

THE STATUS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN:  
SHOULDERING THE THIRD BURDEN  
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Bennett College for Women is a special place, an oasis where women are educated, celebrated, and developed into twenty-first century leaders and contributors. It is one of only two educational institutions in our nation where women of color are at the center, not the periphery, of the universe. Indeed, one might argue that it is one of just a handful of places where African American women are systematically celebrated, not cursorily ignored and vilified. Bennett College for women also offers a special lens through which to view the status of African American women, as many of the choices, challenges, and triumphs that women face are reflected in the hurdles that our students clear, and those over which they sometimes stumble.

In an election year when women of color are being asked if they are voting their race or voting their gender – as if we could divide them – it is important to note that race and gender are intertwined for African American women, and that both are determinants in our economic, social, political, and educational status. The intersection of race and gender, additionally create a third burden for African American women in that part of our status is a function of the way that the majority society marginalizes and demonizes African American men.

A most stunning example of this third burden is evident in the labor market, where both African American men and women experience unemployment rates that are higher than those for the overall population. While the unemployment rate in January 2008 was 4.9 percent, it was 7.3 percent for adult African American women, and 8.3 percent for African American men. Moreover, a full million more African American women held jobs than African American men, with 8.3 million black women and 7.3 million African American men working (1). The underemployment of African American men represents a burden to the African American women who, then, often shoulder disproportionate responsibility in supporting households and children without sufficient contribution from spouses, partners, or fathers. A full understanding of the third burden explains, at least partly, why African American women cannot separate interests of race and issues of gender in analysis of political candidates, economic realities, or social and cultural realities.

There are other important critical economic realities that shape the status of African American women. While more likely to be employed than African American men, African American women earn lower wages than African American men and white women do, with white women earning a median \$663 per week in 2007, compared to \$629 for African American men and \$566 for African American women. All three groups earn less than white men, whose 2007 weekly median earnings were \$850 (2). And, while African American women represent two-thirds of all African American undergraduates, and the majority of graduate students (3), African American women are less likely than African American men to reach the pinnacle of their occupations, especially in corporate America. Indeed, while a handful of African American men lead Fortune 500 corporations, as do a dozen or so white women, not a single African American woman has ever led such a corporation.

If a pie chart illustrates distribution of economic benefits within a race, then African American women have a larger slice of pie than white women within their race group. Thus, historical, institutional, and sociological forces slice the pie differently for African American women than for white women, with gender playing a different role in the African American community because of the way society has dealt with African American men. At the same time, the pie that African American have to slice is smaller than it should be. African Americans are 13 percent of the population, but we have 8 percent of the income and less than 2 percent of the

nation's wealth. For some, the focus has been on increasing the size of the pie that African Americans have to divide, looking at issues of race instead of gender. At the same time, when we view gender status in the African American community, it is clear that the pie analogy is imperfect unless the size of the pie African American women have is viewed as both benefit and burden. Further, the pie analogy is imperfect because it does not capture issues that are not strictly economic – family and family formation, the role of African American women in popular culture, and the challenges that African American girls face in a society that routinely ignores the third burden of African American women.

A focus of women at the top should not preclude attention to the material struggles for African American women at the bottom of the economic spectrum. One in four African American people, and more than forty percent of African American children live in poverty. Many of these poor are working poor – women who earn little more than the minimum wage in service occupations, especially as home health workers, janitors and cleaners, and in other occupations. These women almost always lack sick leave, health care, and benefits that other workers take for granted. They struggle to make ends meet, often bridging the gap between living expenses and inadequate paychecks with credit cards and other forms of high-interest debt. These economically vulnerable African American women's stories are often swallowed by more compelling headlines, yet their reality is a common reality for a significant portion of the African American female population. The third burden is a lens through which we may view African American women's poverty. Too often, especially when public assistance is involved, the status of African American women is linked to the economic role that African American men do not play in poor families. The male and female unemployment that results from the deindustrialization of our nation's cities, and the policy failure to develop jobs policies especially disadvantages African American men, and places the family survival burden on African American women.

#### FAMILY STATUS AND FAMILY FORMATION

Since the 1980s, women head more than 40 percent of African American families. The majority of African American children grow up in households headed by women. While there is nothing inherently wrong with female-headed households, there is much sociological data that suggests that children who grow up in healthy, intact families (it is important to emphasize "healthy" as violent or abusive intact families are not preferable to families headed by one parent) are less likely to be involved in violence and more likely to attend college and lead productive lives. Part of the reason why African American households are so often headed by African American women are economic and structural – African American men are more likely to be unemployed or incarcerated, and are often unwilling or unable to make long-term family commitments based on their economic status. African American women have had no choice but shoulder the burden of family leadership in the African American community.

The status of African American men becomes a third burden to young women who would like to marry and raise families. The difference in educational attainment between African American men and women, and the difference in labor market participation, means that African American women are less likely to marry than their white counterparts. College-educated African American women also often marry later than their white sisters do. Many choose single motherhood as their only motherhood option. While these women have the means to raise children, they would often prefer to raise children with contributing partners.

College-educated African American women are by no means the only women who want marriage, family, and stability. Their realities are often shaped by gaps in labor market opportunities between men and women, and gaps in the training possibilities that men and women face. While clerical and service work provide some opportunities for African American

women without college educations, the decline in manufacturing work has eliminated many opportunities for African American men.

Thus, the educational and economic status of African American men becomes a policy and community concern for African American women, and part of the third burden that African American women shoulder. The extent to which African American men are not allowed to fully participate in our nation's economic life, means that African American women have the opportunity, responsibility, and burden to more fully participate.

## IMAGES IN POPULAR CULTURE

Through the lens of the third burden, aspects of African American women's depiction in popular culture become partly understandable, though wholly unacceptable. The rap music artists who insist on portraying African American women as sexual objects, as "-itches" and "hos" seem to have a seething resentment for African American women that is partly rooted in the economic realities described in the paragraphs above. References to "gold diggers" and images of credit cards swiped through a woman's buttocks demean women to a beat so enticing that other women dance to the sounds of their debasement. When the talk jock Don Imus broadcast hateful words to describe a graceful group of Rutgers women basketball players, African American people around the nation exploded in rage. The conversation was quickly hijacked in both productive and destructive ways. On one hand, the conversation about Imus quickly became a productive conversation about images of African American women in media. On the other hand, the conversation about Imus also attempted to equate rap music artists, some with very limited distribution, with the power that an Imus, with tens of millions of viewers and listeners, had. In some ways, the conversation became one in which segments of the African American community seemed to turn on each other, with younger hip hop artists pitted against older, more established leaders and scholars. It became a conversation much like the prevailing political conversation – are you supporting your race or supporting your gender, as if the two can be separated.

Interestingly, the attention focused on the depiction of African American women in popular culture has barely touched on indelible images of African American women on public assistance and in public housing, and the demeaning images invoked by members of Congress in the 1996 welfare reform debate. While changes in the way that public assistance is delivered and our society's shift away from the poverty debate have blunted sharp images of African American women as lazy and dependent, those women who still receive public assistance, and those who attempt to use education as their escape from poverty while on public assistance find that demeaning images often shape their ability to find jobs and opportunities. White women are more likely to be allowed to attend college while on public assistance than African American women are, partly because caseworkers have some discretion in making exceptions to rules governing college attendance and images of African American women too often influence willingness to make exceptions.

Nearly a year after the Imus flap, the image of African American women in popular culture has only barely improved. The bastion of Sunday morning pale, male talking heads shows little more diversity than it did a decade ago. The gyrating, undulating images of African American women in rap music videos and, by extension, on cable television is as prevalent as ever. And though African American women have organized in response and in resistance to these images, conducting conversations and negotiations with entertainment industry executives and also elected officials who might regulate decency in the absence of its natural occurrence, the progress toward depicting African American women positively in media has been slow.

Media imagery invades the mind and spirit and is at least partly responsible for the unequal, and often dismissive, treatment that African American women face in the labor market and in society. There is bountiful anecdotal evidence that while African American women have been climbing the corporate ladder, images of black women in popular culture are an ankle-weight that slows the climb. Thus, while economic issues such as workplace discrimination and equal pay must interest those who are concerned with the status of African American women, issues of image may well have an impact on economic status.

In this context it is important to note the many powerful images of African American women that exist at the other end of the spectrum. Dr. Dorothy Height, Dr. Maya Angelou, Oprah Winfrey, Susan Taylor, and Michele Obama are among the many African American women whose names and images invoke strength, dignity, and grace, and are an antidote to the demeaning images that so often prevail.

### YOUNG WOMEN, GIRLS, AND THE THIRD BURDEN

While demeaning images may well lightly touch adult African American women, young women and girls often feel the burden of these images acutely, and act out their reaction to these images unwittingly. There is an obesity challenge among African American women that has trickled down to young women and girls, many who face debilitating disease if they cannot get their weight under control. Some girls are also embracing the violence that has shattered so many young black male lives, and acting out their pain in ways that is ultimately self-destructive. The incarceration of African American women has increased exponentially in the past two decades, with some women being incarcerated because of their involvement in the drug culture (translation – their relationship with a man who was involved in drugs), and others because of alarming acts of violence.

Terri Williams has written brilliantly of the pain that many in the African American community deny, the depression that has both debilitating personal and societal effects. Those black women who attempt to manage and respond to images of Sapphire and Superwoman, oversexed video vixen and overworked beast of burden may also be managing a pain they cannot address. The extent to which young women and girls are constantly exposed to conflicting, and often demeaning, images, may play some role in the future status of these women and, indeed, of the African American community at large.

### CONCLUSION

Dr. Dorothy Height has often said that “African American women do not do what we want to do, we do what we have to do”. That daunting adage of service and community, of shouldering the third burden, remains applicable. Those who ask African American women to choose between race and gender ignore the fact that race and gender only partly explain African American women's reality. The third burden, the intertwining of African American male and female lives in the context of patriarchy and economic oppression, is an important way of viewing the complexities of the African American woman's existence in these United States. In the context of this patriarchy we are consumers, not producers, of our images in popular culture, the target of a drive-by public policy analysis that asks us to choose between race and gender as we navigate our reality. To invoke the South African proverb, “black women hold up half of the sky” in the African American community. Whether operating from a strong economic base, or from the poverty status that affects more than one in four of us, we shoulder a third burden as we hold up half the sky. Race, gender, and society's treatment of African American men shape and define our reality and determine our status.

## NOTES

- (1) Bureau of Labor Statistics, The Employment Situation: January 2008.
- (2) Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment and Earnings, January 2008.
- (3) National Center for Educational Statistics, Digest of Educational Statistics, 2006
- (4) Terrie Williams, Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We're Not Hurting, New York: Scribner, 2008