

The Unnecessary Scars from Shattered Glass Ceilings

Date: November 1, 2022

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Source: American Bar Association Criminal Justice Magazine

Editorial Note: This article, written by April Frazier Camara, Co-Founder of the Black Public Defender Association, appeared in the fall 2022 edition of the American Bar Association's Criminal Justice Magazine. It calls attention to the grueling U.S. Supreme Court nomination gauntlet Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson endured in her confirmation process before the Senate Judiciary Committee and how that process tends to be an all too familiar one regarding... "how Black women leaders are spoken to and treated in workplaces and conference rooms across America."

In the spring of 2022, Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson made history as the first Black woman to be nominated and confirmed to serve on the highest Court in the nation. Judge Jackson's ascension to the Supreme Court shattered many glass ceilings. No Black woman had ever been appointed to the Supreme Court before Judge Jackson in its 233 years of existence. The Court has also never had a former public defender serve on the US Supreme Court. She is our first.

As a former public defender and Black woman myself, watching Judge Jackson's historic rise to the highest Court in the nation was both momentous and long overdue. And as her confirmation hearing proceeded before the US Senate Judiciary Committee, this historic moment started to feel and sound familiar. For many Black women, it was like replaying a classic American movie that always requires Black women to endure harm for the sake of the greater good. As a Black woman, I watched the four-day senate hearings as Judge Jackson endured the racism, aggression, scars, and burden of being the first. While Black women should have been celebrating this historical moment, we found ourselves traumatized by witnessing an experience with which Black women are well acquainted.

Judge Jackson's confirmation hearing was a peek into how Black women leaders are spoken to and treated in workplaces and conference rooms across America. Black women are often met with ridicule, microaggressions, and contempt when they dare to ascend to higher heights in their careers. Despite being qualified—and often overqualified—for the position or having followed similar paths as our predecessors, we are met with lines of questioning that question not only our qualifications but also our audacity to be treated as equal. Our resume is checked with microscopic precision. Discrediting questions, such as those inquiring about our LSAT scores, as in the case of Judge Jackson, are presented as legitimate probes into our qualification to serve.

Black women's intersecting marginalized identities expose them to volatile environments in the workplace, but, more specifically, when they are vying for leadership roles. Though it should not be this way, for Black people, and Black women, in particular, seeking progress in your career means opening yourself up to harm. From questioning their qualifications at the onset to questioning their authority and judgment as leaders, Black women are placed in situations where they must work twice as hard to get half the respect of their white male counterparts.

As Judge Jackson was publicly berated and aggressed during her confirmation hearings, it was equally disheartening to read and watch people's reactions to her treatment. Countless news

outlets, pundits, and people on the internet praised Judge Jackson for remaining “poised” while responding to questions seasoned with racial over- and undertones. The reality is, Judge Jackson knew, and as should we, that she had no choice but to disguise the stress and trauma she was under. Her identity as a Black woman in America robbed her of receiving the same treatment as those sitting in the same seat. Rejecting the questions asked of her for being meritless and outright racist or showing any emotions were not viable options for Judge Jackson.

Similarly, in conference rooms across America, Black women are pigeonholed into responding to racism and sexism with unyielding, self-sacrificing strength. They are lauded for and expected to be “strong Black women” who remain poised and do not fold under pressure. They cannot be visibly frustrated; otherwise, they would be painted as angry. They cannot show emotions; otherwise, their ability to lead comes into question yet again. Instead, they must exercise extreme constraint and conceal the stress and pain of being a Black person striving for positions shaped by and designed for whiteness.

Expecting Black women to remain strong in the face of aggression, trauma, and harm is a denial of their humanity. It also leaves harmful policies and practices intact and places the onus on Black women to endure backlash when pursuing new heights in their careers.

Many would agree that our leaders and those in positions of power or influence should reflect the broader community, especially communities that have been historically underrepresented. However, if what is required of Black women to secure leadership roles is withstanding abuse, then we, as a country, as organizations, and as individuals, are unserious about racial equity. Instead of celebrating Black women for enduring unequal treatment, we should work to ensure they no longer have to experience it.

To inspire and sustain the next generation of Black women leaders, we must not expect or require them to endure this harm to be confirmed for these positions. We must create environments where this type of racism and aggression has no place in our workplaces, Congress, and culture. Though I am grateful for Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson and countless others who have endured the scars of shattering glass ceilings, future Black leaders should not have to do the same.