Diplomas vs Incarceration: Does Intersectionality Affect Black Men and Women Differently?

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DIPLOMAS VS INCARCERATION: DOES INTERSECTIONALITY AFFECT BLACK MEN AND WOMEN DIFFERENTLY?

by

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A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Diplomas vs Incarceration: Does Intersectionality Affect Black Men and Women Differently?

By

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Racial minorities are disproportionately imprisoned or sent to jail for reasons including racial profiling, unfair drug laws, and a biased judicial system. Black men are often subject to unwarranted searches and stop-and-frisks. These are meant to protect neighborhoods from criminal activity, when in fact they are often used to target people of color in destitute neighborhoods. Some scholars argue that a lot of differential treatment towards Black men stems from automatic thought processes, or implicit biases on the part of law enforcement officers. These are seen as unconscious and instilled by societal stigmas, rather than the result of careful deliberations. The intersectionality of being both Black and being a woman can give rise to discrimination, and yet research shows that generally, Black women seem to fare better than Black men. However, even though Black women have the propensity to attend and graduate college at a higher rate than their male counterparts, they are still underrepresented in academia. I plan to explore why Black men are so often behind bars, whereas Black women are thriving within society, and how intersectionality affects that. Although it is futile to rank experiences of persecution when discussing oppression of any kind, one can’t avoid noting the blatant disadvantage that Black men and women can be placed in. I choose the concept of intersectionality as my vehicle to tease out the nuances behind the marginalized, but differentiated, plights of Black men and women, mainly because I hope to explore the literature on intersectionality and the efforts by scholars to use this concept to explore the very same systematic oppression that begets societal and individual power hierarchies.
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Introduction: The Role of Intersectionality: Advancement vs Incarceration

“Intersectionality refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis, 2008). UCLA law professor, Kimberlé Crenshaw developed this term and concept, which she then introduced us to through a seminal paper titled: *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* (Crenshaw 1989).

Intersectionality is a lens through which social psychology can view and assess differences between race, gender or class. I will use intersectionality to both acknowledge and assess how these differences are perceived in relation to rates of incarceration and rates of educational attainment in the United States between and within African American men and women. As intersectionality aims to penetrate the multiple layers of oppression, I see it as a useful method to evaluate how men and women from a minority group either thrive or fail by society’s standards of success.

In words, more eloquent and accurate than I think I could ever convey, Ta-Nehisi Coates starts *Between the World and Me* by expressing his concern to his son about being a young black male in a society that consistently abuses and executes his “kind.” Although media does a poor job of displaying how both black men and women can be victimized in society, Coates powerfully articulates this sentiment by discussing how several Black men and women have been taken from this world at the hands of the police. He discusses victims: Eric Garner, John Crawford, Renisha McBride, Tamir Rice and Marlene Pinnock.

And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not
matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction...if it originates in a misunderstanding...if the destruction springs from a foolish policy. Sell cigarettes without the proper authority and your body can be destroyed...Turn into a dark stairwell and your body can be destroyed. The destroyers will rarely be held accountable...And destruction is merely the superlative form of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliations. All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people. No one is held responsible (Coates, 2015).

Coats brings attention to recent occurrences of police violence; however, police brutality is not a new phenomenon. The evolution of the way in which the American policing system began stems from multiple places of origination. However, both slavery and the need to control minorities are two institutional dilemmas that have molded the ways in which early policing was conducted (Kappeler, 2014). Modern police departments got their start from Slave patrols and Night Watches that were originally established in order to regulate how minorities behaved (Kappeler, 2014). Kappeler (2014) continues, stating that because slaves were considered to be owned as property by wealthy white landowners, slave patrols were designed to help facilitate ‘economic order’ by retrieving run-away slaves and by punishing them.

Similar to policing, slavery was institutionalized in the legal make up and law and order on both a state and national level of government. Virginia, Connecticut, New York along with several other colonies sanctioned controlling and criminalizing laws that helped to police slaves. Additionally, in 1793 and 1850, Congress passed fugitive Slave Laws, these laws allowed slaves that escaped to be detained (Kappeler, 2014). As people opposed the idea of Reconstruction, vigilante groups began to arise against Black people. Policing did not apply to these groups who beat, lynched and mobbed against Blacks for any reason they saw fit. Black people were viewed as less than human due to the racist history of Slavery in America. The Ku Klux Klan unofficially policed Black men and women by assaulting and killing them for acts that would not be considered crimes had they been white. Not until over a decade after their establishment did
Congress pass a law prohibiting independent state actors, such as the Ku Klux Klan, from taking the law into their own hands and violating the Civil Rights of Black citizens (Kappeler, 2014). As a founding institution, the existence of formal policing got its start from patrols to keep slaves in check, much of which has been perpetuated in the modern-day role police play. The disproportionate ways in which Black people were targeted due to the color of their skin is still an issue that we will explore in depth in this thesis. Killings, beatings, questionings, stops are all ways in which Blacks are still being pursued by the police.

As Coates mentions, black people have experienced hardships that often lead to restrictions on their bodies, or even the loss of their lives. Police violence against black women is an ongoing issue, one that simply does not get the same amount of attention that violence against black males does. In November 2016, Crenshaw presented a TED Talk titled The Urgency of Intersectionality. In this TED Talk she gives a gut-wrenching account of the numerous black women who have been victimized by law enforcement, and how their intersection of being both a woman and black can create dilemmas that are exceptional. There are social-justice issues that specifically affect Black women, that a white woman or a black man does not have to encounter, because they do not have intersecting identities that seems to be the route of invisibility (Crenshaw, 2016).

In this paper you will find that I analyze intersectionality in a way that I do not want to pin the oppression of one group against another. I simply utilize intersectionality to assess the ways in which intersectionality can be seen in both Black men and women, in it’s positive and negative ways. Black boys and men have received a lot of publicity in recent years for the deaths and police brutality that they have faced. The history of oppression that Black males have encountered is a long one and the issue continues. The United States surpasses all other
countries when it comes to imprisonment with a striking 2.4 million people behind bars. In the past thirty years, that is approximately a 500% increase, with only 5% of the world’s population and 25% of it’s prison population. For all Black men the statistics differ, however, as per the Center for Law and Justice’s New Jim Crow Fact Sheet, one in eight Black men aged 20 – 29 years-old are jailed every day. The cost of the incarceration system totals nearly $70 billion and is spent annually on prisons, probation, parole and detention. Often referred to as the “new Jim Crow”, the mass incarceration of Black men and women is perpetuated by bigoted ideals that are inherent in the biases of those that are in power.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, black women are obtaining an education at unprecedented rates, surpassing their counterparts, and succeeding despite the obstacles and oppression that they face. The issue of mass incarceration with Black males also impacts Black women in ways that are rarely discussed. For example, a fraction of Black women are said to withhold from having children early in life, along with continuing their education and making themselves more financially independent with good jobs, in order to decrease the odds of them not being in an unstable position due to the low odds of them finding a suitable partner (Mechoulan, 2011). Mechoulan also analyzes states that “the massive incarceration of black males in the United States has perceptible effects on black women by their teen years and early twenties… black male incarceration decreases early black nonmarital fertility and increases black-female education and early employment”. This is shown in noting that out-of-wedlock Black teenage pregnancies declined in congruence with Black male incarceration increasing (Mechoulan, 2011). The results suggest that black male incarceration has led more young black women to work full-time.
Throughout history Black women have always worked. When white women had the ability to be stay at home wives and mothers, Black women had to contribute to the household and offer support. This trend continues, as Black women still maintain as the matriarchs of their families and the backbones that often hold their families together, in order to overcome any difficulties or obstacles that they may face, they secure an education and employment that will allow them to have a reasonable living regardless of the presence of a male figure. Black women also have to compensate for the disparity in wages they receive. For instance, Black women are paid a staggering, 63 cents for every dollar white men earn (Pearson, 2016). It is reported that women who are highly educated still receive less than white men who do not attend college at all. Each year, Black women who have earned a Bachelor’s degree typically earn merely $1,849 more than white men who have only obtained a High School diploma. The reality of that statistic is that a Black woman who has attended college for 4 years and received a diploma will only make approximately 6 more cents for each dollar a white man earns, who never attended college (Pearson, 2016).

Albeit important, Black male incarceration is not the only newsworthy discussion that we should be having about Black males. There are Black boys and men that are overcoming stereotypes and getting an education despite the box that the media and society attempts to put them in. If we were to compile all of the work and research on Black males being incarcerated, surely we would have volumes upon volumes of work, but Black males doing well deserve the same acclaim. There are several initiatives that push for the betterment of the education that Black boys receive, which is important and essential to the growth of the group. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (2017) have created a comprehensive timeline about key events that have occurred in Higher education for Black people. For instance, in 1823, Alexander Lucius
Twilight becomes the first African American to graduate from college in the United States, obtaining a Bachelor’s degree from Middlebury College in Vermont. Since then, Black men have made many strides that have been pivotal and important to the Black community. In 1966, the first Black faculty members are hired by U.S. military schools. The U.S. Naval Academy hired Samuel P. Massie Jr. in the chemistry department, he later goes on to be the chair of the chemistry department, and founder of the Black studies program. James L.W. Hill joins the chemistry department at West Point and Reginald L. Brown becomes an instructor for economics and government courses. In 2009 it was reported by the Education Department that over 4.5 million living African Americans now have four-year college degrees. More than 100,000 living African Americans hold doctorates. As recently as 2014, Michael V. Drake becomes the first Black president of Ohio State University.

For most of American history, there has been a hindrance that allowed Black men and women to be successful. Without access to proper schooling and employment opportunities, Blacks have to work harder than their white counterparts in order to be successful. Unfortunately, a lot of those obstacles are still very much in existence, and that is shown in the incarceration and death rates that will be discussed in detail later. The incarceration, abuse and killings of Black men and women needs to be discussed, acted out against, and change must be implemented, however I also believe that we should not lose sight of the positives ways that Black people have contributed to society. Black people have jumped leaps and bounds to reach the high levels of accomplishments that have been reached, and I do not think that should be ignored. Intersectionality is the tool by which I explore these controversial topics, only to further prove that each individual has multiple identities that cannot work independently of one another, as that would not accurately depict ones success or ones struggle.
Chapter 1: When Being a Black Man Has Consequences

“Hugging on my mama from a jail cell
And who’d think in elementary?
Hey! I see the penitentiary, one day”
- Tupac

Stigmas and stereotypes have plagued the United States of America for centuries. Dating back to the slave trade, black men, women and children were shackled and forced into slavery, where they were considered a source of profit rather than human beings. Although the Emancipation Proclamation was issued by Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, slavery was not eradicated until nearly three years later when the 13th Amendment was ratified on December 6, 1865. Even then, African Americans continued to fight for their freedom in the south by either escaping to a free state, which were considered to be “safe zones,” or waiting for the Union Army to occupy the state they were enslaved in, thus granting them “true freedom” (LeFlouria 2015). Life after the 13th Amendment was by no means easy; many slaves were penniless, homeless, or forced to sign a contract as employees for their former slave masters, who never actually compensated them. The former Confederacy created laws to criminalize being Black, which I will further examine later. The oppression of the black American continued throughout the Jim Crow era, via the decimation of Black Wall Street, the war on drugs, and currently through mass incarceration. Through this brief review of the bigotry that occurred and continues to occur in the United States, I will assess the inconsistencies and parallels of how black men and women have been oppressed, and how the intersectionality of their identities plays a pivotal role in their plight.

Immediately after the Civil War ended, Southern states enacted "black codes" that allowed African Americans certain rights, such as legalized marriage, ownership of property, and limited access to the courts, but denied them the rights to testify against whites, to serve on
juries or in state militias, vote, or start a job without the approval of the previous employer (PBS, 2017). As one can imagine, this made life difficult for blacks; the new rights they gained came with stipulations that were quite restrictive. However, these codes were all repealed in 1866 when Reconstruction began. After the failure of Reconstruction in 1877, and the removal of black men from political offices, Southern states again enacted a series of laws intended to circumscribe the lives of African Americans. Harsh contract laws penalized anyone attempting to leave a job before an advance had been worked off. “Pig Laws” unfairly penalized poor African Americans for crimes such as stealing a farm animals (O'Brien Wagner & Bluestem Heritage Group, 2012). Additionally, vagrancy statutes made it a crime to be unemployed. Many misdemeanors or trivial offenses were treated as felonies, with harsh sentences and fines. For example, there seemed to be state-sponsored “crusades against black idleness” (LeFlouria 2015). A mandate of the law was that those who were considered to live a life of idleness, of which they did not work, or have a property to call their home, were defined as vagrants. Blacks without land were further defined as "[having] no visible and known means of a fair, honest, and reputable livelihood," or "[persons] who live by stealing or by trading in, bartering for, or buying stolen property [and gambling]," and were subject to harsh legal penalties (LeFlouria, 2015). The authorities in the south, who were undoubtedly white, used these laws and codes to their benefit and utilized the law to justify their illegitimate arrest of black men, women, and teenagers for offenses that were otherwise minor (LeFlouria 2015). The Pig Laws remained a staple in the south for decades, and did not officially disappear, as they just transformed into an even more discriminatory set of laws, otherwise known as the Jim Crow era (PBS, 2017). Harsh sentences and unfair laws such as these helped to drastically increase the prison population.
Slavery masqueraded under another name: the convict lease system. After the Civil War, the South’s economy, society, and government were in shambles. Southern state governments struggled to raise money to repair damaged infrastructure and to support new expenses such as universal public education. The prison problem was especially challenging, as most prisons had been destroyed during the war. Previously, African-American slaves had been subjected to the punishments at the hands of their owners. With government ineffectiveness and an increase in both white and black lawlessness, the problem of where and how to house convicts was significant (PBS, 2017).

Initially, some states paid private contractors to house and feed the prisoners. Within a few years states realized they could lease out their convicts to local planters or industrialists who would pay minimal rates for the workers and be responsible for their housing and feeding - thereby eliminating costs and increasing revenue. Soon, markets for convict laborers developed, with entrepreneurs buying and selling convict labor leases. Unlike slavery, employers had only a small capital investment in convict laborers, and little incentive to treat them well. Convict laborers were often dismally treated, but the convict lease system was highly profitable for the states and the employers (PBS, 2017).

Public sympathy eventually grew towards the plight of convict laborers and southern states struggled over what to do. The loss of revenue was significant, and the cost of housing convicts high. Eventually, many southern states stopped leasing out their convict laborers, instead keeping them to work on public projects in chain gangs (O’Brien Wagner & Bluestem Heritage Group, 2012).

Following the Jim Crow Era, the war on drugs was born and the government and law enforcement became tough on crime, without any research or anticipation of the repercussions.
Speculation continues to revolve around the conspiracy that the government funneled drugs into black neighborhoods and then created the War on Drugs to solve the issue they created. Ferner, Grim and Sledge (2014) recount a declassified article from the agency’s internal journal:

The charges could hardly be worse a widely read newspaper series leads many Americans to believe CIA is guilty of at least complicity, if not conspiracy, in the outbreak of crack cocaine in America’s inner cities. In more extreme versions of the story circulating on talk radio and the Internet, the Agency was the instrument of a consistent strategy by the US Government to destroy the black community and to keep black Americans from advancing. Denunciations of CIA — reminiscent of the 1970s — abound. Investigations are demanded and initiated. The Congress gets involved (Webb, 2014).

There were situations classified as “ghost dope,” where black men were being accused of moving drugs when they physically could not have done so— for instance, they were already incarcerated -- which then added time to their sentences (DuVernay, 2016). In truth, the war on drugs did not actually “solve” anything. People are arrested for drug offenses more than homicides, sex offenses, bribery, robbery, aggravated assaults, kidnapping, arson, and extortion combined (Smith, Fixing the System, 2015). They were and are hunting humans instead of drugs.

A major turning point occurred on the 19th of June, 1986, when star basketball player Len Bias, a promising young recruit from the Boston Celtics, died of an overdose on cocaine. Following the death of the star player, the minimum sentence for possession of 1 gram of the inner city drug became 10 years in prison, compared to the exact drug in powder form, used primarily by the white community, required 100 grams of cocaine for the same sentencing. In 2013, a bill was passed, the Smarter sentencing act, which adjusted the ratio of Crack to Cocaine to 18:1, and those who were previously convicted can appeal the previous 100:1 Crack:Cocaine law (Congressional Research Service, 2013). Although it was an advancement towards equality,
the ratio was still more for crack then it was for cocaine, which is unacceptable, being that they are the exact same drug.

Frequently painted as rapists, drug addicts and generally dangerous people, black men are subjugated to immense amounts of discrimination and oppression. Often ignored in history, the reverse reality of interracial rape, of white men raping black women throughout slavery, has a greater presence in the history of this nation, than black men raping white women (DuVernay, 2016). Whether it was propaganda telling citizens that black people will rape their women, rob their homes, and terrorize their towns, or infiltrating black communities and planting drugs in black homes, then arresting them at higher rates and serving them with longer sentences than their white counterparts, blacks have consistently been targeted by law enforcement and the media. The historical narrative is that huge strides have been made in society towards equality, but the truth is, every time we take a step forward, we seem to be pushed two steps back.

Antonio Moore (2016) from the Huffington Post does an excellent job of providing a contrasting point of view to put the incarceration of black males into perspective. India’s population totals 1.2 billion people, including approximately 380,000 people incarcerated. However, as per the graph below there are more Black men incarcerated in the United States than the total number of people incarcerated in the countries displayed (Moore, 2016):
Legal scholar Michelle Alexander (2011) addressed the questions so often asked over the past 30 years, “Where have all the good black men gone?” Evidence shows that they are often times incarcerated for minor offenses, or they are killed for walking home, reading a book, playing with a toy gun, having a broken taillight, standing outside of a corner store, selling mix-tapes, while black. In the New York Times article, 1.5 Million Missing Black Men, Leonhardt, Quealy, and Wolfers (2015), provide a comprehensive account of just this: “Incarceration and
early deaths are the overwhelming drivers of the gap. Of the 1.5 million missing black men from 25 to 54 — which demographers call the prime-age years — higher imprisonment rates account for almost 600,000.” Coates criticizes the statistics by stating, “fully 60 percent of all young black men who drop out of high school will go to jail. This should disgrace the country. But it does not...” (Coates 2015). “Almost 1 in 12 black men in this age group are behind bars, compared with 1 in 60 nonblack men in the age group, 1 in 200 black women and 1 in 500 nonblack women” (Leonhardt et al, 2015). The societal structure of the United States has conditioned citizens to implicitly associate black men with violence, when in fact black men do not commit violent acts or do drugs or any other heinous act at a higher rate than their white counterparts (Leonhardt et al, 2015). There are a staggering 1.1 million fathers behind bars, which translates to certain communities becoming so locked into this cycle that it begins to normalize the issues they face. This is such a shameful rhetoric, because the children are raised to think this is the way things should be. This intersectionality of being both a male and African American has created some of our greatest athletes, artists, and intellectuals, but it has also created a group that is highly oppressed, and unjustly treated.

Many prisoners remain in jail because they can’t afford to make bail. Cops adhere to quotas in order to “build up” the system. The cops and others are implicitly biased, so they see a young black man and question their identity, and what criminal activity they might participate in. A lot of times those who are arrested from low-income, black neighborhoods accept plea bargains for crimes they did not commit for reasons such as being told they will be allowed to leave the police department. They are given a public defender who poorly advises them, or who does not educate them on the impact incarceration will have on their lives. Mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent crimes leave no discretion in sentencing to the judge, but instead puts
the decisions in the hands of the prosecutors. Mandatory minimum sentencing also creates an incarceration rate that is massive and unable to be decreased, and leads to overcrowding. Thus, injustice is born. Three felonies mandates you to prison for nearly the rest of your life. Only 3% of cases actually go to trial, and that is typically due to the high mandatory minimum sentences that they are facing, so many opt for the plea bargains for an even greater fear that they will be incarcerated for crimes they did not commit. For example, Kalief Browder was punished for not taking a plea bargain for a crime that he did not commit. The system had Browder, a teenager at the time, awaiting trial at Rikers Island for three years, with bail set at $10,000, an amount far higher than his low-income family could afford (DuVernay, 2016). So are these targeted actions by law enforcement really implicit, or is it learned? Or is it implicit because it is learned in such a way that one does not even realize that they are internalizing these biased ideals that are so morally compromising? Quite simply, there is a social branding at work, which equates to a presumption of guilt in the eyes of law officers, lawyers and judges: being a black male of color from a poor neighborhood.

Incarceration became the easy “fix” to controlling the black community. 1 in 17 white men will go to prison in their lifetime, whereas 1 in 3 black men will be incarcerated and possibly lose that right to vote which they fought so hard to obtain. Disenfranchisement varies depending on the state the individual lives in or is imprisoned in. According to The Sentencing Project’s 2014 Felony Disenfranchisement report, an estimated 2.2 million African Americans, or 7.7% of black adults, are disenfranchised, compared to 1.8% of the non-African American population. In the following three states – Florida (23%), Kentucky (22%), and Virginia (20%) – over one in five African Americans is disenfranchised. Provided the rates of incarceration to date, three in ten of the next generation of black men can expect to be disenfranchised at some
point in their lifetime. In the states that do not allow ex-offenders to vote, roughly 40% of black men have the probability of having their right to vote taken permanently. Institutional biases exist throughout the system, which is already unjust. Many are numb to the effects these biases impose on the communities of black Americans.

Private prisons are a booming industry that, much like slavery, the capitalistic United States can’t afford to get rid of. The more people who are in prison, the fewer job opportunities there are for the hardworking United States citizens. They tell us to blame immigrants, but really it is the prisoners who are stealing our jobs. American Legislative Exchange Council, otherwise known as ALEC, writes laws and gives them to politicians. It is an easy way for certain people or companies with money to push their own agenda, without having to contrive the legislation on their own (DuVernay, 2016). 1:4 State Legislatures are in ALEC. A few laws that were proposed by ALEC are the “Stand your ground” law, which ultimately was the law that let George Zimmerman walk free for shooting and murdering Trayvon Martin, a young African American Boy. Martin also was standing his ground, only he did not have a gun. ALEC also proposed mandatory minimums and three strikes legislation, which have incarcerated Black and Brown people at a rate far higher than their white counterparts. Their most recent controversial proposal is placing GPS trackers on juveniles so that they can serve their time in the comfort of their own home. They will not only have prisons privatized, but by putting them under surveillance and under control in their own neighborhoods, they will also be privatizing parole (DuVernay, 2016).

ALEC also works closely with the private prison company, and especially the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA). CCA plays a major role in the Prison industrial complex – those who profit off of mass incarceration. There are telephone companies that thrive
off of contracts with CCA: they inflate rates charged to inmates and their families to make calls. Corizon Healthcare has contracts in 28 different states, which has turned it into a multimillion-dollar industry. Aramark is a food distributor who has been charged with misconduct in several states after tainted food with maggots was found in several prisons (DuVernay, 2016). Glenn E. Martin summated this form of slavery by saying, “When I think of systems of oppression, historically in this country and elsewhere, they’re durable, and they tend to reinvent themselves, and they do it right under your nose” (DuVernay, 2016). We need modern day abolitionists to fight modern day oppression that takes the form of private prisons.

The business of prison continues when ex-prisoners have to pay thousands of dollars in restitution and supervision fees to their parole officers after being released from prison. But because of “check the box” questions on job applications, they are not able to land a decent job, meaning they can’t pay the fines, and they end up back in jail, thus continuing the cycle. According to an NPR survey, defendants are even forced to pay for some of the costs for their public defender. This appears to be the case in 43 states, plus the District of Columbia. For instance, those who pass through the court system in Louisiana are charged fees, approximately two-thirds of which goes towards the budget for public defenders statewide (Sunne, 2014).

The system is rigged for prior felons to not succeed. They cannot obtain public housing, federal education loans, food stamps and other supports that could help better their lives. VICE founder and CEP. Shane Smith made the following comment in the HBO Special Report, Fixing The System “Throwing everybody in jails and prisons is a hopeless way to govern our society and it is inconsistent with a democracy that prides itself on freedom and liberty”. Ironically and unfortunately we [African Americans] were enslaved in this country longer than we have had the
privilege of being “free”. “For 250 years black people were born into chains – whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains.” (Coates 2015)

The intersectional reality for Black men, more often than not, includes death. Frequently we hear and see reports of unarmed black men who are gunned down by law enforcement, even when they comply with the officer. They continue to be vilified by the media after death, bringing up their prior conviction records, or past indiscretions as though that defines who they are or justifies their unjust murder by cops who deem themselves the judge, the jury and the executioner. Per the Washington Post’s (2015) interactive database detailing the number of people shot and killed in the past year, along with the United States 2014 Census data, there are 5.5 times more white men than Black men in this country approximately 20 mil vs 115 mil. However, Black men are 3.3 more times likely to be shot while unarmed by police than white men approximately 1.9 mil vs .57 mil. This is alarming because of the ratio of men being killed under the same guise, but with the only difference being their race, and yet, the Black males who are the smaller of the two populations, are unjustly dying at much higher numbers.

The gendered and racial oppressions that come with being a Black male is inherited. It is passed down from one generation to the next, and has plagued those that fit that description more than any other race. Coates (2016) once again speaks to this phenomenon, “But the price of error is higher for you than it is for your countrymen…the story of a black body’s destruction must always begin with his or her error, real or imagined—with Eric Garner’s anger, with Trayvon Martin’s mystical words (‘You are gonna die tonight’), with Sean Bell’s mistake of running with the wrong crowd...” The Black Lives Matter movement responds to the constant victimization of Black persons who have their human rights compromised at the hands of others. It is a social movement that tries to be inclusive of a group that is so often marginalized within our society.
Black Lives Matter attempts to openly show how intersectionality can either be beneficial for some (White males), and deadly for others (Black males). In my next section I will display how intersectionality affects not only Black males, but also Black females.
Chapter 2: When Being a Black Woman Has Consequences

“If you’re black, you were born in jail”
-Malcom X

Although Black men have gotten a lot of attention as the targeted group directly impacted by intersectionality in a negative manner, Black women are not only oppressed, but also, unnoticed. As previously mentioned, after slavery the convict lease system was put in place in order to maintain the economy of the South. The convict lease system was not exclusively for men: virtually from the start of the system the convict lease system was applicable to all, without any regard for sex. Succeeding the General Assembly’s decision to reorganize the prison population, “all able-bodied convicts,” including women, were lawfully divided out to different private industries and farms (LeFlouria, 2015). Part of the issue was that after slaves were freed, they did not have anywhere to go, nor the resources needed to start a new life elsewhere. As stated in LeFlouria’s 2015 book *Chained in Silence*, roughly 90 percent of African Americans still resided in the rural South, thus leaving them susceptible to the neo-slavery that emerged in order to keep African Americans constricted. When the Civil War ended in 1865, the Freedmen's Bureau that consisted of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, was generated by the federal government to aide ex-slaves in sufficiently adapting from being enslaved to being free. Many different professionals went to the South in order to help roll out the orders that the bureau commanders requested. Field agents, officers, clerks, and medical personnel offered several forms of relief for ex-slaves, such as economic relief, promotion of educational opportunities, medical support, and standardized labor. This intervention that the bureau provided in contract negotiations operated as liaisons between White employers looking for inexpensive Black labor and ex-slaves who desperately needed economic opportunity (LeFlouria 2015). However, for some ex-slaves it was simply too late.
African American women had factors other than those that incarcerated African American men post-slavery faced, which led to their incarceration. For example, in 1896, Mattie Crawford killed her stepfather after he had repeatedly abused her. When her stepfather came into the house she took a chair and “brained him” with it. This resulted in a conviction of which she was charged with murder by a Meriwether County judge, and was then sentenced to life imprisonment in the Georgia state penitentiary (LeFloria, 2015). The history of her abuse did not come into consideration when sentencing her to life for her actions; she was still criminalized even though she was ultimately the one who was victimized. Over 100 years later similar circumstances exist in Florida. In 2012, Marissa Alexander was either incarcerated or on house arrest until she was released on January 27, 2017 (Hauser, 2017). Alexander was convicted of aggravated assault for firing a warning shot at her abusive husband. The very same defense (Stand Your Ground) that George Zimmerman was able to use in order to avoid jail time for killing Trayvon Martin, was not accepted by the judge of Alexander, even though there was a history of abuse (Hauser 2017). Intersectionality is evident in the way in which women have been and continue to be criminalized for situations that would otherwise be classified as self-defense if they were not Black. Acts of violence cannot be looked at independently of the cause that created said violence. The contextual evidence of why the crimes are committed should be at the center of the issue and not in the periphery.

Situations other than abuse can also place African American women in prison when they are indirectly involved. Peter Enns (2015) provides anecdotal evidence of just that in his recent publication on incarceration. Police officers discovered half a kilogram of cocaine stashed away in the Florida home of Stephanie George, an African American woman. George received a sentence of life without parole for her non-violent offense. This sentence was under the drug
laws that unfairly punished crack offenders more severely than they did cocaine offenders. George testified that she was unaware that her former boyfriend had hidden the drugs in her home. Her former boyfriend testified that he had paid her to store the crack. The judge concluded that his hands were tied (Enns 2015; Adwar 2014). Due to mandatory minimums, the judge was forced to sentence her as severely as he did, despite this being her first and only offense. Unfortunately, women often become an accessory to crimes that they themselves did not commit, or that they commit for fear that if they don’t, their lives and the lives of their family will be in danger (Enns 2015). Kemba Smith, calls this issue “the girlfriend problem,” she states that many times the wives and girlfriends receive more time than their significant others who are actually selling the drugs. Unluckily, this is often due to the fact that the wives and girlfriends are not the ones selling the drugs, resulting in them not having the same amount of information to give to the police (Crenshaw, 2012). Another common problem, is that they fear for their own safety and safety of their loved ones. As per The Sentencing Project’s (2016) account of Kemba Smith’s case, of which she was in an emotional and physical abusive relationship with her boyfriend, Peter Hall, of which she made several failed attempts to leave Hall. Hall was later discovered murdered, at which point the government held Smith accountable for his $4 million crack cocaine ring. The judge dismissed the domestic violence that Smith endured, evidence which could have exculpated her in this case. Crenshaw (2012) continues by pointing out that another defendant in a related case attested that his actions were due to the pressure that he felt, which ultimately led to him being acquitted. Smith’s history of abuse was not adequate in proving duress, whereas the male defendant’s distress was considered lawful; “this distinction parallels the traditional ways that violence against women that would
otherwise constitute felonious assault has been interpreted to be less significant in the context of an intimate relationship” (Crenshaw, 2012).

Crenshaw (2012) has made exemplary efforts to bring attention to the plight of Black women. Women who identified with the LBT (lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) community were particularly targeted by law enforcement trying to force and “hyperpolice”, or over-monitor, the clothing that prisoners wear (Crenshaw, 2012). In an effort to have women inmates appear more lady-like, some prisons issued more form fitting attire, which created an uncomfortable situation for those who are non-conforming. This type of policing takes the form of regulating what acceptable femininity is for women, which subjects those who do not fit that stereotype to be ignored and often oppressed. Another layer of intersectionality is recognized when “girls of color in particular that are masculine- or stud-identified or aggressive-identified are really singled out as sexual predators and hypersexual” (Crenshaw 2012).

Crenshaw (2012) goes on to discuss how different systems continue to perpetuate the ways in which these hierarchies of race, class, and gender are mirrored in prison and foster care systems and how they intersect to make an unjust inequality. The concept can be described as “structural –dynamic discrimination”, where Black women are susceptible to the family court systems grounded in their economic status, which disrupts their ability to obtain resources, and further perpetuates a stereotypical representation of Black women as bad mothers, leading to the justification of the punishment they received along with the separation of them from their family as the preferred intervention (Crenshaw 2012). Crenshaw (2012) continues in this vein by discussing how patriarchy, further perpetuates this complex by making women primarily responsible for caretaking rather than men. “For example, the economic marginality of women of color poses daunting impediments to securing shelter and accumulating assets. Yet the
centrality to domestic life that sexist norms impose on women leaves them with the main responsibility for raising and housing children” (Crenshaw, 2012). The cyclical problem continues as Enns (2015) mentions the states the astronomical costs of incarceration are derived form the children of those who are incarcerated. Research displays that it is difficult for children when they have a parent who is incarcerated. Haskins (2014), exemplifies this by showing a direct negative connection between paternal incarceration and children’s educational preparedness. There is also evidence that children who have a parent in prison have a higher chance of either being in prison or in foster care. (Foster and Hagan, 2007). Unfortunately, a large majority of parents that are incarcerated would have benefited from other interventions much rather than prison to help both them and their children. For instance, according to the Sentencing Project’s 2012 Criminal Justice Facts sheet, “9% of parents in prison were homeless in the year before the arrest leading to their current imprisonment; 20% were physically or sexually abused prior to their imprisonment; 38% do not have a high school diploma or GED; 57% have current mental health problems; 67% have a recent history of alcohol or drug abuse”. Additionally, the statistics show that 1 in 15 Black children had a parent imprisoned in 2007 as opposed to merely 1 in 111 white children. This means that Black children are 7.5 times more likely than are white children to have a parent in prison (Sentencing Project, 2012). From a policy standpoint, the less we prescribe prison as a solution to solve problems that plague society, the better off children and parents will be who are in the prison system.

Black women have a much higher likelihood to be incarcerated in comparison to their white counterparts. 1 in 18 Black women will go to prison, whereas 1 in 111 white women will end up in prison. The numbers represent a large disparity in treatment between Black and white
women, which further elucidates the troubles that incarceration presents itself for Black women, who have two intersecting identities that are often subject to oppression. In the Intersectionality Learning Circle held by the African American Policy Forum, they note the importance to note that African-American men are also incarcerated at rates that are unacceptable, however, because there is so much focus on men, African-American women are also being incarcerated at higher rates and are being rendered invisible to those who are pushing for policy reform.

More often than not, African-American women are lumped into one category that is disproportionate to other incarcerated women. In the Intersectionality Learning Circle it was mentioned how Black women are treated in a “one size fits all” manner in correctional facilities, which places them in large prisons that are made to hold and discipline violent offenders; “Within these institutions, women prisoners are often denied routine family planning services, given insufficient medical and drug treatment, as well as inadequate or nonexistent child care, educational and employment training programs.” Being that these prisoners are classified as committing violent offenses, they will even handcuff and shackle pregnant prisoners during pregnancy, labor and childbirth. Some Black women have even reported being subject to uninformed and forced sterilization (Schwarz, 2014).

As previously mentioned, for women who have children while incarcerated, there can be a real issue, specifically for Black women who lose their capability to parent. In the Intersectionality Learning Circle held by the African American Policy Forum of which the topic of discussion included that there are an estimated 64 percent of incarcerated Black women that are single mothers, unfortunately that means that while incarcerated if their children are not with other relatives, they end up in foster care. This tumultuous upbringing for many children of mothers who are incarcerated lands them into mischief, drug use and gangs. The Intersectionality
Learning Circle also stated that the cycle of crime, violence and poverty continues, as children of incarcerated parents are approximately six times more likely to be incarcerated or in need of financial assistance.

Herron Gaston (2015) from the Huffington Post, points out how poverty has a large impact on the environment that Black women have to overcome when trying to make better life choices,

One must also consider the adverse affect of inner city poverty prompted by social and economic isolation and inaccessibility. For instance, the lack of financial resources, the lack of access to quality education, the lack of sufficient health care, the lack of employment opportunities, the lack of familial support, and systemic oppression are all contributing factors in keeping women of color in a perpetual state of deficiency. (Gaston, 2015)

He notes that it is not always such a simple solution of Black women being in situations that are self-created, that there are intersecting issues and layers of oppression that result in their hardships. Gaston continues by asking for a call to action, he states the importance of institutions such as the government in demanding a change in the way we manage offenses. Ultimately, families, communities and children are better off when they are given the tools to succeed.

Another institution that puts girls and women at risk for adult incarceration are juvenile detention facilities. As per Crenshaw (2012), prosecutors will dismiss seven out of ten cases involving white girls whereas only three out of ten cases are dismissed for Black girls. There is a disproportion in criminalizing the common misconduct that adolescents have a tendency to do. Along with the varying ways in which the illegal behaviors are enforced, for instance, the status offense of curfew violations is highest in urban areas, where black and brown children tend to be located, whereas in the suburbs it is not a law that is often enforced. The nature in which some of these status laws operate appear to be counterproductive, thus creating negative outcomes that trail an arrest or detention, when in reality these youths are being punished for simply being
youthful (The Sentencing Project, 2014). The statistics show that abuse does not only affect women, but girls too. 80% of girls have reported that they were physically abused, and 77% of girls report that they were sexually abused, thus leading to violence, and criminal futures (The Sentencing Project, 2017).

Additionally, in recent years, there is more policing at schools which can often turn regular adolescent behavior into criminal behavior. For instance, according to The Sentencing Project’s article titled *Disproportionate Minority contact in the Juvenile Justice System*, children who engage in fights during lunchtime in the schoolyard, are sometimes punished for misbehaving with an assault charge (2014). There was an acknowledgement that Black students are being targeted and sent for disciplinary action at higher rates than white children which led to the Departments of Justice and Education providing guidance for school districts on how to discipline without discrimination due to race, color, or nationality (2014).

As a society we need to learn how to focus on multiple areas of social injustice without being distracted by another, or admit that we don’t care as much about women as we do about men. Black women are being arrested, abused, killed; yet they do not get nearly as much media attention as their male counterparts. If White women were being treated in the way that Black girls and women are, there is a large probability that the public outcry would be a lot louder. If we claim that Black lives matter, than that must mean all black lives, whether they be men, women, transgender, gay, atheist, or whatever other form they may take.
Chapter 3: Black Excellence: When Being a Black Man Has Benefits

“Stereotypes of a Black man misunderstood, and it’s still all good.”
- The Notorious B.I.G.

I would like to start this chapter by mentioning that there is not nearly as much research done on this topic as there are for Black men being incarcerated, and that in and of itself is telling. It seems as though the research that is being done is more prescriptive, addressing the issue after it has already manifested, much rather than proscriptive, highlighting the positives and pushing for a continuance of the commendable things that we find in the Black community. Sometimes it seems as though society is perpetuating a self-fulfilling prophecy by only focusing on the bleak circumstances that run rampant in the Black community, although extremely important, and worthy of our attention, there should be an equal amount of acknowledgement of the circumstances that allow Black boys and men who flourish.

According to the College Board’s literature titled: Transforming the Educational Experience of Young Men of Color, some believe that the constant mention of Black men not being successful creates a stigma that lowers the expectations of the educators who directly influence Black boy’s trajectory in life. Additionally, it is the schools and institutions responsibility to ensure that all students are being given equal opportunity to reach their potential. When we view this from a social justice perspective, it is institutions that must utilize parents and guardians as the valuable resource’s that they are, much rather than as part of the problem. Blaming parents and guardians is not advantageous to the success of the child. As per the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, there are three necessary steps that schools must follow in order to bridge the divide with parents.

1. Provide parents with information and skills to support their children’s education.
2. Coordinate community programming that meets the needs and issues that students and families encounter.
3. Recognize the rights of parents — and their fundamental competence — to share in school decision making.

As we push for initiatives such as these, Black boys can receive the proper foundation to propel forward academically towards more positive outcomes. It is important that Black boys grow into confident, Black men who do not feel inadequate.

Often, Black boys are given negative labels, whether it be from their community, their loved ones, or the media, they may start to identify with the undesirable traits that are given to them. To further assist them in embracing the intersectionality that their race and gender converge to form, it is essential that we encourage them to tap in to how great they actually can be. *Transforming the Educational Experience of Young Men of Color* says “…the creation and management of fresh symbols has the power to shift perceptions of black males from problems to be fixed to human beings in possession of the full right to pursue academic success and effect change in their own voice.” A few suggestions The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center presents are identifying what goals they have and giving them the tools to reach those goals, teach them how to invest in their futures, and mold the way that they value themselves.

Poor families deserve the same recognition as families that are middle class or wealthy when it comes to the education of the children who are directly affected. The issue of inequality is complex and must be coordinated on multiple levels to ensure that children receive the help that they require. Community outreach is an important and useful tool to facilitate support for the mission of supporting children that may be underprivileged, however government-funded institutions can often act as a catalyst to ensure that concerted efforts are executed in a timely fashion. The Obama administration was the source of a number of efforts that worked to revitalize poor, under resourced neighborhoods by expanding “ladders of opportunity” for youth of color examples include, Choice and Promise Neighborhoods, Promise Zones, and the Strong
Cities (Hwang, Quane and Wilson, 2015). The communities that are affected by poverty often seek initiatives that allow families and the community to strengthen their bond in order to improve the in-school and extracurricular experiences for children who are enrolled in school. As part of the Education Next series discussing the state of the American family, the authors speak to the education of children from impoverished neighborhoods is important, “Building on neighborhood-empowerment efforts dating from the 1960s, these initiatives seek to create enhanced social contexts that extend choice-making capacity and practical opportunities to act on them” (Hwang, Quane and Wilson, 2015). The push for collaborations that will help motivate the community holds a potential that is unprecedented and important to the growth of these children.

There are several outstanding organizations that are a part of the movement to help develop and promote constructive outcomes for Black boys and men. The Question Bridge aims to defy the common depiction of Black males through popular culture and predominant stereotypes about how a Black male should operate based off of their race and gender. Question Bridge challenges the concept of “Blackness”, as it is not a simple concept that can define an entire group of people, because every person is their own individual with potential that far surpasses the poor implicit biases and stereotypes that exist (Thomas, 2013).

Another exemplary project that aims to highlight the positives that Black boys and men have to offer is The Black Male Identity (BMI) project, located in Baltimore, Maryland. BMI can be described as an influential illustration of a campaign that is run citywide and is very successful. Transforming the Educational Experience of Young Men of Color highlights BMI as an organization that centers exclusively on the power of symbolism. The National Campaign for Black Male Achievement provided funding that helped to create BMI. The objective was conceived as a method to construct a model within Baltimore in order to facilitate ways to
combat the negative narrative and stereotypes that suppress high levels of achievement for Black boys and men within the community. BMI has been successful as a result of dedicated public and private school educators playing a crucial role by lending their classrooms to alternative channels of engagement, such as “community-based artists committed to coexploring black male youth identity in all of its complexity, resulting in an expanded framework for supporting black male achievement” (Transforming the Educational Experience of Young Men of Color).

The issues and the efforts of young Black boys and men are not absent of acknowledgement form the very group it directly impacts. According to the Survey Snapshot: Views and Experiences of Young Black Men by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2006), the most prevalent problem is that “young black men [are] not taking their education seriously enough”. The hardships of the Black community are evident in the personal difficulties that Black men note: three-quarters say that either they, a close friend or a family member have been in prison, and two-thirds say that they have a close friend or relative was murdered (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006). These obstacles are important to mention, because many Black boys and men overcome the odds that are stacked against them and are triumphant by societal standards.

There are a number of Black men who are noteworthy as extremely successful despite the ways in which society has tried to hinder them. Ta-Nehisi Coates is weaved throughout the entirety of this thesis, not only for the riveting and enigmatic words he uses to describe Black men and women, but also because he is a great example of someone who overcame odds to be a leading figure in the Black community. The winner of the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work - Biography/Auto-biography in 2016, Coates is considered extremely successful and well known in the literature world, however, life was not always easy. In The Beautiful Struggle (2009), Coates details his life growing up as an adolescent in inner city
Baltimore during the 1980s. As a child who was one of seven, Coates was a self-described nerdy kid who had to master the art of making it through an unstable decade in Baltimore -- the age of crack, which was when murder was at extremely high levels. While all that was going on within the community, Coates still was able to become a model Black man that did well for himself and his family. Further proving that although it is not always an easy road, there are those who lead successful lives.

We have examined the struggle that have plagued the Black man, however, that is not always the case. Although it is important to bear witness to the oppression that the intersection of identifying as a male and identifying as Black brings, we must note that Black men are otherwise thriving. There tends to be a lot of focus on the difficulties they face, justifiably so, but I think it is also important to reframe the way we look at Black men. By doing so, I think that we can also put an end to the self-fulfilling prophecies of Black men and boys being un-teachable and easily ignored.

Although the mass incarceration problem is large and very much real, there is an inherent issue with comparing college vs. prison. Black men, along with those of other races can be incarcerated at a much larger range of time, which is essentially at any point in their lives for any length of time, whereas the typical age of enrollment in college happens during a more narrow age range and a short timespan. The point being that this comparison is a faulty one, and somewhat unnecessary. Yes, incarceration is an issue, but it is a separate one from college enrollment, and should be treated as such (Desmond-Harris, 2015).
Source: http://www.vox.com/2015/2/12/8020959/black-men-prison-college

It is important that this topic be discussed, and further researched. The disparity between discussing Black men and boys being incarcerated vs Black men and boys gaining an education and should be examined. There is an unequal amount of attention between the two topics, and the natural way to transition from speaking about Black men in prison is to think about the next step, and how we can use programs, outreach and activism to bring about the change we wish to see. The topics are very nuanced and not as binary as the media makes it out to be.
Chapter 4: Black Girl Magic: When Being a Black Female has Benefits

“All my life I’d heard people tell their black boys and black girls to ‘be twice as good,’ which is to say ‘accept half as much.’”
-Ta-Nehisi Coates

Since Slavery African American women also had to deal with hardships and continue to do so to this day. However, African American women seem to fare better on paper. One in four black men are and will be incarcerated, which often leaves black women to supplement their presence with added responsibility. Black women are enrolled in college and obtain higher education degrees at a rate that surpasses all other demographics The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (2010). I examine these phenomena from an intersectional standpoint. Despite the pain that so many African Americans dealt with as a people, one cannot help but notice the difference in outcomes between black men and women. Black men end up incarcerated at a rate that is disproportionate to their counterparts of other races, whereas women experience the opposite, attending and completing higher education at a rate that is unparalleled to their female counterparts of other races. Why is this happening? What is it about the intersectionality of the two identities: being a man and being black that results in mass incarceration? And, conversely, what about the two identities of being a woman and black that leads them to successful paths?

Education appears to be the most significant difference between these two intersectionalities. An imperative factor to black women doing well in the educational arena, and thereafter, is being able to see other women of color in those positions of power. When women have the proper mentors, or role models in the fields that they wish to enter, it helps to shatter the effects of the inequalities of intertwining systems of oppression. The complete implementation and understanding of Intersectionality is to address institutional change and have it applied to remedy these very issues.
Olivia Davidson made a compelling speech in 1886 before the Alabama Teacher’s Association that was pushing members to go into the ghetto regions of the towns and country, where their black sisters who were low-income were located to “spread the light of knowledge and the gospel of cleanliness” (LeFlouria, 2015). The purpose of this push for helping the less fortunate black women of their towns was to help them present themselves better, along with show them how to care for themselves and their hygiene. In addition to straightening up their appearances, black women were given lessons about how to raise children, how to keep a clean home, and to discard their careless ways and be better examples for the Black youth. They were trying to make it known that the children are the future of the community and race, and that they look to the older generation for guidance and as examples. In an effort to dismay any bad habits that they may form as a result of the negative environments they might be in (LeFlouria, 2015). This helped to propel Black children down the path of higher moral standards, and education.

African Americans across the board continue to excel in higher education, as they strive to break the barriers that were made for them. Detailing a list of statistics, The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (2010) stated that in 1993 African Americans obtained 65,338 bachelor’s degrees. As of 2010 African Americans have earned 146,653 bachelor’s degrees on an annual basis, which is an increase of more than 124%. Additionally, the number of African American students to have a master’s degree has quadrupled from only 16,136 in 1993 to 62,574 in 2010.

Women have fought tirelessly for their right to an equal education. In 1862 Mary Jane Patterson was the first African American woman to earn a Bachelor’s of Arts degree. Fast forward to present day: within each racial or ethnic group, in 2009-2010, at each level, women have earned the majority of degrees at all levels of higher education. For instance, according to the US Department of Education (2012), “Black females earned 68 percent of associate’s
degrees, 66 percent of bachelor's degrees, 71 percent of master's degrees, and 65 percent of all doctor's degrees awarded to Black students. Hispanic females earned 62 percent of associate's degrees, 61 percent of bachelor's degrees, 64 percent of master's degrees, and 55 percent of all doctor's degrees awarded to Hispanic students.” Please see Figure 2 below for a detailed percentage distribution by race and gender from 1999 – 2010.

**Figure 3: Bachelor’s Degrees awarded to Black people vs Other Races**

![Bachelor's Degrees statistics](image)


Black women and girls are making leaps and bounds in ways that are highly recognizable and imperative to the growth of well-regarded fields. For example, Tiera Guinn, a 22-year-old MIT student, who will be graduating with a 5.0 GPA works with NASA even though she has yet to graduate. She is a Rocket Structural Design and Analysis Engineer for the Space Launch System (Hill, 2017).
Representation is imperative to furthering the development of African American women enrolled in institutions of higher education and in positions within academia. It is both critical and necessary for African American women to advance within their fields, as it provides encouragement, unity, and mentorship to see women who look like you mastering their respective fields (Smooth, 2016). Different conferences and groups create spaces that help to facilitate the unity mentioned. For instance, Rutgers University sponsored a conference in 2009 called *Black Women Academics in the Ivory Tower*. The *Inclusive Illinois: Women of Color in the Academy* is another annual conference that begets mentorship and sisterhood. A sisterhood that is well known is Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA), which was founded at Howard University as the first Black sorority for Black college women (JPHE, 2017). Although there have been several pushes for more inclusivity on an institutional level throughout history, the efforts continue which is exactly what intersectionality is interested in shifting.

Wendy Smooth (2016) introduces both the concept and goals of intersectionality and its relation to the black woman’s plight: “In addition to recognizing the differences that exist among individuals and groups, intersectionality is invested in modes of institutional change and designed to remedy the effects of inequalities produced by interlocking systems of oppression” (Smooth, 2016). It is also critical for those who may not have the same intersecting identities to realize their agency within academia and act as allies to those who are not as privileged. Those who face less discrimination should not stand idly by to the oppression of others, but should lend a helping hand and advocate for those who may have less agency. “Even in our efforts to engage in social change, we are most capable of organizing our energies toward alleviating our own oppressions, all the while overlooking the oppressions of the other” (Smooth, 2016; Collins, 1991).
Choo and Ferree (2010) emphasize the importance of incorporating the standpoints of multiply-marginalized people and the inequality they face.

...Especially women of color; an analytic shift from addition of multiple independent strands of inequality toward a multiplication and thus transformation of their main effect into interactions; and a focus on seeing multiple institutions as overlapping in their co-determination of inequalities to produce complex configurations from the start rather than ‘extra’ interactive processes that are added onto main effects. (Choo and Ferree, 2010)

Here we see the emphasis placed on establishing the varying ways in which one might be oppressed. It is imperative to analyze oppression through its interaction within the social world and through its connection of overlapping identities, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class, disability, etc.

Maria Guerra created a comprehensive fact sheet published with the Center for American Progress (2013), which details the positive influence Black women have in society:

- African American women earned more than half of all science and engineering degrees completed by African Americans—surpassing their male counterparts.
- African American-owned businesses are the fastest-growing segment of the women-owned business market and are starting up at a rate six times higher than the national average.
- The number of companies started by African American women grew nearly 258 percent from 1997 to 2013.
- The number of African American women-owned businesses in 2013 was estimated at 1.1 million, comprising 42 percent of businesses owned by women of color and 49 percent of all African American-owned businesses.
- African American women-owned businesses employed 272,000 workers and generated $44.9 billion in revenue in 2013.
- Of the top 10 fastest-growing private companies owned by black entrepreneurs from 2009 to 2012, only 27 percent were owned by black women.

Black women are exemplary in many ways, whether it is education or entrepreneurship, they have an increasing and unparalleled propensity to thrive. In less than ten years African American women expanded the rate at which they became their own bosses by 258 percent when starting
their own company. Black women are generating jobs at high rates and contributing millions of dollars in revenue to the economy. The statistics above show the advancements that Black women have made despite the ways in which society continues to hold them back.

A few highlights of times in history when women were successful and excelled in academia and employment was provided by JBHE (2017). In 1945, Adelaide Cromwell returns to her alma mater, Smith College, in Northampton Massachusetts, where she joins the Sociology department as the first black faculty member at a highly selective liberal arts college. Lila Fenwick becomes the first Black woman to graduate from Harvard Law School in 1956. She later went on to lead the United Nations’ Human Rights Division. In 2007, Danielle Allen joins the Institute for Advanced Study as the first African American to be appointed to the permanent faculty. These are but a few instances of which exemplary Black women have exuded Black girl magic, a term coined in 2013 by CaShawn Thompson to shine light on Black girls and women who persevere despite the adversity they face in society. The hashtag started as #BlackGirlsAreMagic, becoming a viral showing how successful Black women truly are, ranging from “Selma” and “13th” director, Ava DuVernay, or friends appreciating one another’s accomplishments through social media (Thomas, 2015).

Black women are setting the tone for success on multiple fronts. Coates’ quote that opens this chapter is a lesson that Black women had to learn early and never forgot. Success is not something that comes easily to a Black woman, but it is earned. It may not be represented at every level of their accomplishments, and no matter how far Black women have come, they still have a long way to go, but every step forward is a step in the right direction.
Conclusion: The Manifesto of The Modern-Day Abolitionist

We have reviewed the ways in which racial and sexual injustice manifests, now I would like to analyze in what ways we can take action in order to beget the change that we so desperately need to see. Engaging in activism does not have to be hard or one-size fits all. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) created a list for educators titled: “10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism,” to utilize and inspire activism in its different forms. The first tip they give is to educate those around you about what you think is important. “As students learn about an issue they care about, their natural instinct is to share their new knowledge and insight with others”. To further encourage some ones enthusiasm about fighting an injustice, talking to others and teaching them about why this topic needs their attention too. We can also utilize the different outlets of sharing this information with one another by sharing it creatively though their writing, acting, or artwork. It is also important to accept opposition, and that not everyone will have the same point of view as you, and that we can explore our own thoughts by having a stimulating conversation with others.

Another method of actively participating in the resistance of social injustice is to fight for change in legislation. The ADL gives an example of young advocates doing just that, from the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act that was originally introduced to congress in 2001. The passion that young adults have for issues that directly impact their lives and futures can often act as an accelerator for analyzing and proposing new laws. Finding encouragement by banning together with others who feel compassionate about the same issues can create coalitions and writing groups that send letters to legislators (“10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism,” n.d.).
For those who want to take a more hands on approach, running for office is another way to implement your ideals and impact how the government operates. The ADL says that by joining government “It gives youth the experience to reflect on and consolidate their own positions on important school issues, learn how to communicate those positions, build relationships with others and become a good listener in understanding constituent’s needs.” An additional method to be active in activism is to join protests and demonstrations. When we are able to express ourselves and meet and connect with others who are also involved in these issues, it can be both empowering and enlightening. It can also get the wheels in motion for thinking of next steps to pushing the social justice initiative you are fighting for. This can be an individual endeavor that allows you to discover what you hope to gain from this experience, or you can organize a group of friends to join you in preparation for the demonstration, thus creating a sense of community and unity. The ADL also advises us to use social media to our advantage. Creating public awareness through our most used and highly trafficked sources is a very valuable resource. Creating videos and using the “live” function on a lot of social media websites, informative videos, blogs, memes, or online petitions can create quick effective action.

Additionally we can raise funds for the issues we are interested in. Fighting social injustice is not always free; therefore, organizing ways in which to finance your movement is key to backing the cause. Selling items, sponsoring events, holding auctions, and more are all ways that money can be earned to help fight social injustices. You can also donate your time by volunteering and engaging in community service. In addition to organizing and advocating on a large scale, being encouraged to help bring about change locally is a great way to be active about issues we care about. The ADL states that “serving the people who are directly impacted
gives young people firsthand knowledge of the situation, deepens their understanding and builds empathy”. Writing letters to companies that further institutionalize ideals that are not in line with the injustices that you are fighting for, writing to the company can help change the unfair or biased way in which they operate. ADL provides the following example of what we can do to impact change, “if students want to change the ways toy companies use gender role stereotypes to package and sell their toys or games, have them write letters to toy or video game companies and explain why they think their practices are biased”. The final piece of advice that ADL provides for fighting for a cause you care about is to utilize the press as a resource. Publicity can amplify the message you are trying to send, it can get more people concerned about the social injustices you care about and can potentially have a bigger impact. Interviewing people, writing an op-ed piece, or a press release can be a good way to sharpen their message and broadcast it to a larger group of people.

A great example of someone who used several of these tools in order to change the landscape of the social injustices he saw is Jesse Williams. Williams is an individual who has been a spokesperson for the Black community by being active in his human rights efforts for years. He recently received acclaim from BET for the excellent work he does when he was awarded BET’s Humanitarian Award in 2016. He starts his acceptance speech by thanking the Debra Lee, the president of BET for the nomination, along with his parents for their guidance and the values they instilled in him from a young age. He continues by acknowledging others who keep the movement alive and speak out about the injustices faced by Black people. Below is a short excerpt from his acceptance speech.

This is for the real organizers all over the country - the activists, the civil rights attorneys, the struggling parents, the families, the teachers, the students that are realizing that a system built to divide and impoverish and destroy us cannot stand if we do. It's kind of basic mathematics - the more we learn about who
we are and how we got here, the more we will mobilize. Now, this is also in particular for the black women in particular who have spent their lifetimes dedicated to nurturing everyone before themselves...Tell Rekia Boyd how it's so much better that it is to live in 2012 than it is to live in 1612 or 1712. Tell that to Eric Garner...Sandra Bland...Dorian Hunt... (Lasher, n.d.)

Williams continues by critiquing the capitalistic way in which Black people have supported the United States, yet fail to get the respect they deserve. He speaks to the idea that whiteness is simply a fabricated construct that takes advantage of Black people by appropriating their culture. Often deeming Black culture as ghetto, and belittling Black people’s ideas, Williams referred to it as “gentrifying our genius and then trying us on like costumes before discarding our bodies like rinds of strange fruit” (Lasher, n.d.). Coinciding with the Black Lives Matter, and the Black Girls are Magic movement he concludes his revolutionary acceptance speech by stating, “…the thing is that just because we're magic doesn't mean we're not real” (Lasher, n.d.). Williams may have gotten a lot of attention for his groundbreaking speech, but he has been fighting for racial justice long before he received the well-deserved acclaim and award at the BET awards in 2016.

Williams sits on the board of directors for a non-profit organization founded by civil-rights attorneys called the Advancement Project. He also starred in and was the executive Producer for a documentary titled, “Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement” (Butler and Izadi, 2016). Williams is not only a figurehead, he has joined other activists during rallies, marching side by side with those who are pushing for change. He advocates for change and to put an end to the school-to-prison pipeline of people of color, along with police reform and accountability (Butler and Izadi, 2016).

It is important to be apart of the change that we wish to see. In order for police brutality, mass incarceration, and negative implicit biases to end, we must resist. The movement is now, we can no longer allow innocent Black men and women to be targeted due to the color of their
skin, or because of their class. There is great strength in numbers, and we are beginning to realize just that. Resistance is key #BlackLivesMatter.
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