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ABSTRACT

The power of Black women is discussed in terms of their progress in society so far, their current predicaments, and possibilities for the future. The progress of Black women is seen in their survival, the greater numbers of Black women in nontraditional roles, and the competence and qualities with which they perform in those roles. Four predicaments are seen in the current situation for Black women: (1) Black female-headed households live in poverty not because they are headed by females, but because Black women and children often live in poverty with or without a male present; the issue is not household arrangements, but inequality based on gender, race and class: (2) integration has failed Black women; (3) the women's movement has been relatively silent on Black women's empowerment; and (4) affirmative action in higher education has not worked for Black women and the assumption that Black women are readily marketable because they are both black and female is a myth. Possibilities are seen in the motivation to overcome social class boundaries, the cultural experiences that allow for greater role flexibility and sharing of responsibilities among men and women, and the affinity of Black women with other people of color in the Third World as well as in the United States. Amid correct demands that society fulfill the promise of the Constitution, Black women must advocate for their own empowerment. Contains 42 references. (KM)

ASSOCIATION OF BLACK WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION, INC.

Tenth Anniversary Conference Keynote Address

May 5, 1988

THE POWER OF BLACK WOMEN: Progress, Predicaments, and Possibilities

By VALORA WASHINGTON

THE ASSOCIATION

The Association of Black Women in Higher Education (ABWHE) is a national membership organization whose mission is:

1. to promote the intellectual growth and educational development of Black women in higher education.

2. to seek to eliminate racism, sexism, classism and other social barriers which hinder Black women in higher education from achieving their human potential,

3. to communicate the history, personal and professional achievements and contributions of Black women in higher education in order to help preserve the presence of Blacks in higher education,

4. to provide academic and social mentoring for Black youth in order to insure a future generation of Blacks in higher education, and

5. to utilize our talents, strengths and expertise to advance a vision of social justice.

Association of Black Women in Higher Education, Inc.
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I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins
My soul has grown deep like rivers.
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusty rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

We have gathered here to celebrate the power of Black women. To talk about ourselves, to name ourselves, to connect with each other.

I begin sharing my thoughts with you today by reading Langston Hughes classic poem because I want us to begin by connecting with the image of Black women bathing in the Euphrates when dawns were young, being lulled to sleep near the Congo, and looking upon the Nile.

This is a very real vision, it is our vision, we connect with it.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

We are sisters, Black women shaping our collective destiny through individual callings to labor in the field of higher education. For all of us some of the time, and for some of us most of the time, this calling feels very different from a bubble bath in the Euphrates. As Black women—as Black people—we are living in a time when the doors of access, opportunity, and success in higher education are being closed; fewer Black students and professors are entering American colleges and universities and success often seems elusive to those who dare to enter (see Washington and Harvey, 1988).

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

We have all come here to celebrate and to learn and to be renewed but we have arrived here from different paths. Some of us are experiencing a particular joy that comes from knowing that we are making a difference to some students, faculty or workers in your institution. Others of us have come here as a means to be restored and strengthened for the struggle we are waging to survive as learners, teachers and employees in institutions of higher education.

Whatever path brought us here, while we are here, it is important that we connect with each other and with the visions we have inherited. I believe that we feel most defeated when we allow our vision to be dominated by this particular historical moment, by the voices heard only in our lifetime. We are strengthened by connections with "rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins." For, as Lerone Bennett (1972) has stated, she who controls images controls minds and she who controls minds, has little or nothing to fear from bodies.

INTRODUCTION

This morning I want to share with you my image of "The Power of Black Women." We have made progress. Still, we are confronted daily with a myriad of predicaments, hopes and expectations. They contribute to the tradition of active resistance to the oppressive forces which have dominated our experience in the United States (see Davis, 1983).

As long time survivors of the triple jeopardies of racism, sexism, and relative poverty, Black women are objects of curiosity, observed and judged by a host of other people. Black poets have tended to idolize us as standard bearers, as those who have sown the seeds of faith and love in the midst of suffering (see Burgher, 1979; Wade-Gayles, 1980; Washington, M., 1975). In contrast, the microscopic images of empirical studies, clinical observations, and educational analysis accuse us of being social defects, deviant and deficient (see Washington, V. in press; Rodgers-Rose, 1980).

Whether revered or despised, the circumstances of our history have required exceptional valor among the most common of women. Yet our courage and resourcefulness have been obscured by the now familiar demographic profiles that find us at the bottom of almost any social indicator including health, employment, income, or education (Woloch, 1984; Dairty and Myers, 1984; Children's Defense Fund, 1985).

The strengths of Black women may seem remote to scientists and public opinion makers for other reasons as well. These "well-informed" Americans are often physically and socially segregated from us as well as being psychologically distant. We are aliens to be read about and discussed in seminars. Through all the volumes of analyzes about us, our own voices are still faint or omitted altogether.

Even though the situation is improving, there is still a scandalous paucity of scientific work about Black women by Black women. The number of Black women engaged in the scientific process has remained small; Blacks are seriously underrepresented among graduate and professional school students (The College Board, 1985). Compounding this tragedy is the fact that Black women, economically and politically oppressed as a group, have been unable to shape or influence widespread myths and assertions about us.

Studying Black women is a formidable and challenging task. The task draws on many fields such as psychology, economics, sociology, and literature. Understanding Black women is further complicated by the fact that our existence in the United States has been under conditions of social instability, societal discontinuity, and rapid social change (see Steady, 1981; Allen and Farley, 1986).

Also, as we well know, Black women are not a monolithic group. While there is considerable evidence for common personality patterns and world views based on history, culture, and social circumstances (see Jones, 1972; Hale, 1982), it is time to move toward an ecological and liberating perspective on Black women.

In attempting to analyze the power, progress, predicaments, and possibilities for Black women, one immediately confronts grave misconceptions, outright distortions of fact, and defensive attitudes (Joseph & Lewis, 1981; Rodgers-Rose, 1980; Woloch, 1984). The destructive influences of capitalism, racism, sexism, and the media have combined to define an image of womanhood cleverly fashioned so that only a few Black women could ever be expected to attain it. But, because a few do attain this particular image, they are used to support the idea that the image is generally valid, which it is not. We are called to continually reject these images and values and to bear witness to the question Sojourner Truth asked at a Women's Rights Convention in the nineteenth century:

Ain't I a woman?

Most of us have "not plowed, and planted and gathered into barns" as Sojourner Truth did, but we sing with her when she declares "I could work as much as a man...and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and ain't I a woman?"

THE POWER OF BLACK WOMEN: PROGRESS

Discussion of the progress of Black women must clearly be stated in the context of value and images which are our own—not in the mirror of the dominant culture's values. As we move to fill new roles, and to create new roles, we must bring with us our own ethos, our own particularity. The interests of Black people are not served by windowdressing or by having "representative" Black people without Afrocentric perspectives in positions of leadership and authority. This is not to suggest that we must fulfill the popular stereotypes of Black particularity, but that we are called to continually create and re-create the authenticity of Black particularity. We must affirm that we are a people who value people above all else (Mbiti, 1970).

To begin, I would like to borrow a line from the movie *The Color Purple*. The power of Black women is illustrated beautifully as Celie is finally leaving her situation. Having weathered a barrage of assaults to her dignity, and judgments that she is destined to fail, she responds simply, "I'm still here."

I'm still here. And WE ARE still here.

And the world is different because we are here. We have never been an idle presence. We have never been an idle presence. We have moved from being nannies to become negotiators, and the truest measure of our progress must be in terms that highlight the values inherent in our negotiations as well as our results.

The progress of Black women must be measured not only by the numbers of us who fill certain institutional roles, but, perhaps most significantly, by *how* we fill those roles, by what we bring to those roles that would be absent if we were absent. The progress of Black women, as Black women, is the measure of how well or how poorly this nation has been able to accommodate the unique perspectives of those once defined as inferior because we are Black, and unstable because we are women.

We have already demonstrated that we are competent. We are presidents and vice-presidents of major colleges and universities. We are teachers and researchers. We are contributors in virtually every field of human knowledge. We have excelled as scientists in explaining the world, and we have excelled as humanists in giving that world meaning. And the quality of our contributions evidences neither inferiority of mind nor instability of purpose.

Because we are a people who value people, the progress of Black women can never be fully understood by looking at Black women alone. We must examine the lives of those around us. We must look at the lives of our immediate, extended, and fictive kin, as well as the lives of those we encounter in our communities and in our institutional roles. It is in the quality of these lives that our success is most accurately reflected, and it is here that our values must be most vigorously affirmed. Our task is not simply to educate the white world regarding our abilities, but to create a Black world in which these abilities become significant.

I will not maintain that we are *essentially* mothers, but I do want to point out that we are *also* mothers. And in that sense, we pass on to coming generations the meaning, the ontological significance of *being* a Black person. Despite the increasing pace of social change, our children continue to reflect the values which they receive in their home communities. They are truly our lines into the future. We are their link from the Euphrates to an unknown future. Our connection to a common past and our allegiance to a viable future helps our own lives find their real meaning. Any sense of progress must address *both* of these concerns.

THE POWER OF BLACK WOMEN: PREDICAMENTS

In order to effectively move ourselves and our children into the future, we must confront several major impediments to power. There are many paradoxes that can be raised in any discussion of the power of Black women. I want to raise four of them:

- The claim that Black women are so dominant and powerful, that we can be blamed for the persistence of poverty and other "failures" of the Black population;
- the failure of integration to appreciably multiply the power of Black women;
- the general silence of the women's movement on Black women's empowerment; and
- the backlash in affirmative action in higher education and the contrast between the myth and the reality that Black women are prime hires, a "bonus" minority because we are both women and Black.

The overwhelming component of Black poverty occurs in families headed by women. This fact has led to several theoretical models which essentially blame "Black martriarchs" for the condition of Black people. Although there have been numerous critiques of this image of our power, the image of structurally dysfunctional, woman-dominated households has remained a strong theme in discussion about Black women. Incidentally, this theme was advanced by both Black and white scholars, such as E. Franklin Frazier (1932, 1939) and Patrick Moynihan (1965, 1986) Thomas Sowell (1981) and Charles Murray (1984).

The "tangle of pathology" that Moynihan articulated found its way into both political and social science rhetoric. The primary focus of this notion is that culture and human capital deficits, such as poor work habits or lack of training, explain the powerlessness of persistent poverty among Black women and their children and families (see Moynihan, 1965).

What we must all recognize is that the trend toward female-headed households is a relatively new phenomenon, but Black, and Black female poverty is not (see Darity and Myers, 1984). A 1985 study by Mary Jo Bane found that two-thirds of Blacks living in female-headed households were already poor before a change put them in a female-headed household. The emphasis on female-headed households misses an essential truth about Black women and poverty and power: with or without a male present, there is a strong likelihood that Black women and children will be living in poverty in America today. Household arrangements are not the issue. The issue is inequality based on gender, race and class.

Robert Staples (1970) calls the Black matriarchy theory a "cruel hoax" since Black women are economically exploited because we are both Black and female, and because of the shortage of Black males. The stereotype of the domineering Black woman is in ironic contrast to the masses of Black women who constitute a defenseless group against white racism in its most virulent sexual and economic manifestations.

Black women, on the other hand, have not been passive objects who have been satisfied to sit back and watch their menfolk make history (see Rodgers-Rose, 1980). The highly functional role that we have had to play in both our families and in society has given us a sense of power, a sense of who we are (see Nobles, 1974A, B; Cazenave, 1983; Scanzoni, 1971; Mack, 1974; Joseph and Lewis, 1981; Allen, 1985).

"We can see how white male scientists and policymakers and

educators, contrasting our lives to those that they have expected of their women, found the roles of Black women difficult to comprehend. In a possible projection of the ego damage these white males would feel under similar circumstances, they readily presumed and scientifically concluded that the status of Black males and the Black family was being undermined by domineering Black women.

A second predicament of our power is what Paula Giddings (1984) calls *the failure of integration*. Integration seems to have resulted in the invisibility and assimilation of Blacks rather than into a society that self-consciously recognizes the value and integrity of racial ethnic groups and their cultures. Integration has been associated with the closing of Black colleges, or changing Black colleges into "multi-cultural"/white institutions while predominantly white colleges and universities admit even *FEWER* Blacks than they did a decade ago. Integration is associated with higher proportions of nonblacks teaching Black children, and with discriminatory or ineffective treatment of Black children (Arnez, 1978; Bell, 1980A, 1980B; Cornbleth and Korth, 1980), but not with more Black teachers (Cole, 1986; Anrig, 1986), an important factor in black achivement (Banks, McQuarter and Hubbard, 1978; Beady and Hansell, 1981). Integration is associated with fewer Black professors and administrators in both historically Black and predominately white universities (see Washington and Harvey, in press).

A third predicament is the relative *silence of the women's movement on Black women's empowerment*. Most of us clearly recognize the strong impact of sexism on our lives. Indeed, Black women have a great deal to profit from equal rights for women. For example, comparable worth would be a boon to Black women. Women are generally segregated in low paying, secondary jobs but Black women are highly concentrated in the lowest paying and lowest status women's work, from nurse's aide to private household worker. Paula Giddings (1984) points out that because racism and sexism are motivated by similar economic, social, and political forces, it is only logical that those who seek to undermine Blacks have historically been the most virulent antifeminists.

But as Angela Davis (1971) and others have shown, white feminists have, since the beginning, too often acquiesced to racist ideology, effectively undermining our common cause. White feminists are infected with the disease of facism in the same homes and schools which infect white men (see Joseph and Lewis, 1981).

Many white feminists have envied the role, value, and economic importance of Black women to their families. Yet, aside from theoretical plaudits to the concept of gender equality, few women of any race envy the LIVES of Black women. Our so-called liberation has been rooted in hardship, suffering, circumstance and freedom FROM choice (Washington, Valora, in press).

The relationship between race and gender is a fundamental question which appears to be "on hold." This question must be addressed because, in my view, Black women will play a pivotal role in the success of both the struggle for Black liberation and for women's rights. Neither struggle can proceed effectively without us.

Also, we Black women have our own feminist homework to do. We need to investigate and think carefully about how we relate to each other, why we have not made strong commitments to the feminist movement, how the nature of our struggle is changing, and how we can or should relate to the white feminist structure.

The final predicament that I will discuss today involves *affirmative action,* or what my colleague and I call "affirmative rhetoric" (see Washington and Harvey, in press). A commonly held assumption is the Black women are readily marketable because employers get two affirmative action "credits" when we are hired. Since affirmative action is largely viewed as an erosion of employment or academic standards, this "two-for-one" rhetoric also serves to give a cryptic view of how others really view our worth.

These assertions about the employability of Black women have not held under close scrutiny. While white women in higher education have advanced in the past decade, women of color have not. The number of Black women in administrative and faculty positions has actually declined. Those at the bottom of the professorial ladder—in number hired, in rank, and in comparable salaries—are Hispanic and Black women (see Washington and Harvey, in press).

Despite the prevailing folklore that they "can't find any" when it comes to hiring Black faculty, the availability pool argument does not fully explain the absence of our voices. For example, fewer Black scholars entered the professorial ranks in 1979 than in 1975 although the number of full-time faculty positions increased by more than 5,000 and the number of Blacks receiving PhD's increased by more than 200 (see Harvey and Scott-Jones, 1985).

"Affirmative rhetoric, negative action" justly characterizes the impact of affirmative action on Black women at predominate' · white four-year colleges and universities in the United States. Racial and sexual inequality in academe is likely to persist as long as a regulation/compliance approach is considered sufficient evidence of afirmative action commitment (Washington and Harvey, in press).

THE POWER OF BLACK WOMEN: POSSIBILITIES

Historically, the broad experiences of Black women were similar. We have been the symbolic guardians of faith and ethnic identity. Typically, we have also been wives and workers who saw our potential reduced by the unyielding walls of segregation and discrimination. With our men, we prepared our children to endure the limited present but to be ready for unlimited possibilties. For Black women, whether educated or uneducated, middle-class or poor—our foremost goal has been to attain the rights of citizenship set forth in the Constitution of the United States. Our problem was the failure of the government to safeguard our freedom.

Since the 1960's, many civil rights hurdles have been overcome. These rights resulted in employment and educational opportunities that boosted many Black women into the middle-class. At the same time, changes in the American economy have reduced the need for unskilled or semiskilled Black workers, particularly males. As evident in the earlier discussion on the persistence of poverty, the consequences for Black family life have been devastating (Darity and Myers, 1984).

As we approach the 21st century, the experiences of Black women will be widely divergent. Those women who are highly skilled or married to men with sophisticated training will see their incomes increase and their children prosper. On the other hand, poor, single or adolescent mothers are likely o be come increasingly alienated and distant from mainstream American life (see Darity and Myers, 1984; Children's Defense Fund, 1985; Auletta, 1982).

Whereas the Black underclass becomes more deeply rooted in poverty, the Black working class, formerly the backbone of the Black community, faces an increasing challenge to maintain economic self-sufficiency. Moreover, the children of the working class, impatient with the pace of racial progress, often have little desire or motivation for the blue-collar work of their parents (Darity and Myers, 1984).

Further compounding these difficulties is the differential birthrates between middle-class and poor Black women. It is the poorest Black women who carry the heaviest responsibility for having and raising Black children. The Black women of the underclass appear to be the only segment of the Black population that shows evidence of commitment to childbearing. Yet these women have the least resources and they are obliged to nurture the new generations in nontraditional settings. Moreover, their motives for childbearing are most frequently impugned in discussions among policymakers about the consequences of the existing structure of social transfer payments (Darity and Myers, 1984).

The psychological and material resources now existing in the Black community will become even more strained by this dilemma. Accustomed to the appearance of racial unity, it will be more difficult to ignore the important constellation of family income and experiential factors that separate the Black middle-class from the Black poor and the educated from the uneducated.

I see at least three possibilities, drawn from our experiences as Black women, that will help us to meet these new challenges.

The first possibility relates to our motivations to overcome social class boundaries. Poor Black women are not "them versus us" in the sense that other Americans may see them. "They" are our mothers and grandmothers, our sisters, aunts, nieces, cousins and daughters. Most of us probably have poor relatives with whom we are in contact. These are natural alliances which, if buoyed by community support, provide distinct possibilities for both preventing public dependence and for ameliorating the impact of changing social conditions. These relationships offer a solid vehicle for consciousness-raising as Black women shape our self-definitions, roles and responsibilities in the 21st century.

Second, our cultural experiences have allowed for greater role flexibility among Black men and women, and more sharing of work and responsibility. Continued flexibility of social roles, rather than the adaptation of white patriarchial American

models of family life, is essential in this critical moment of history.

Third, we, as Black American women, have historically felt an affinity with other people of color. We must now build upon these feelings to develop true links between African-American women and other women of color in the United States as well as with Third World women. We must recognize the systemic connections between their oppression and our own, between our oppression and the exploitation of women in the developing world. We must articulate the interrelationships of race, sex, and class exploitation in its domestic and international manifestations.

CONCLUSION

Ironically, our power is threatened by the romantic notion of Black women as martyrs. This notion is an obstacle to changing the realities faced by black families today. It may be a long time before the negative images and connotations of Black women are disspelled from scientific and popular discourse. However, the survival, development, and ultimate liberation of Black communities compels us to build upon our real strengths and capacities.

In addressing our current predicaments, a key debate is whether or not Blacks should continue to emphasize the need for government action or to target our energies on self-help. Although a combination of government and community initiative is essential, we as Black women must focus on what we can do using our own resources. Amid the correct demands that society fulfill the promises of the Constitution, we must advocate for our own empowerment, for self-reliance.

This sense of determination is particularly acute for us as educators in a higher education system which could be no more effective in eliminating us if it had declared an outright war. Those of us who are the teachers, the leaders, the watchdogs, must exhibit a special strength and sense of purpose to empower others through educational opportunity.

In the words of Horace Mann, former President of Antioch College, we must be ashamed to die until we have won some victory for humanity.

Claude McKay put it this way:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

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VALORA WASHINGTON

In the position, Vice-President/Dean of Faculty at Antioch College, Dr. Washington is the chief academic officer. She is responsible for liasion with six academic institutes, and a major academic support offices, in addition to full and part-time faculty.

Her career in higher education began in 1978 at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, where she held a faculty position in Early Childhood Education. During the 10 year period since that time she has been principal investigator or director of 12 funded projects along with responsibilities in teaching and administration.

Dr. Washington has served in the dean's office, School of Human Ecology at Howard University and at The American University as Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies in Arts and Sciences. In those positions of leadership, she was responsible for program development, advising staff, admissions, and recruitment, student policies and placement.

She is a nationally recognized trainer and technical strategist having provided assistance to over 63 organizations. Over 36 articles and chapters in scholarly publications have been authored by Dr. Washington. She is co-author of *Project Head Start: Past Present and Future Trends in the Context of Family Needs.*

Dr. Washington received her B.A. degree from Michigan State University. Her Ph.D. was earned at Indiana University. She has received many fellowships and awards. In 1985 she was named one 100 Young Women of Promise by *Good Housekeeping Magazine.*

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