

**Unseen:  
A Perspective on How Black Women are Left Out of America's Social and Political  
Movements**

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**Abstract**

The year 2020 saw a monumental call for change in America. Who was at the heart of it all? Black women. They have been praised for their contributions to politics and have advocated fervently for social change, yet they will likely see little to none of the rewards of that change. This perspective analyzes two spaces: Politics (through the Democratic Party) and social justice movements (Feminism and the Black Lives Matter movements). Literature has shown that Black women are statistically more likely to identify as feminists, participate in elections, and advocate for policy to better the community rather than the individual. To properly understand why Black women's integral roles in these organizations go unnoticed, it is imperative to draw attention to the lack of intersectionality present in social activism and politics and the misogynoir that harms Black women and girls in our communities. Also, the idea of media representations of Black women reflecting how America interacts with Black women as members and leaders of these communities must be explored. Often Black women are reduced to tropes, tropes that intend to diminish Black women's power in the public sphere and make them nothing more than caricatures. As technology advances and digital activism comes to the forefront, there become even more ways to be vocal and create social change. America must call for an intersectional view of activism and require those who run these organizations and groups to consider if they address the unique issues of Black women, a demographic that supports, advocates, and at times, creates their ideologies and frameworks.

**Introduction**

Considering the historic moments of Vice President Kamala Harris taking the stage as the first Black and South Asian vice president in American history, Stacey Abrams being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize due to her work to increase voter turnout, and the Democratic Party praising Black women for their voter turnout in swing states, especially surprise blue state Georgia, it is time that we addressed a significant issue in America today. Black women are excluded from America's social and political movements. In the next few months, the fanfare will die out, and America will go right back to leaving Black women out of conversations surrounding justice and policy that impact them more than anyone else. The root of the issue is America does not take Black women seriously, leaving them to work harder for representation and consideration in political and social spaces (Brown & Lemi, 2020). At most, these spaces use Black women to say, "Here is the respect and representation!" while simultaneously reducing them to the classic tropes concerning Black femininity (the overbearing, sassy, and unreasonably angry Sapphire, the overly sexual Jezebel, and the utterly unsexual and undesirable mammy) (West, 2008). These tropes commonly show up when we look at Black women's societal and political positions. They are judged on their sex appeal (the Jezebel), whether they are "aggressive" or "controlling" (the Sapphire), or they are categorized as the motherly figure who is happy to take on more than their share of responsibilities (the mammy). While these tropes are most apparent within the media, the media often influences our public and private life (West, 2008). As America views these caricatures on screen, they begin to associate Black women in real life with these stereotypes. Essentially, the tropes begin to work in real life to diminish the importance of Black women in policy creation and positions of power.

Many may ask, "Well, the movement or the political party is receiving spotlight, so why does it matter who is credited or if the ideologies are specifically addressing Black women?" It matters because, after achieving success due to the work of Black women, these movements leave out Black women's issues, voices, and perspectives on policy. They are devalued in the distinct spaces intended for the

marginalized groups that they represent. Also, their contributions to the Democratic party go largely unacknowledged. To understand why it is vital that policies and political and social groups address the unique concerns of Black women, society must be cognizant of how and why the American, Black woman's experience is unique.

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to describe how race, class, gender, etc. 'intersect' with one another and overlap (Crenshaw, 1989). It is important to note that this term does not necessarily reference the oppression of Black women, but the difference in experience that Black women have as being the intersection of two of the most marginalized groups in America. The specific intersection of racist and sexist oppression and microaggressions experienced exclusively by Black women is commonly called misogynoir, a term coined by Black feminist Dr. Moya Bailey (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). While anyone can participate in misogynoir, the dynamics differ, which is evident in the areas analyzed below that advocate for the success, rights, and political ideologies of white men, white women, and Black men, while mostly ignoring Black women (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). These terms identify the unique way that Black women interact with the world and thus how the world interacts with them.

## **Social Justice**

### *The White Face of Feminism*

Feminism today has examined gender discrimination through the lens of the white female experience (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality in feminism cannot be ignored, especially considering that Black women face unique issues in many areas. These areas are not addressed because they are not the white female experience. For example, the recurrent narrative in feminism is that women are seen as passive, whereas in the Black community, that is not true (Crenshaw, 1989). Often Black women are stereotyped as the "Sapphire" within their community as being "loud" or "aggressive" (note there is no trope that suggests passivity, delicacy, or romanticism) (West, 2008). This lack of cultural acknowledgment is a prime reason many Black women, although historically shown to be more likely to express support for gender equality and feminism (Gay & Tate, 1998), do not identify with the more popularized version of feminism today. Interestingly, a study conducted by Gay and Tate (1998) found that Black women who strongly identified with their race were less likely to identify as feminists. This is the idea that by being race-conscious, one cannot support a movement that does not acknowledge one's race.

When discussing feminism, it is essential to acknowledge the work that Black women have placed into the feminist movement has gone chiefly unrecognized with today's feminism being whitewashed. For example, Tarana Burke, a Black woman, began the #MeToo movement in 2006 to give Black women the confidence to speak about sexual assault (Leung & Williams, 2019). Today, white women have become the face of #MeToo, with Black sexual assault survivors still being silenced or not taken seriously (e.g., the survivors of Bill Cosby and R. Kelly's assaults) (Leung & Williams, 2019). Overall, popular feminism is not highlighting the misogynoir that runs rampant in America, like how Black women are sexually abused more often than any other group of women, and Black trans women are violently victimized at higher rates (Crenshaw, 1989). This is primarily due to the overly sexual Jezebel trope internalized by society. Because of this internalization, there is a belief that Black women cannot be victimized because they are overly sexual. This leads to fewer arrests in cases where the survivor is Black, less credibility for Black women in courts, and less societal backlash towards the assaulter (Gay & Tate, 1998). Thus, intersectionality must be acknowledged when discussing feminism, because its absence allows Black women to continue to be victimized at disproportionate rates and impacts Black women's access to justice.

### *Black Lives Matter...Except Yours*

Black Lives Matter has become one of the most popular movements talked about in 2020. While there is no question that the disgusting killings of Black and Brown men by the police are outrageous and must be dealt with immediately within American society, this movement has received the most popularity

advocating for change surrounding the deaths of Black men (Ransby, 2018). When mentioning spaces created by Black women, the Black Lives Matter movement must be included. Three Black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, created the Black Lives Matter movement, and Black women overwhelmingly support it (Ransby, 2018). While the movement was created due to the death of Trayvon Martin, a young Black boy, and received a resurgence in 2020 due to the death of George Floyd, Black women (e.g., Reykia Boyd and Miriam Carey) were simultaneously being victimized by law enforcement (Crenshaw, 2015). It was not until Sandra Bland was killed in police custody in 2015, and more recently, Breonna Taylor was shot and killed while sleeping in her bed, that Black women were given the spotlight in this movement. Commonly, when statistics surrounding police misconduct (violence, racial profiling, the criminalization of poverty, drug offenses, etc.) are given, they center around Black men, when Black women experience injustices at the same rate yet receive less coverage and even less justice (Crenshaw, 2015). Because of Black female activists who have an intersectional approach, the movement #SayHerName has attempted to fill the gap and elevate the stories of Black women who have experienced police violence (Crenshaw, 2015).

### **Politics**

#### *The Democratic Party*

Ultimately, Black women are the mainstay of not only social justice and human rights movements but the Democratic Party as well. Black women, since 2012, have turned out in record numbers to show support, campaign, and vote for Democratic candidates (Brown & Lemi, 2020). For example, approximately 90% of Black women voted for Joe Biden in the last presidential election, ultimately securing his presidential win (Brown & Lemi, 2020). However, while Black women overwhelmingly vote Democrat, they have also been vastly underappreciated by the Democratic Party. Black women are remembered during election season, but when a new term begins, the party fails to develop infrastructure, fund resources, or create policies that help their communities (Brown & Lemi, 2020).

As for candidates, the last few years have shown a record number of Black women running for office and being victorious in their elections, flipping seats, and making history. The most popular of today, Vice President Kamala Harris and Stacey Abrams, only represent two of the many powerful Black women who have taken leadership positions in the party. These women have and, if the past is any indication, will continue to face extraordinary hurdles and deal with large amounts of pushback in the form of gatekeeping, racism, and sexism within their positions (Brown & Lemi, 2020). These issues arise because, as authority figures, Black women are often stereotyped as pushy or hostile when being assertive (West, 2008). That image can become internalized by Black women, causing them to assume responsibility for others' discomfort (or attempt to take on the role of the nonthreatening, accommodating authority figure, running into the mammy stereotype) (West, 2008). So, why are Black women still so active in the Democratic Party? Patricia Hill Collins (1991) argued that Black women experience the world through both a racist and sexist lens, so they are much more likely to view oppression as "one overarching structure." Therefore, Black women are more likely to be left-leaning, participate in politics at higher rates, and side with policies and social justice movements that uplift the Black community as a whole (Gay & Tate, 1998). This means that because of their intersectionality, Black women will remain advocates for policies that move society forward.

### **Conclusion**

While the list of areas in which America has failed to give Black women a voice can go on and on, this is a snapshot of and a plea for intersectional awareness in politics and social justice movements. The key is that you do not have to be Black or a woman to consider intersectionality in political or social policy work. As technology moves forward, there are more ways than ever to use your voice for advocacy. Black women are endlessly and often silently putting forth the work and receiving no credit, although they want and deserve change, understanding, respect, and a voice in America. This is a call for the public to look around these social and political spaces. America should question if they see representation and begin to allow Black women opportunities to present ideas and promote the social

change they are prepared to deliver.

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