a reminder that racial microaggressions and other matters in the workplace are trivial compared with other issues in life” (173). The role of religion and spirituality is valuable and central and deserves to be researched in more depth in terms of how it provides sustenance, support, and empowerment in light of the barriers that Black women encounter when ascending through the ranks of leadership. All the four women talked about their spirituality. Some indicated they were Christians, while others talked about being good Christians when they were young, but now relied on their spirituality—the spiritual practices from their ancestors. All four women that participated in my study talked about sponsorship and mentorship.

Sponsorship and Mentorship

I usually do not hire Black people. Instead, I create structural change; like policies, or frameworks, or programs; these will outlive me when I am gone. This is another coping strategy. There is so much microaggression that it becomes tiring and focusing on tangible changes diverts people’s attention from you (Mwende).

Nia indicated very clearly that the only way she was appointed to her role was because someone in a higher office sponsored her. She was also mentored when it came to interview preparation. It was interesting to note, however, how both Mwende and Imani did not have sponsorship or mentors. They created their positions; then, they got noticed and people were willing to sponsor or mentor them. Also, Mwende, as the quote above indicates, was not too keen on hiring Black people. She felt, if she created structures that are conducive to increasing representation, Black people would eventually be hired. She was very keen on policies, and making the central administration take a keen interest in these policies and their implementation.

As indicated earlier, Imani felt those who could mentor

her did not have enough knowledge of her field, or they were struggling to survive. What she resorted to was reading and searching for literature that spoke to her, while Mwende spoke about herself in conferences, or when she gave public talks. She let the people know who she was and what she stood for in these open forums.

According to Holder et al., sponsorship and mentorship played a valuable role in terms of supporting participants’ promotion. Sponsorship helped to make participants be “felt” and “seen” in their absences. All that the sponsor needed to say in a promotions committee was, that person is really good. They will bring lots of talent and contribute to the organization’s mandate. Holder et al. write: “Participants shared how having sponsors and mentors helped them to feel empowered, and it validated their presence in the workplace as well as their feelings when they encountered racial microaggressions in the workplace” (174). Sponsorship and mentorship help to bolster, support, and provide access to opportunities and strategizing that is immensely valuable to Black women in leadership positions. Obtaining strong mentors and sponsors who are versed in the challenges that Black women face can be difficult; however, because of the lack of Black women in leadership positions in the academy (Johnson and Thomas 166). Additionally, Johnson and Thomas indicated that mentorship and sponsorship provides an opportunity for upward mobility, and in particular to gain entry in the C suites. Thus, mentorship and sponsorship are critical to the success of Black women in leadership positions inside the academy, and in other leadership domains as well (Johnson and Thomas; Holder et al.). Examining ways to increase appropriate sponsorship and mentorship is perhaps an area that requires further study.

Conclusion

While oppressive historical structures demean, hinder, marginalize, and oppress Black women who aspire to leadership roles, the women in my study were not ready to give up. The hurdles are encountered in corporate institutions, in schools and in academia (Holder et al.; Johnson and Fournillier; Maseti). Maseti, in her autoethnography, outlines the struggles she encountered as both a student and a professor in a South African context. She writes, “These institutions of higher education (IHE) were founded on ideologies of whiteness, classism, and patriarchy that produce systemic injustices” (343). These logics remain across continents, embedded in corporate institutions and facets of learning. Therefore, combatting them takes a toll, a skill set, and particular coping strategies to achieve success. The insidious nature of white supremacist barriers can enact themselves in countless

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Song of Whitman and the Black Man

You may have read Walt Whitman's poem all the way through, songs about himself.
You may often go back and re-read the part where he comes upon a Negro man, a run-away,
sitting on his woodpile.

Your heart breezes balmy, as he assures him and leads him all limpsy into the house,
loosens, as he fills a tub to wash away sweat and awkwardness
warms, as he slaves to heal his bruised feet and the galls of his neck and ankles
warms further through, as he clothes him and welcomes him to sit at the table

Your heart glows at his recuperation then accepts it is his time to pass on north.
You may be determined to master this noble manner, hope you have the courage
remembering that this whole week,
the gun, fire-locked, leaned in the corner,

the only prisoner, held captive by kindness.

ways as has been shown in this paper. The four women, however, were determined; they had purpose, and had their eyes on the finishing line. They were also aware of the fact that these institutions were not created to serve the needs of their communities, but that of mainstream society. However, they were very conscious of their history; the sacrifices that their ancestors made for them, and that they were standing on the shoulders of mighty men and women of the past. They were also aware of the presence of their ancestors in their midst.

The narratives of Black women's leadership experiences in the academy have provided a deeper understanding of what happens in boardrooms, in the corridors as well as in their homes. What is very clear from these narratives is that these women know who they are; they know their strengths and their resilience. They know that they are standing on the shoulders of great Black women leaders from antiquity to the present. The women leaders may not have taught at all in Canadian schools, but their spiritual strength has been passed on from generation to generation. Despite the fact that the few women in leadership position in the academy feel isolated, invisible, silenced, and at the same time keep a smile on their faces; they know they are not alone in their invisibility. Additionally, Holder et al. confirm the invisibility; the disregard of credibility that Black women face, and the onslaught of cruel perceptions and stereotypes are real. Mainah's study also confirms the notion for the disregard for Black women who held educational leadership positions in academia in the U.S. The narratives

in this paper show the hostility that Black women face in a variety of contexts. Racism plays out in multilayered ways that have major consequences. The racism that the women faced was expressed as covert, indirect, and more ambiguous, thus creating challenges in identifying and acknowledging its occurrence (Dovidio and Gaertner), while still impacting and oppressing individuals in profound ways (Sue et al. 183–90). For instance, all the participants from my study confirmed microaggressions, and these were also confirmed in the literature review by Holder et al.

The findings in this study corroborates with the literature that was done that delved into Black women in leadership positions in terms of Corporate America, Schooling, the Academy, and the responsibilities around family that Black women uphold. In addition, we examined Black women in leadership positions in the United States, South Africa, and Britain. It is my hope that this work will provide useful frameworks, findings, and insights into the need for further research on the topic of Black women in leadership positions, not only in the academy but other organizations.

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