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Visible But Out of Place:

Black Women and Gender in
Assessments of African American
Inequality



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Executive Summary

Several recent cases have been causes for criticism within contemporary African American social justice movements. The anti-racist marches in support of the Jena 6, Troy Davis, and Trayvon Martin were widespread, highly visible, and deemed modern day civil rights causes by many African American leaders and lay people alike. However, similar cases where African American women were also unjustifiably attacked, beaten, and murdered by whites struggle for the same public outrage and sorrow. In August 2007, 20 year-old Megan Williams was invited to a “party” at a trailer home in rural West Virginia by a friend. Attending the “party” was her boyfriend, Bobby Ray Brewster, his mother Karen, and four other people. This group, comprised of six white women and men aged 20-49, proceeded to torture, sexually assault, and hold Williams against her will for more than a week. Brewster, his mother, and Williams' other attackers were all prosecuted and convicted in 2009 on charges of kidnapping and sexual assault. Only one of Williams' attackers was charged with a hate crime. Consequently, national media commentator Roland Martin and several African American feminist bloggers believed the case should have been viewed as a hate crime by African American social justice organizations and lamented their lack of attention to it.

In June 2011 in Minneapolis, transgender woman Chrishaun "CeCe" McDonald and four of her friends made a midnight run to a local grocery store. En route to the store, McDonald and her friends were confronted by racist and

transphobic slurs from a small group of white men and women congregated in front of a tavern. McDonald and her friends tried to walk away, but she was hit in the face with a beer glass by one of the women and then subsequently punched. The fight between the groups escalated until Dean Schmitz charged at McDonald, who stabbed him in his chest with a switch blade. Schmitz died at the scene and McDonald was convicted for second degree manslaughter. A Minneapolis-based legal rights non-profit organization advocated on McDonald's behalf. However, the title of Marc Lamont Hill's recent Ebony Magazine article asked this question of African American organizations, "Why Aren't We Fighting for CeCe McDonald?".

Similar questions can be asked of all of these cases and the hundreds that never make it to feminist blogs or mainstream media outlets: Why did we march so loudly and proudly for the young men in Jena, for Troy Davis and Trayvon Martin, but not for Megan or CeCe? Are women's experiences invisible in contemporary African American anti-racist discourse and organizing? Furthermore, is this invisibility the result of male bias? My dissertation explored these questions empirically, along with theoretical and methodological approaches to studying the existence of male bias in social justice organizing and the ways that social justice organizations allocate their time across the intersectional subgroups of their constituencies.

My dissertation not only studies the gender attitudes of contemporary African American social justice leaders and their organizations, but also contributes to a broader sociological understanding of intragroup inequality or "secondary marginalization". In these processes, oppression is not only exercised by dominant groups over subordinate ones but also by privileged subordinate group members

over their lesser privileged counterparts. For African Americans, intragroup inequality can occur along multiple axes and, paradoxically, often exists for the purpose of advancing the race. Historically, African Americans have maintained that conformity to dominant group norms was necessary in order to prove that they deserved equality with whites. Given this, African Americans and their communities are policed by powerful individuals and organizations in an effort to tamp down deviations from these norms. Gender and sexuality are common sites of this boundary-setting, with particular attention paid to the behavior of African American women. Therefore, asking questions about the visibility of women's issues in African American social justice organizing is not only about getting gender issues addressed in the context of anti-racism, but also understanding the motivation for the exclusion. Given this, my dissertation draws on sociological, social psychological, and political science theories to produce an intersectional framework for measuring intragroup inequality in the context of social justice advocacy. It helps to uncover the ways that social movement narratives, in their efforts to eradicate one type of inequality, might actually reproduce other types by ignoring the experiences of particular in-group members or deeming those experiences deviant.

Key Findings

In each chapter of my dissertation, I investigated the visibility of women's issues in contemporary African American social justice organizations in several ways. In

chapter 2, I addressed the visibility of women's issues within African American politics by conducting a content analysis of the missions and program descriptions of 34 national African American organizations. I interviewed and surveyed 45 leaders of local, regional, and national African American organizations between July 2011 - May 2013 and also examined their responses to questions about the types of issues their communities are concerned about and their organizations active on. They also answered open-ended questions about the existence and nature of sexism within African American communities. Key findings from the content analysis indicate that, among national African American organizations, women's organizations are the primary advocates for African American women and/or gender issues. Next, I found that leaders of local, regional, and national organizations do not believe their communities are concerned about nor report that they are active on gender-based disadvantaged subgroup issues such as domestic violence, sexual assault, and reproductive rights. Finally, although the vast majority of these leaders report that they believe African American women experience sexism in African American communities, they attribute this to African American women's gender role non-conformity; which they believe has been caused strategically by "white" ideologies such as feminism. That is, African American women are the victims of interpersonal tension with their male partners and sexist speech because they have allowed themselves to be used by whites to "keep black men down".

In Chapter 3, I used the case study method and flip the gender lens to look at two recent cases where African American women and gender issues were actually

central to the public outcry. In both the Don Imus/Rutgers Women's Basketball and Dunbar Village rape controversies, the verbal and physical assaults endured by African American women were addressed by prominent African American social justice organizations. Using textual analysis of public organizational documents and social movement theory, I find that, despite the fact that African American women are the actual victims of sexist hate speech and sexual violence, African American organization leaders framed African American men as the symbolic victims. They used both cases as evidence of the continual suffering of African American men at the hands of racist systems and institutions.

In Chapter 4, I presented one of the first sociological applications of the intersectional invisibility model. This model states that prototypical in-group members are privileged relative to other in-group members because their interests are put forward as overall group interests. Returning to the semi-structured interview and survey responses of 45 leaders of African American organizations, I specifically look at the extent to which men are viewed by organization leaders as prototypical African Americans and if this is associated with the types of issues organization leaders report they are active on and believe their communities are concerned about. Leaders were also asked open-ended questions about the social status of African American men and whether this should influence the amount of advocacy attention they believe organizations should devote to them. Findings indicate that African American men are viewed as prototypical and their prototypicality is moderately associated with the types of issues organizations were active on and perceived their communities to be concerned about. Whereas in Chapter 2

leaders stated that women's gender non-conformity is detrimental to their communities; in this case, leaders believe that restoring patriarchal leadership in families and communities is the key to decreasing many of the negative social conditions that affect African Americans.

In the final chapter, I concluded the dissertation by returning to the concept of intragroup inequality by considering the centrality of gender conformity to the historical development of African American anti-racist organizing in the United States. The findings presented in the dissertation illuminate what dominant voices in black nationalist anti-racist discourse have long denied: that gender is central to our analyses of and remedies for racial inequality. However, gender is larger than specific sets of women's issues more appropriately resigned to the privacy of homes and families. Gender is an institution, and as such, it structures attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. It is an organizing principle of human social life. While there is no central theory explaining how gender structures social movements specifically, it is clear through the findings presented here that gender ideologies impact assessments of the social problems that affect African American communities, identification of the primary victims of those social problems, as well as remedies for those problems.

Conclusion and Implications

Gender conformity has served a political function in the fight for African American equality. Throughout the history of African American anti-racist work, gender conformity has been the terrain across which racial equality is to be gained. In this

respect, gender conformity was and still is viewed by African American leaders as a prerequisite for racial equality and advancement. This view is not only prevalent in the African American community, but is increasingly becoming linked to state interventions into African American communities. Interestingly, these interventions reflect the same simultaneous patterns of devaluing women while seeking to empower men. Public images of black welfare queens who refused to work and sapped government resources provided the ideological justification for the rollback of government assistance programs in the 1980s and 1990s. During the same time period, "endangered black man" narratives began to pick up steam on the national stage. On the federal level, the image of endangered black men and morally decaying African American communities implicitly justified George W. Bush's Fatherhood Initiatives. The goal of this program and its many spin-offs put forth by non-profit organizations was to create conditions where men would marry the mothers of their children and find employment that would allow them to be breadwinners and fulfill their destiny as responsible fathers.

More than a decade later, Barack Obama launched his own "My Brother's Keeper" initiative designed to make similar inroads against the disadvantages that young African American men face. The problem with gender conformity and androcentric ideology driving black politics and federal intervention is that it stifles and distorts the fact that all members of African American communities suffer from various forms of disadvantage relative to their white counterparts. It also views absent or societally vulnerable men as the cause of the ills that plague African American communities rather than their consequence. The "reversed" gender order

that many lament is actually the outcome of perpetual racial inequality. New research and analysis from thinktanks such as the African American Policy Forum demonstrate that, relative to their white counterparts: both African American women and men earn pennies on the dollar; both African American girls and boys are disciplined and/or suspended from school at higher rates; both African American women and men are stopped, harassed, arrested, and incarcerated at higher rates. Analyses of African American social problems which continue to state that female heads of households and absent men are causes of inequality rather than the outcomes run the risk of ignoring or misdiagnosing the equally tumultuous racial disadvantage that African American girls and women experience.