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Case Study: Black Women in Cleaning and Care Jobs in the US

Throughout world history, racial oppression has been a leading force contributing to the exploitation of Black people. Examining intersectionality within this oppression reveals deeper layers of struggles faced by Black women. Despite their significant contributions, Black women are often underrepresented and their labor goes underappreciated in Western cultures, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation for the benefit of the global economy. This intersectionality between race and gender can be analyzed through the large presence of Black women in cleaning and care jobs in the US. This study argues that the historic legacy of slavery, coupled with systemic racism ingrained in racial capitalism and patriarchy, has led to the overrepresentation of Black women in care and cleaning jobs, where they undergo inhumane and underpaid treatment despite their large economic contributions. This ultimately calls for the amplification of Black female voices in positions of leadership to represent and challenge the ongoing cycle of oppression in domestic labor jobs.

Would capitalism be so successful without the implication of feudalism, slavery, or other exploitive techniques by the bourgeois class? Within the theoretical framework of racial capitalism, authors such as Cedric Robinson and Julian Go analyze how the exploitation of Black people has always been a part of the success of capitalism. While there are many layers to this discussion, racial capitalism “implies that there are deep connections between racism or racial inequality and capitalism,” rooting back to either racial divisions before capitalism or the exploitation of Black and Indigenous people in times of colonialism and slavery (Go, 39). Go discusses this connection between race and capitalism and recognizes and highlights its

intersectionality and historical specificity. The struggle for Black men and women have been different in consideration to their treatment in society. Cedric Robinson places this idea of Black Marxism and racial capitalism up for discussion, as he claims that "the development of capitalism can be seen as having been determined in form by the social and ideological composition of a civilization that had assumed its fundamental perspectives during feudalism" (Robinson, 24). Here, he argues that social hierarchies in early European history converted into racial differences and shaped ideologies of exploitation. The expansion of global capitalism emerged from both racism and nationalism, and he highlights the usage of slavery and immigrant labor within this expansion. Money would not accumulate towards the wealthy without the exploitation of power-less workers; a theory reflected in the history of Black female labor alone.

As previously stated, there is intersectionality behind racial capitalism as the patriarchy has created a different experience for Black men and women through differences in gender roles and power dynamics. As discussed by Vergés, "without the work of women of color, which is necessary but must remain invisible, neoliberal and patriarchal capitalism would not function" (Vergés, 2). This reference to invisibility is important to note in her analysis of Black women in cleaning jobs, as the lifestyle of the upper class would fail without the hidden work of Black women. This is purposeful, as "the bodies of black women have long been commodified, made into capital" throughout history (Vergés, 3). This process can be referred to as the 'economy of exhaustion,' in which the health and minds of Black women are exhausted at the expense of capitalist success. The intersectionality behind this is highlighted, for example, after the emancipation of slavery. Discussed by Claudia Jones, Black men entered the workforce post-emancipation, but because of their low wages, Black women were compelled to work, a struggle that white women did not face (Lynn). Once white women did enter the workforce,

"their wages were significantly higher than Black women's" (Lynn). Therefore, there is a cycle of forced, yet underpaid, work for Black women at higher rates than white women because of the wage differences made between Black and white men. Feminist movements against gender roles in the 1970s centralized white women and sparked an even higher percentage of Black care workers. When "white feminists denounce the boredom and invisibility of unpaid housework, the movement to recruit racialized women for cleaning/caring accelerated" (Vergés, 5). Despite feminist motivations, the push for equal gender work opportunities only aided white women. This is not only reflected in female Black labor in the US, but even in immigrant labor of women of color around the world. As Faaris discusses, women of color began to be employed as care and domestic workers to "allow [white] women to work outside the household and created entirely new professional figures" (Faaris). White women pushed for opportunities in the workforce, but only succeeded with the dependency on Black and migrant women to enter their household and complete the cleaning and care jobs they once fulfilled. Race and gender, as mentioned, have played together to perpetuate a cycle of dependency and exploitation of Black women.

Statistics of this intersectionality and cycle of labor clearly reflect the exploitation of Black women in care and cleaning positions. To begin, Black women have historically worked harder than white women to support themselves and families because Black men were not provided with high enough wages to do so. In 1880, "35.4% of married black women and 73.3% of single Black women were in the labor force compared with only 7.3% of married white women and 23.8% of single white women" (Black Women & Labor Market). This statistic reflects the patriarchal support for white women, whether fatherly or marital support. This has been the case throughout history, and still incredibly relevant today as just in 2020, 76% of Black

mothers were in the labor force, leading any other race (Roux). Since times of slavery, this job discrepancy has been especially reflective of the reliance of Black women in their own homes and the homes of white families. During slavery, Black women were constantly "devalued as mothers" and pushed to be workers caregiving for the needs of white families. As mentioned above, white women entering the workforce led to increase of Black female labor in the household, so apparent that "nearly 28% of Black women are employed in service jobs compared with just ⅛ of white women" (Black Women & Labor Market). This economic need for Black female care-givers thrives especially from their low wages. Black women are pushed towards care jobs as an easy option of work, yet are exploited with a long history of low-wage rates. Take the following statistics as an example. Domestic workers in the US, according to the Economic Policy Institute, make "on average just 74 cents for every dollar that their peers make" (Domestic Workers Chartbook). Taking this into consideration and adding the intersectionality of both race and gender, the statistics further show that 91.5% of these domestic workers are women, and 52.4% are women of color (Domestic Workers Chartbook). These statistics highlight the disparities in labor force participation between Black and white women, and underscore historical and ongoing exploitation of Black women in care and cleaning jobs. The reliance on their labor successfully benefits both the patriarchy and white women in their freedom from household duties. Because of the cycle of racial capitalism, and the invisibility of their work and underpayment, the upper class has historically exploited Black women and have further hid their struggle under patriarchal control.

Not only are Black women in cleaning and care jobs underpaid compared to their counterparts, their mental and physical health are put at risk. In regards to cleaning jobs, Black women are waking up at unimaginable hours to work 'invisibly.' Their work can often be

measured as physically dangerous as “they inhale toxic chemical products and push or carry heavy loads[, and] usually travel long hours in the early morning or late at night” (Vergés, 1). At any age, harmful working conditions can result in shorter life spans or further health conditions. Black women are put at the forefront of this risk, because within racial capitalism their lives are deemed less worthy than that of the white male or women. For others to experience the cleanliness of wealthy and urban areas in the US, women of color work invisible hours. The working conditions only worsen with age, yet because these jobs are socially reproduced, Black women are often forced to work for a large majority of their lives for financial stability. In addition to unsanitary conditions of cleaning jobs, the mental health of these women are at stake as well. Care jobs for the children of other families occur at the expense of leaving one's own children, creating physiological effects on both the Black women and child. Lastly, Black women also have a higher chance of experiencing violence at their workplace as well, something relevant since times of slavery. Over time, “whether it be enslaved people working in the fields and in houses of masters or as domestic workers and store clerks in the 20th century[,] Black women receive less mentorship, are less likely to be promoted, experience microaggressions[, and] workplace harassment” (*Workplace Harassment Against Black Women*). Despite putting their health on the line, Black women are forced to return to these harmful workplaces in order to make money for themselves; an ongoing cycle of abuse in racial capitalism.

How does this cycle come to an end? Highlighting Black female voices and empowering their perspective is the most impactful manner in which change may come. Black women have been excluded from social justice movements against racism and sexism for decades, and their voices must be put at the forefront of this struggle. As stated by Malcom X, the most disrespected, unprotected, and neglected person in America is the Black women (Elder). Without

social influence and funding, political changes against this exploitation will not come as easily. In her analysis of successful grassroot leadership in Brazil, Kiesha-Khan claims that highlighting Black female perspective “encourages us to not only do the political work within the academy of documenting the vast inequalities that shape black women's lives, but also to seriously recenter praxis in ongoing formulations of black diasporic feminist thought” (Khan, 115). With the success of leadership in movements in Brazil, Kahn suggests the need for placement of Black women as central figures to highlight the deeply rooted intersectionality beneath this struggle. The cycle of domestic labor abuse of Black women has continued because of the suffocation of Black female leadership. Just in 2018, it was published that “there are zero African-American women running Fortune 500 companies” (Cheeks). This further contributes to the issue of socially reproduced low-wage jobs for Black women because without role models to look up to, it is difficult for Black women to imagine the possibility to work at a higher level in corporate America.

The ongoing exploitation of Black female labor highlights the intersectionality of race and gender in the layers of systematic oppression. It further opens up discussion for additional factors as well, such as class. With effects of racial capitalism and patriarchy, Black women have undergone a cycle of oppression in care and cleaning jobs while white women enter the workforce at a higher rate. Their struggle alone represents all sectors of marginalized communities that work for the benefit of the capitalist economy instead of themselves. To represent their struggles, highlighting the Black female perspective will call for necessary and impactful changes that do not get represented adequately in social movements, and work towards dismantling cycles of ongoing oppression and labor exploitation.

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