

Women of Color Working at UCONN

For my final project, I had the privilege of interviewing my colleagues who are fellow women of color. I explored how being a woman of color and an employee at UConn intersect. Obviously, I have my own theories regarding this topic, but I attempted to remain impartial to avoid influencing the interviewees responses. After I received their responses, I was able to interpret them with my own personal connections. My paper will briefly discuss the methods used to source my data, then analyze how a black woman's intersectionality affects her role and perception in institutional spaces. The institutional setting that I am observing is the University of Connecticut.

My interviews began by asking a set of ten questions to five different women of color. All the women identify as black and work in the residential assistant position at the University of Connecticut. The questions they were asked ranged from job titles and responsibilities to the representation of women of color in their field. However, I would first like to focus on two questions, as they were crucial to shaping my paper. The questions are as follows: what are some words that come to mind when you think about being a UConn employee, and do these words change when you think about being a UConn employee specifically as a woman of color? One hundred percent of the interviewees answered yes. When they specifically reconsidered their employment through the lens of being a black woman, it drastically changed. Responses like white, inviting, and friendly instantly changed to stressful and isolating. But why is this?

The answer is simple. Black women are consistently undervalued in comparison to their male and white counterparts. In the RA position, many interviewees spoke to being questioned by a superior in a way they did not believe a white or male counterpart would experience. This is far from a new concept, as black women are never made a priority. Why take their word on a

residential life issue when black women are rarely listened to, even when their lives are at stake? Patricia Zavella speaks on this issue in *Reproductive Justice Activism*. Zavella details that the Dobbs decision caused an influx of attention surrounding “abortion-centric” activism. Yet, many are still not aware that black women have the highest maternal mortality rate amongst any other race. She specifically notes, “Black women are three times more likely to die due to pregnancy-related conditions.” In New York, the probability of black maternal mortality skyrockets to 12 percent. Constantly, the news has brought attention to abortion law protests and marches for reproductive equality. Still, black women are left as an afterthought. They’re not given a platform to speak and must fight for every ounce of representation in the mainstream media.

Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí provides reasoning for why black women are not prioritized in America, with her commentary on western colonization and gender systems. Oyěwùmí explains, “Western colonization is yet another case of Western dominance in the documentation and interpretation of the world, one that is facilitated by the West's global material dominance.” (The Invention of Women, p. 32). In the Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí quote, she expounds on the fact that western powers overtly highlight and enforce what they deem significant. If something does not align with western standards, it is looked down upon, critiqued, and often eliminated. This practice is seen in society today. In relation to black women, they were brought to this land as captives. Commonly associated with animals or objects. They had no worth in society. As time passed, the treacherous stereotypes and hatred for black women that thrived in the 17th century became ingrained in what America is today. Hatred for black women has not dissipated but is hidden in the shadows. Now, it is more commonly seen in daily microaggressions. While my interviewees note that they do not experience blatant racism in their day-to-day lives, repetitive microaggressions are still painful. As aforementioned, employers will undermine work they have

been successfully completing or attempt to playfully bring up harmful stereotypes. Like Evelyn Blackwood's experience, their supervisors believe they can create a space to question the very validity of a black woman's competence solely based on preconceived notions (*Tombois in West Sumatra*).

My favorite responses from this survey revolved around the question, how does the representation of other women of color in your field impact you? Everyone emphasized the strength of solidarity. By just seeing a fellow black woman, it instilled a sense of confidence and security. Suddenly, there was someone to not only looked out for them, but also easily understood their common stressors and emotions. These fellow women of color removed a burden from their shoulders that they were not previously aware of. This concept is closely related to one that can be found in Leith Mullings' *Resistance and Resilience, the Sojourner Syndrome, and the Social Context of Reproduction in Central Harlem*. Middle-stratum participants in their study explicitly chose to live in Harlem in an exchange of stressors. While the community may feature prevalent poverty levels and systematic neglect, being surrounded by other black individuals provided protection for their families and limited exposure to racism (p. 82). Both the RAs in my study and middle-stratum participants in Leith Mullings' research found a comfort in their community that could not be substituted, regardless of alternatives.

After completing this project, I reflected on my appreciation at the chance to interact with my community as the interviewer. Not frequently can I step away from being a black woman and genuinely observe how the world operates. Even so, one thing I constantly experience is a sense of isolation as a black woman working and existing in a white setting. My interviews allowed me to reinforce black unity, especially among my peers. It was encouraging to give the black women

around me a platform to speak honestly about their experiences. Representation matters, and I am grateful for my opportunity to spotlight their everyday struggle to be valued and respected.