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Full Length Research Paper

Examining and Overcoming Barriers to Leadership for Black Women in HBCU Spaces

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The researchers in this study aimed to explore the barriers Black women face when ascending to leadership roles at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and the coping strategies they employ to overcome them. Guided by two research questions, we gathered data from 93 Black women who currently work or have worked at HBCUs and aspire to leadership roles. Our findings, integrated with existing literature, reveal several significant barriers: microaggressions and gender oppression, limited access to professional networks and mentors, and work-life imbalances. Gender Oppression and Workplace Microaggressions emerged as prominent barriers, aligning with previous research on gender discrimination in academic settings. Most respondents reported not having access to formal mentorship programs, significantly impacting career progression. Additionally, balancing work and personal responsibilities, coupled with discrimination, adversely affects well-being and career advancement. The stereotypes and perceptions of Black women also emerged as a significant issue, placing undue emotional and psychological burdens on Black women. Respondents highlighted the importance of personal support networks, professional networks, and mentorship in coping strategies. Support from family and friends, professional networks, and seeking additional education were commonly cited strategies, with mentorship being particularly valued.

Keywords: Black, women, Historically Black College and University, HBCU, ascension, leadership, barriers

Despite advancements in gender equality, Black women remain notably underrepresented in mid and executive-level leadership roles across corporate, government, and higher education sectors. According to NASPA (2014), Black women are four times less likely to hold executive positions compared to their White counterparts. Similarly, Miles (2012) noted that Black women frequently encounter stagnation in mid-level positions, regardless of their educational attainment or professional experience. Furthermore, West (2020) highlighted that advanced degrees among Black women do not necessarily translate to advancements in leadership roles, particularly in chief student affairs positions.

Although Black women are the most educated demographic in the United States, even in their own spaces, Black women experience pervasive barriers to leadership (Kaba, 2023). According to UNCF (2019), 62% of students at HBCUs are women, yet only about one-quarter of HBCU presidents are women. This highlights the need to investigate the challenges Black women encounter in reaching leadership positions within HBCUs to understand further why so few Black women ascend to the highest leadership roles in these spaces. Leadership roles

in this study can be defined as various positions crucial for the effective governance, strategic direction, and operational management of these institutions, including Presidents or Chancellors, Provost or Vice Presidents, Deans, Chairs, or Directors.

Historically, Black women have contended with pervasive discrimination, sexism, racism, workplace bullying, and limited access to mentorship and professional development opportunities across various fields (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Hollis, 2018). This experience often arises from the intersection of race and gender, creating systemically biased environments where Black women feel undervalued and encounter invisible barriers that hinder their career advancement (Turner et al., 2011). To highlight this notion, the tragic case of Antoinette “Bonnie” Candia-Bailey, Vice President of student affairs at Lincoln University of Missouri, underscores the systemic obstacles Black women face in leadership positions, with instances of racism and workplace bullying leading to devastating consequences, such as suicide (Wong, 2024). Hollis (2018) also emphasized the significant impact of academic bullying on hindering the career advancement of Black women within HBCUs. Herder (2021)

interviewed several Black female presidents of HBCUs in a leadership blog to find that they, too, have experienced gender oppression and objectification despite their high level of education and competence. Additionally, Domingo et al. (2022) identified institutional and service-related obstacles, such as the unfair distribution of service responsibilities and undervaluation of contributions, which exacerbate the challenges faced by Black women in advancing their careers.

The purpose of this study was to examine the barriers Black women face when ascending to leadership roles at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and the coping strategies they employ to overcome these barriers. To do so, we employed an exploratory quantitative research design. Our study findings contribute to the existing literature by providing empirical insights into the challenges faced by Black women in ascending to leadership roles. Further, we addressed the gap in research by focusing specifically on Black women's leadership experiences within the HBCU context. Ultimately, we sought to raise awareness of Black women's unique challenges and propose policy changes to facilitate their progression into leadership positions within HBCUs.

Literature Review

Gender oppression, lack of mentoring, and limited professional development are major obstacles to Black women's ascension into leadership roles at HBCUs. Black women often encounter both gender and racial discrimination, which contributes to their underrepresentation in leadership positions. They also face microaggressions and hostile work environments that impede their professional development and access to opportunities. The lack of solid mentoring worsens these challenges, as Black women do not have the support, guidance, and networks needed for career advancement. Together, these barriers create a multifaceted and arduous environment that consistently blocks Black women's path to leadership at HBCUs.

Gender Oppression

Black feminist theory illuminates how the intersection of gender and racial oppression uniquely impacts Black women in higher education. According to Collins (2019), Black women experience double jeopardy, a term that encapsulates the compounded effects of both gender and racial discrimination. This dual burden means that Black women must navigate professional spaces with inherent disadvantages that cannot be altered. Chance (2021) conducted a qualitative phenomenological exploration into how Black women in higher education leadership navigate cultural adversity. Respondents in the study highlighted that the intersection of race and gender poses significant challenges for Black women who strive to present their true and authentic selves (Chance, 2022). Additionally, despite individual differences, Black women leaders in higher education often share common experiences of discrimination, intersectionality, identity issues, cultural diversity, and a struggle for belonging. This indicates that gender

oppression is a significant barrier that hinders the advancement of Black women in leadership positions at HBCUs.

These detrimental perceptions cast doubt among decision-makers about the suitability of Black women in leadership positions. This scepticism makes it significantly harder for Black women to penetrate the concrete ceiling. Additionally, in academic environments, Black women often face microaggressions, which are subtle yet insidious forms of discrimination (Smith, 2019). These microaggressions foster hostile and unsupportive work environments, hindering Black women's professional growth and access to leadership opportunities. According to Vazquez and Williams (2021), the marginalization and stereotyping of Black women also contribute to feelings of imposter syndrome, which can erode their confidence and deter them from aspiring to leadership positions.

Gender oppression also results in unequal access to essential resources such as mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, which are crucial for career advancement (Wright & Brown, 2019). The lack of access to these resources further widens the gap for Black women seeking leadership roles in higher education. Thus, gender oppression, intertwined with racial discrimination, creates a complex and challenging landscape filled with negative stereotypes, microaggressions, and resource inequalities that obstruct Black women's ascension to leadership at HBCUs.

Lack of Mentorship

A lack of mentoring, negative mentoring experiences, and other mentoring challenges can hinder the long-term success of Black women in academia (Davis et al., 2022). The lack of formal mentoring programs can inadvertently create disparities in accessing support (Bova, 2000). Typically, available mentors are White men who select other White men, seeing them as younger versions of themselves (Nair & Vohra, 2017). Horton (2023) conducted a study on mentorship in academia, focusing on barriers and strategies for African American female faculty. The research highlights that the lack of mentorship significantly impacts the career progression of Black women in higher education. Horton emphasized that mentorship is crucial for navigating the complex academic landscape, particularly for underrepresented groups facing unique challenges.

Similarly, Davis et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative research study examining the barriers to mentoring faculty Women of Color in higher education. In the study, four themes were identified: negative mentoring, difficulty finding mentors, insufficient institutional support, and lack of post-tenure mentoring. Mentors neglecting their role slowed productivity and required assertive steps from the respondents. Additionally, Faculty of Color face unique career barriers, including cultural clashes, devaluation of scholarship, exclusion from professional networks, and discrimination. Davis et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of formal mentoring processes in offsetting these experiences.

Lack of Professional Development

Black women at HBCUs often lack access to structured professional development programs (Colclough, 2023). The absence of targeted training and support can impede their ability to acquire the necessary skills for leadership positions (Lim et al., 2015). Limited access to programs tailored to the unique challenges faced by Black women further restricts their professional growth. Targeted professional development initiatives can help address these gaps (Colclough, 2023). Professional development programs can offer valuable opportunities for Black women to enhance their leadership skills, such as communication, decision-making, problem-solving, strategic planning, and management (Fuller & Williams, 2020). Strengthening these skills is essential for preparing them for leadership roles. Additionally, these programs allow Women of Color to connect with potential sponsors, peers, and mentors, especially when they face challenges in organically expanding their networks (James & Carter, 2019). Emphasizing and investing in professional development is crucial for promoting greater inclusivity and diversity in academic leadership.

Work-Life Imbalance

Dr. Tashni-Ann Dubroy, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer at Howard University, recently highlighted in a forum that being a Black woman in an organization often allows for very few mistakes (Herder, 2021). This means that Black women must continually work harder to prove their ability to lead an institution, often resulting in longer workdays, the sacrifice of relationships, and an unhealthy work-life balance (Laube & Hunt, 2023). To further explain, a study by Jean-Marie (2017) emphasized that Black women in higher education often struggle with the dual burden of professional responsibilities and societal expectations, leading to significant work-life conflicts. These conflicts can impede their career advancement and overall well-being.

Lockett and Gasman (2018) also noted that the demanding nature of leadership roles at HBCUs, combined with the personal responsibilities that Black women often bear, exacerbates work-life imbalances. This situation is further complicated by the lack of supportive networks and formal mentoring programs within these institutions, making it harder for Black women to navigate their career paths effectively. Therefore, addressing work-life balance issues is crucial for supporting Black women in pursuing leadership positions at HBCUs.

Strategies for Overcoming Barriers

Despite Black women's challenges in higher education, several strategies can help them navigate and succeed. Robertson (2022) identified coping mechanisms such as religion and spirituality, armouring, shifting, support networks, sponsorship and mentorship, and self-care. Building relationships, forming alliances, and identifying champions are crucial for increasing self-efficacy and establishing a sustainable support system.

Connecting with others who share similar experiences through professional organizations, online forums, or therapy groups can help Black women create support networks. Creating safe and supportive spaces allows Black women to share achievements, experiences, and challenges, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support (Smith & Johnson, 2019). Professional counter spaces, culturally sensitive environments established by and for Black women, promote professional growth and community support (West, 2019). Such environments foster a sense of belonging and provide vital support for Black women seeking to rise into leadership positions. Additionally, prioritizing self-care, such as exercise, meditation, or journaling, can help manage stress and improve mental well-being for Black women. Applying the Black feminist theory provides context for why these barriers most often permeate Black women's experiences in leadership roles.

Theoretical Framework

Black Feminist Theory: Intersectionality and Power

Black feminist theory, which Kimberlé Crenshaw first introduced in print in 1989, outlines the multidimensionality of Black women's experiences in various spaces (Crenshaw, 1989; Taylor, 1998). However, analyzing race and gender through a single-axis approach ignores the experiences of Black women and limits the inquiry to privileged group members (Crenshaw, 1989). Moreover, cases involving class-privileged individuals add another layer to the challenges Black women face. Their experiences uniquely combine race, gender, and class discrimination (Rosette et al., 2018). While all women experience gender oppression, Black women face compounded barriers due to racism and classism, impacting their professional lives significantly. This intersectionality worsens work-life imbalance, as they are often expected to juggle roles such as caregiver, breadwinner, and community leader without sufficient support (Ali, 2023). This imbalance hampers their career advancement and affects their overall well-being (Perry et al., 2013). Black feminist theory further explains this phenomenon as it explicates that Black women cannot be completely empowered until the intersecting oppressions, including racism, sexism, and classism, are obliterated (Collins, 1990).

A significant component of intersectionality is its relationship with power and stratification (Alinia, 2015). Rooted in Black feminist epistemology, it explores the interplay of power and knowledge, asserting that Black women's experiences of intersectionality—through race, class, and gender—are shaped by intersecting systems of dominance and oppression. Black feminist theory “exposes the way that domination is organized and operates in various domains of power” and “also shows the path of struggle and to empowerment while at the same time highlighting the challenges and difficulties in combating intersecting oppression, since the multipositionality of social agents, on the one hand, and the simultaneity of multiple and intersecting sites of oppression, on the other, make the relationship between domination and resistance highly complex” (Alinia, 2015, pp. 2334-2335). Based on positionality in social

structures and hierarchies, Black women often become part of oppressive systems and reproduce majority race and gender domination when ascending to leadership roles in higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the barriers Black women face when ascending to leadership roles at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and the coping strategies they employ to overcome these barriers. While there has been some attention to this issue in recent literature, it has largely focused on women employed at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) and has primarily utilized qualitative research approaches. We designed this study to fill a significant gap in the literature by specifically examining the barriers that hinder Black women from ascending into leadership roles within the context of HBCUs. By focusing on the unique challenges Black women face in leadership within HBCUs, this research provides insights into the factors contributing to their underrepresentation and explores potential strategies to overcome these barriers. Ultimately, the goal is to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Black women in leadership roles and to inform efforts to promote their representation and advancement within HBCUs and beyond.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide this exploratory quantitative study:

1. What barriers do Black women encounter in their ascension to leadership positions at HBCUs?
2. If barriers exist, what coping strategies do Black women who work or previously worked at HBCUs use to overcome such barriers?

Research Design and Methods

Much of the research on the barriers Black women face as they ascend to leadership positions at HBCUs has utilized qualitative methods such as phenomenology and case studies to capture their experiences. While impactful, these methods often limit the ability to generalize results to larger populations. To investigate the pervasive barriers Black women face at HBCUs further, the researchers in this study aimed to expand the body of research by broadening the sample size and conducting an exploratory quantitative study.

Quantitative research can be defined as a systematic and scientific approach that investigates causation between variables through statistical analysis (Adams & Lawrence, 2018). This method allows researchers to interpret data and test relationships, making it suitable for addressing the research questions posed by this study (Creswell, 2014). By employing numerical measures, quantitative methods facilitate the explanation of relationships (Adams & Lawrence, 2018). Traditionally, quantitative studies follow a positivist worldview, emphasizing the measurement of factors influencing outcomes,

which asserts that a scientific approach is the only way to uncover the truth about a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

We used a descriptive survey design to uncover Black women's perceptions and the barriers to attaining leadership at HBCUs. Adams and Lawrence (2018) defined descriptive research as a method to examine "who, what, when, where, and how" (p. 18). This exploratory survey technique allows for an in-depth review of a phenomenon. Stebbins (2001) described exploratory research as a broad-ranging, purposive, systematic, and prearranged effort designed to maximize the discovery of generalizations leading to the description and understanding of a social or psychological area. In other words, a descriptive survey design collects data on specific variables without investigating causation. When empirical data on a subject is lacking, an exploratory approach can examine respondent opinions to understand behaviors and attitudinal trends (Adams & Lawrence, 2018).

This design was chosen for the current study due to the limited knowledge about the perceptions of Black women in the context of HBCUs. The goal was to reach a wider range of respondents to build a more accurate picture of the barriers women experience as they seek leadership positions at HBCUs and to examine the strategies they use to overcome those barriers.

Overview of Respondents in the Study

Criteria for inclusion in the study required respondents to identify as Black women who were employed or previously worked at an HBCU in any discipline. Respondents were recruited through multiple methods, including snowball and convenience sampling, without any incentives for participation. The purpose of the study and an invitation to participate were shared through six social media groups frequently visited by Black women in higher education. Additionally, the same survey information was emailed to professional contacts of the authors and distributed via two professional listservs, which included 500 higher education administrators affiliated with HBCUs. The invitation included a link to a detailed study summary, allowing respondents to determine if they met the study criteria. Those who chose to continue were presented with a consent form outlining the study's risks and benefits and were required to consent to participate.

A total of 204 Black women who currently work or have worked at HBCUs responded to the survey. The study involved 93 respondents after missing data was removed. All respondents identified as Black women and ranged in age from 28 to 70 years, with an average age of 49. Among the respondents, 62 held a Master's degree or higher. The roles within the university varied, with 28 serving as faculty members, 42 as university or department administrators, and 13 as center or program directors. Regarding tenure status, 15 respondents were tenured, 6 were on a tenure track, and 44 were not on a tenure track, all of whom aspired to a leadership role. Marital status among the respondents showed that 23 were single, 32 were married, and

11 were divorced. Refer to Table 1 for the participant demographic characteristics.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Characteristic	<i>n</i>
Currently or previously worked at an HBCU	93
Education level	
Master's degree or above	62
University Role	
Faculty	28
University/Department Administrators	42
Center/Program Directors	13
Tenure status	
Tenured	15
Tenure Track	6
Not on tenure track	44
Marital Status	
Single	23
Married	32
Divorced	11

Note. *N* = 93. Not all respondents completed the demographic questions.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was developed using a carefully chosen set of previously validated research tools. These included (a) the Gendered Racial Microaggressions Scale for Black Women (GRMS) (Lewis & Neville, 2015); (b) the Work-Family Conflict Scale (Kelloway et al., 1999); and (c) an index measuring coping mechanisms (Manley, 2015). To better fit our research objectives, we extracted 14 items from the GRMS to create two modified microaggressions scales and 5 items to form a gender oppression scale based on stronger interrelations among these variables compared to their original groupings. We also incorporated 5 items from the Work-Family Conflict Scale and included the original coping mechanisms index. The mentorship survey questions were adapted from Feldman (2010) and comprised six questions focused on current mentoring relationships and mentoring needs. The professional development scale was modeled after Feldman's work but tailored to include specific activities relevant to higher education settings. These instruments were selected for their relevance to our study's focus areas and were modified to align with our research objectives and target population.

The Gendered Racial Microaggressions Scale (GRMS) was initially developed to evaluate both the frequency and stress appraisal of microaggressions through feedback from a focus group of Black women and an expert panel (Lewis & Neville, 2015). In Study 1, exploratory factor analysis with a sample of 259 Black women identified a multidimensional structure with four distinct factors: (a) assumptions of beauty and sexual objectification, (b) silenced and marginalized, (c) strong Black Woman stereotype, and (d) angry Black Woman stereotype.

Study 2 confirmed the adequacy of this 4-factor model for both frequency and stress appraisal scales through confirmatory factor analysis with an independent sample of 210 Black women. The GRMS demonstrated strong reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.78 to 0.91 across subscales, and validity was supported by significant correlations with psychological distress and established measures of racial and sexist microaggressions.

Similarly, the Work and Family Conflict Scale, developed by Kelloway et al. (1999), was designed to assess four dimensions of work-family conflict: (a) strain-based work to family, (b) time-based work to family, (c) strain-based family to work, and (d) time-based family to work. Reliability was robust, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.75 to 0.85 across various subscales over different waves of data collection. Confirmatory factor analysis with data from 236 employees supported the scale's factor structure. We carefully designed our survey to reflect the strengths of the scales mentioned. We combined these scales into one survey because together, they best captured the barriers that previous literature has identified as being experienced by Black women when they advance into leadership roles.

Prior to the full-scale deployment of the instrument, the survey underwent a pilot phase with a sample of 10 respondents. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from an accredited academic institution before the study. This piloting process facilitated iterative feedback, allowing for the refinement of survey items to enhance clarity, comprehension, and relevance. Minor edits were made based on the pilot respondents' feedback to improve the efficacy and validity of the survey instrument. Once finalized, the survey was administered online using the Qualtrics platform, providing a convenient and secure environment for data collection. It took respondents 15 to 20 minutes to complete the survey.

The survey began with a consent form outlining the purpose, duration, administration procedures, potential risks and benefits, and the intended use and assurances of privacy and confidentiality. It included six sections, each addressing distinct aspects related to respondent demographics, experiences of gender oppression, mentorship access and importance, lack of professional development, work-life imbalance, and strategies for overcoming barriers. The question formats included Likert scales and open-ended questions, providing comprehensive insights into respondents' perspectives and experiences.

Data collection occurred over one month during the summer of 2022. At the end of the survey, respondents received the researcher's contact information so they could share additional thoughts or ask questions. They could also provide their own contact information if interested in future research on this topic. All responses and communications were kept confidential.

Validity and Reliability

We employed various techniques to ensure the validity and reliability of our survey instrument. We utilized construct

validity as we adapted and selected items from previously existing scales that were theoretically relevant to our research objectives. We also demonstrated reliability in previous research through measures such as internal consistency reliability, which assesses the extent to which items within a scale consistently measure the same underlying construct.

In addition, piloting the survey with a small group of respondents and iteratively refining the survey items based on their feedback ensured that the selected items accurately measured the intended constructs and were comprehensible to our target population of Black women employed at HBCUs. This pilot study also allowed us to assess internal consistency and test-retest reliability. Incorporating skip logic and clear instructions in the survey design minimized respondent error. Finally, rigorous data cleaning and validation checks were conducted to identify and address any potential inconsistencies or outliers in the dataset, thereby bolstering the overall reliability of the quantitative survey data.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this exploratory quantitative study involved several steps to ensure a comprehensive examination of the collected data. The analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). First, descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics and scale responses. Measures of central tendency were used to describe continuous variables (e.g., age). Frequencies and percentages represented categorical variables (e.g., educational level, university roles, tenure status, and marital status).

An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to identify the underlying factor structure of the survey items (Refer to Table 2 for validity and reliability factors). The specific steps included running a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation to extract factors (Adams & Lawrence, 2019). In addition, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity were used to assess the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were retained, and items with factor loadings of 0.40 or higher were considered significant (Adams & Lawrence, 2019). To elaborate, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure for the entire dataset was 0.398. A low KMO value indicates weak correlations between the variables, suggesting that the variable measurements are quite diverse. This was expected in our study, as we designed our survey using previously validated scales to measure the relevant theoretical variables we believe are best suited to assess the barriers Black women face in attaining leadership roles at HBCUs. For example, when we focused on specific barrier experiences such as gender oppression, work-life balance, and microaggressions scales, the KMO was 0.885. For professional development and mentorship experiences, the KMO was 0.622, indicating that the measures we wanted to examine are interconnected.

Additionally, we obtained strong reliability statistics and are confident that we accurately measured the intended variables.

We conducted a reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha to evaluate the internal consistency of each scale. This analysis was performed in SPSS by selecting the relevant items and using the default Cronbach's alpha option under the Reliability Analysis function. The resulting Cronbach's alpha coefficients are presented in Table 4. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 or higher was considered acceptable, signifying that the items within each scale reliably measured the same construct.

Table 2
Validity and reliability of factors

Validity and reliability of factors	Items	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Sig.	Eigenvalue	% Variance Explained
Microaggressions: Workplace marginalization	7	.868	378.96	<.001	4.685	66.93
Microaggressions: Black women stereotypes	7	.882	401.01	<.001	4.67	66.88
Gender Oppression	5	.858	317.31	<.001	3.866	77.32
Lack of professional development: Training Opportunities	5	.837	84.162	<.001	2.991	59.81
Lack of professional development: Scholarship/ Grant Writing	4	.744	91.44	<.001	2.749	68.72
Value of mentorship for career advancement	7	.823	265.03	<.001	3.739	53.42
Work-life imbalance	5	.829	217.62	<.001	3.526	70.51

The results of the factor analysis reveal a robust underlying structure encompassing various workplace-related constructs. Microaggressions: workplace marginalization and Black women stereotypes each account for approximately 67% of the variance, indicating that these factors effectively capture a significant amount of variability related to marginalization and stereotyping experiences in the workplace. Gender oppression stands out with the highest explained variance at 77.32%, emphasizing the prominence of gender-based differential treatment as a distinct and impactful experience.

The lack of professional development factors, which encompass training opportunities and scholarship/grant writing, explain approximately 60% and 69% of the variance, respectively, underscoring these as crucial areas of professional development barriers. The value of mentorship for career advancement factor, slightly lower at 53.42% of the explained variance, remains acceptable and reflects the impact of mentorship on a variety of career-related skills. Lastly, the work-life imbalance factor explains 70.51% of the variance, capturing the considerable influence of work commitments on personal life balance.

The high KMO values and significant results from Bartlett's test indicate the data's suitability for factor analysis, while the high eigenvalues and explained variance across factors reinforce their reliability and distinctiveness. Altogether, these findings affirm that each factor represents meaningful constructs, validating them as reliable measures for assessing workplace challenges, professional development barriers, and the value of mentorship, making them well-suited for further research analysis.

Results

Our study examined barriers Black women experience when ascending into a leadership role at an HBCU. A total of 204 responses were received. However, after removing missing data, 93 responses were completed and included in the final analysis.

Research question # 1: What barriers do Black women encounter in their ascension to leadership positions at HBCUs?

Descriptive Statistics

At the beginning of the survey, respondents were asked, in general, to select yes or no if they encountered some barriers ascending to leadership and to what degree they experienced them. One hundred percent (n = 93) of respondents reported having experienced at least one of the following barriers at an HBCU: sexism/gender bias, lack of network and mentors, caregiving/family responsibilities, physical/mental health and wellness, and imposter syndrome. Refer to Table 3 for response descriptives.

Table 3

Degree of experience with barriers

To what degree do you feel you have experienced the barriers below?	n	Mean	St. D	Scale
Sexism/Gender bias	72	3.60	1.241	1=none, 2=slight, 3=somewhat, 4=moderate, 5=extreme
Limited access to professional networks or mentors	73	3.33	1.463	1=none, 2=slight, 3=somewhat, 4=moderate, 5=extreme
Caregiving/Family responsibilities	73	2.48	1.529	1=none, 2=slight, 3=somewhat, 4=moderate, 5=extreme
Mental or physical health/wellness	73	2.55	1.482	1=none, 2=slight, 3=somewhat, 4=moderate, 5=extreme
Internal barriers/Imposter syndrome	73	2.97	1.414	1=none, 2=slight, 3=somewhat, 4=moderate, 5=extreme

After addressing the initial broad questions about general experiences with barriers, the survey included additional barrier scales to further examine specific instances of microaggressions, gender oppression, lack of professional development, and work-life imbalances that Black women experienced at HBCU while attempting to ascend to a leadership position. We also inquired about the importance of mentorship in overcoming the identified barriers and asked respondents to share coping mechanisms and strategies. Table 4 presents a detailed summary of the psychometric and descriptive statistics of the barrier scales used in the study.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions: Workplace marginalization and Black women stereotypes had mean scores of 23.37 and 19.79, respectively, with relatively higher standard deviations (6.4 and 8.4), suggesting variability in participants' experiences of marginalization and stereotyping in the workplace. This indicates that these events happen sometimes or frequently to the respondents. When examining individual instances over their careers, 91% of respondents felt unheard at some point in their academic career, and 92% had their comments ignored. Another 89% reported being disrespected in the workplace, and 91% felt their authority was challenged. The item with the highest score was the question, "I am assumed to be a strong Black woman," with a mean of 60.79. For this question, 91% of the respondents stated that they have been assumed to be strong Black women. When examining occurrences over their careers, 70% of the respondents reported that someone had told them to calm down, 61% were perceived as an angry Black woman, and 68% reported that someone accused them of being angry when speaking calmly.

Gender Oppression

Gender Oppression had a mean of 19.26 and the highest standard deviation (9.12), indicating that experiences of gender-based discrimination may vary widely among respondents. Forty-one percent of the respondents felt that they had experienced unfriendliness or unwelcoming behavior at work due to their gender. Forty-two percent also felt that their opinions were overlooked and ignored, and their work was assumed to be inferior to men. Additionally, 56% of respondents felt their employer or co-workers treated them differently than their male co-workers.

Table 4

Psychometric and Descriptive Statistics for Barrier Scales

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	n	Range	Mean	St. D
Microaggressions: Workplace marginalization	.917	81	7-35	23.37	6.4
Microaggressions: Black women stereotypes	.916	81	7-35	19.79	8.4
Gender Oppression	.926	81	5-35	19.26	9.12
Lack of professional development: Training Opportunities	.878	51	5-24	13.64	4.52
Lack of professional development: Scholarship/ Grant Writing	.844	51	4-18	9.70	2.95
Value of mentorship in career advancement	.843	92	13-30	25.61	4.11
Work-life imbalance	.895	74	5-25	16.01	6.04

Lack of Professional Development

Respondents provided information on the availability of various professional development opportunities at their institutions. The lack of professional development scales had moderate means, with training opportunities at 13.64 (SD = 4.52) and

scholarship/grant writing at 9.70 (SD = 2.95), showing that perceptions of limited access to professional development opportunities are less intense but still consistent across participants. A substantial 64% of respondents affirmed the presence of professional development opportunities at their respective HBCUs. At first glance, this statistic reflects a commendable commitment to nurturing the growth and potential of the HBCU faculty. However, delving deeper into the responses reveals a more nuanced narrative. Among those surveyed, 63% reported that professional development opportunities extended beyond the confines of the campus.

To better understand the specifics of these professional development offerings, respondents were asked to assess how frequently various programs were made available to them. A significant majority, 61% of respondents, “rarely” or “never” experienced publication training and writing groups. Advising training was found to be seldom offered, with 30% experiencing it “rarely” and 20% indicating that it was entirely absent in their professional journey. Funding for faculty engagement through conference attendance was seldom offered, with 42% of the respondents stating that it was “rarely” or “never offered.” A significant portion of respondents, 56%, noted that leadership training was “rarely” or “never offered” at their institutions, indicating a gap in leadership development opportunities. Grant-related training, including grant writing, grant writing assistance, and grant identification assistance, was reported as “rarely” or “never offered” by a substantial percentage of respondents, ranging from 41% to 51%.

More than half of the respondents, 54%, reported that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training was “rarely” or “never offered,” indicating a need for increased focus on diversity and inclusion initiatives. Concerningly, Title IX training was “never offered” for 10% of respondents and “rarely offered” for 34%, highlighting a compliance and ethics training gap. Finally, assessment training received limited attention, with 14% “never” being offered this training, 27% “rarely,” and 35% “occasionally,” suggesting the need for more comprehensive training in educational efficacy evaluation.

Value of mentorship in career advancement

Respondents were asked to rate how important they felt mentoring was in various professional development areas in higher education. Categories for consideration ranged from networking to skill development to publishing. Additionally, questions asked whether respondents had a mentor and the nature of the mentoring relationship. The value of mentorship for career advancement had a mean of 25.61 and a lower standard deviation (4.11), suggesting generally high regard for mentorship with relatively consistent views across the sample.

However, recognizing this importance, 71% of the respondents reported that they did not have a mentor at their HBCU. Of those who did have a mentor (29%), the majority (93%) of those mentoring relationships developed organically instead of being

assigned by their institution or as a part of a formal mentoring program.

Work-Life Imbalance

Work-life imbalance had a mean of 16.01 and a standard deviation of 6.04, which indicates moderate concern among participants about balancing work and personal life, with some variability in their experiences. The majority of the respondents indicated they had not experienced significant barriers that impeded their work-life balance. To further evaluate the work-life imbalance, 63% of respondents “somewhat agreed” and “strongly agreed” that it is difficult to tell where their work life ends, and their family/non-work life begins.

The consistent reliability and varied mean scores observed across these scales emphasize the significant impact of these experiences in the workplace. The high mean scores in microaggressions, gender oppression, and work-life imbalance highlight the notable challenges faced by participants. In contrast, the high mean value of mentorship underscores the perceived importance of mentorship for career growth. These findings affirm the reliability of the scales as valuable tools for further exploring the influence of workplace dynamics, developmental opportunities, and mentorship in professional settings.

We ran several ANOVAs to examine the relationship between variables. Tables 5 and 6 highlight the impact of gender oppression and various forms of microaggressions on perceived barriers to leadership and access to professional resources within HBCUs. Separate one-way ANOVAs were conducted with each identified barrier and the following questions, “Do you feel like you have experienced barriers to attaining a leadership role at your HBCU?” and “To what degree do you experience barriers, such as sexism, limited access to professional networks and mentors, caregiving, mental/physical wellness, imposter syndrome?” The results in Table 5 indicate that gender oppression significantly influences respondents' perception of barriers to attaining a leadership role at their HBCU, with a high F-value of 17.691 and $p < .001$. Additionally, microaggressions: workplace marginalization also has a significant effect ($F = 8.437$, $p = .005$), suggesting that experiences of workplace marginalization are linked to perceived leadership barriers. These findings highlight the substantial impact of gender oppression and workplace marginalization on respondents' perceptions of their leadership opportunities.

Table 5

Factorial ANOVA for Gender Oppression, Workplace Microaggressions, & Do you feel like you have experienced barriers to attaining a leadership role at your HBCU?

Source of Variation	SS	df	M	F	P-value
Gender Oppression	1219.55	1	1219.55	17.691	<.001
Microaggressions: Workplace Marginalization	442.03	1	442.03	8.437	.005

* $p < 0.05$

*Table does not report interactions due to cell sizes

In Table 6, we analyzed the relationship between microaggressions and a broader range of perceived barriers, including sexism, limited professional networks, caregiving, wellness, and imposter syndrome. The results show that microaggressions, workplace marginalization ($F = 2.019, p = .028$), and microaggressions, Black women stereotypes ($F = 2.156, p = .019$) significantly impact these perceived barriers. This suggests that stereotyped expectations and assumptions about Black women contribute to a heightened perception of workplace and professional challenges. Overall, these findings emphasize the substantial role that gender oppression and microaggressions play in shaping the professional experiences of respondents and highlight the need for targeted interventions to mitigate these barriers and promote equitable leadership opportunities and professional support within HBCUs.

Table 6

Factorial ANOVA for Microaggressions & To what degree do you experience barriers, such as sexism, limited access to professional networks and mentors, caregiving, mental/physical wellness, imposter syndrome?

Source of Variation	SS	df	M	F	P-value
Microaggressions: Workplace Marginalization	1597.60	20	79.88	2.019	.028
Microaggressions: Black Women Stereotypes	2237.49	20	111.87	2.156	.019

* $p < 0.05$

Next, we will describe the coping strategies that the respondents used to overcome the barriers experienced.

Research Question # 2: If barriers exist, what coping strategies do Black women use to overcome such barriers?

The survey included an index measuring coping mechanisms (Manley, 2015). The question asked which coping strategies women have used when faced with obstacles while pursuing leadership positions. Respondents were able to check all items that applied. Therefore, the percentage will not equal 100% as respondents could select more than one item. Some items on the list included consulting with a mentor, turning to family and friends for encouragement, or applying for other jobs.

Mechanisms utilized by 50% or more of the sample were Family and friends (76%), Professional networks (62%), National conferences (62%), Consulting with colleagues (58%), Seeking additional education (54%), and Talking with a mentor (50%). Women were asked about the strategies they felt were most effective in addressing barriers to leadership advancement. Ninety-five percent of respondents selected mentorship, and 81% selected effective leadership as a key strategy. Although we were able to answer the research questions that guided our study, it was not without limitations.

Limitations

When interpreting the results of a study, it is important to consider various aspects, even when statistical analysis has been conducted to determine the significance between variables. One such aspect is the issue of researcher bias, which can arise when the researcher's personal beliefs or opinions influence the

collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. To minimize this potential bias, we used objective measures to ensure that the survey instrument used to collect the data was reliable and valid (Creswell, 2014).

Another crucial factor to consider is the sample size. While statistical analysis can provide valuable insights into the relationship between variables, the findings may not apply to the entire population based on the sample size (Creswell, 2014). In addition, conducting more sophisticated statistical analysis was challenging due to the sample size. We encourage future researchers to expand the sample size to assess differences among experiences between roles or departments.

Moreover, time constraints could have influenced the findings of this study. The duration allocated for data collection and analysis may not have been sufficient to capture all relevant factors or fully comprehend the relationship between variables. Another limitation is the possibility of measurement error, which can occur if the data collection instrument is not adequately designed or if the respondents misunderstand the questions (Creswell, 2014).

The scope of the study is also a limitation to consider. Our research question focused on a specific population. Therefore, the findings may not apply to other contexts or groups. Additionally, extraneous variables that were not taken into account during the study may have affected the results. These variables could include environmental factors, cultural differences, or individual characteristics of respondents that were not measured.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that research is an ongoing process. While this study may have contributed valuable insights, there is always more to learn and discover. Future studies can build on these findings and explore new questions, leading to greater understanding and knowledge.

Discussion

We explored the barriers Black women face when ascending to leadership roles at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and the coping strategies they employ to overcome these barriers. Guided by our two research questions, we gathered data from 93 Black women who aspire to or have aspired to leadership roles in HBCUs. The following discussion integrates our findings with the existing literature to provide insights into these barriers and strategies.

Research Question 1: What barriers do Black women encounter in their ascension to leadership positions at HBCUs?

We identified several significant barriers Black women encounter when aspiring to leadership positions at HBCUs. The primary barriers identified included microaggressions, gender oppression, limited access to professional networks and mentors, and work-life imbalances.

Gender oppression emerged as a prominent barrier, with an overwhelming majority of respondents indicating these issues as significant obstacles. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting the pervasive nature of gender discrimination in academic settings (Hollis, 2018). Such biases often result in Black women being perceived as less competent and authoritative compared to their male counterparts, further hindering their professional advancement. Seventy-one percent of the respondents reported not having a mentor at their HBCU, and if they did have a mentor, the relationship grew organically, indicating that HBCUs do not have formal mentor programs established. This limitation can significantly impact career progression, as networking and mentorship are crucial for professional development and advancement (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The lack of formal mentoring programs at many institutions exacerbates this issue, as informal networks are often less accessible to Black women. Respondents also indicated that the stress associated with balancing work and personal responsibilities, coupled with the pressures of facing discrimination, can adversely affect overall well-being and career progression (Manke, 2019).

We also found that gender oppression, workplace microaggressions, and stereotypes about Black women were highlighted by respondents as having a profound effect on Black women's professional experiences at HBCUs. More importantly, these findings are consistent with the experiences explained by the Black feminist theory and provide a robust framework for understanding the complex and intersectional nature of the barriers faced by Black women in their pursuit of leadership roles at HBCUs. This theoretical perspective emphasizes the unique experiences of Black women at the intersection of race, gender, and other social categories, and it critiques systems of oppression that perpetuate inequality. Our findings can be elucidated through the lenses of several key concepts within Black feminist theory.

The concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is central to Black feminist theory. It posits that Black women's experiences cannot be understood solely through the lenses of race or gender alone but must be examined at their intersection. Our study found that gender oppression, limited access to professional networks, and work-life imbalance are significant obstacles for Black women. Intersectionality explains that these barriers are not just additive but multiplicative, creating unique and compounded challenges that differ from those faced by White women or Black men. In some cases, people experience both racism and sexism, which is known as double jeopardy. This can result in them being seen as less competent or authoritative. In our research, we found that over 50% of respondents reported experiencing gender oppression (Collins, 2019).

In addition to this, one of the findings highlighted the impact of the "Strong Black Woman" (SBW) stereotype, where 91% of respondents reported being assumed to be strong and resilient. This stereotype, while seemingly positive, places undue

emotional and psychological burdens on Black women, expecting them to endure stress and adversity without complaint. Collins (1990) describes how controlling images justify and perpetuate social inequalities. The SBW stereotype can lead to the neglect of Black women's mental health needs, as indicated by 45% of our respondents identifying mental and physical health as significant barriers.

Research Question 2: What coping strategies do Black women use to overcome such barriers?

In the study, we also explored the coping strategies employed by Black women to navigate and overcome the identified barriers. Respondents indicated a variety of strategies, with several common themes emerging. Black feminist theory emphasizes the agency and resilience of Black women in resisting and navigating oppressive structures (Rosette et al., 2018). Our findings on coping strategies such as relying on family and friends, professional networks, and seeking additional education underscore this resilience. These strategies reflect Black women's collective wisdom and resourcefulness to overcome barriers. The high value placed on mentorship, cited by 95% of respondents, aligns with the communal ethos emphasized in Black feminist thought, which values relationships and collective support as essential for survival and success (Collins, 1990). Support from family and friends was the most frequently cited coping mechanism utilized by 76% of respondents. These findings are consistent with research by Smith & Johnson (2019) and underscore the importance of personal support networks in providing emotional and practical assistance in navigating professional challenges.

Over 60% of respondents cited professional networks and mentorship as significant strategies. These networks provide essential support, guidance, and opportunities for professional growth. Respondents also sought additional education and attended national conferences (54% and 62%, respectively). These activities enhance skills and knowledge and provide opportunities to build networks and gain visibility within the academic community.

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant barriers Black women face in ascending to leadership roles at HBCUs, with gender oppression and lack of professional support being the most prominent. The coping strategies identified, particularly the importance of mentorship and established professional networks, offer valuable insights into addressing these challenges. HBCU institutions can play a crucial role by fostering inclusive environments and providing formal support systems to facilitate the professional advancement of Black women in academia.

Research and Policy Recommendations

It is crucial to conduct more research to fully understand the experiences of Black women in higher education. Such research should involve comparing experiences at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), exploring cultural differences, and using mixed-methods studies. Leaders at HBCUs should establish safe

spaces and provide leadership development opportunities specifically for Black women. HBCU leadership should recognize and respond to the diverse experiences of Black women working at their institutions and offer mentorship, leadership development, and career advancement opportunities to increase the representation of Black women in leadership positions.

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