

1-1-2000

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### Recommended Citation

Woody, Bette; Brown, Diane; and Green, TeResa (2000) "Black Women in the Economy: Facing Glass Ceilings in Academia," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: [http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter\\_review/vol12/iss1/8](http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol12/iss1/8)

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# Black Women in the Economy: Facing Glass Ceilings in Academia

By  
**Bette Woody,  
Diane Brown, and  
TeResa Green.**

## Introduction

Nancy Jones, 35, successfully completed her PhD in Sociology at an elite East Coast university in September. Thanks to her perseverance and networking among women's caucuses in several academic organizations, she had three job prospects, though no firm offers. One job possibility is a rural campus of a state college system in the South while the other two are located in lesser campuses of state university systems just outside big cities in the Midwest. All require heavy teaching loads, provide no research support and one, the highest ranked, is actually an untenured joint appointment with women's studies. Nancy wonders whether it was worth it all to struggle to get the doctorate when her best offer is a post-doc where she just finished her degree. Nancy's best friend, Sally Herbert, also Black and female, was less fortunate. To stay with her husband and growing family in the Washington D.C. area, Sally rejected her one job offer in a campus of a West Coast university system, to take a part time replacement position in a private university located in the District of Columbia. After one semester, she is thinking of looking for a better paid government job. So far, her academic job search in the D.C. area has lasted more than a year and the only possibility is a one year appointment in a community college. A mentor of Sally's, Adelaide Smith, a distinguished political scientist, has just resigned from a tenured faculty position in an elite California university to take a full time executive position with a leading private foundation on the East Coast. Professor Smith declared to her incredulous friends, "I'm sorry, I'm really tired of the racist games on both sides; I'm going to spend the last days of my [professional] life at least getting well paid, along with some recognition for my trouble."

These are not real individuals, but rather composites of typical experiences of Black women with doctorates in the social sciences trying against the odds to pursue academic careers today. Long denied all but the most marginal jobs in higher education, Black women have made astonishing gains getting on academic career ladders over the past 20 years. But for all their impressive achievements in obtaining doctoral degrees in challenging fields at top US universities, Black women remain in the backwater of academic careerism, over-represented in low prestige schools, relegated to part time, low paid teaching jobs, and frequently hired in off tenure track positions which are likely to be at least partly saddled with administrative duties, work which offers least prospects for mobility. Why such an outcome for the most discriminated population in the US? The answers appear to lie in a continuing set of discrimination patterns institutionalized in higher education institutions, reinforced by new and subtle stereotypes and strategies, which hit Black women with the double whammy of being Black and female. Worst of all, Black women are more and more viewed as a marginal population, not able to satisfy the "preference for Black men" to fill "affirmative action slots" on teaching faculty.

The shrinking population of Black male doctoral degree holders may hold much of the key to the problems of Black women. Declines in Black male interest in doctoral degrees, has clearly not spelled gains for the recruitment of Black female scholars. New evidence of these patterns is visible in the latest government data on academic achievement of Black women and teaching job success. While Black women are achieving at high rates, they are also systematically by-passed by an expanded recruitment of African and Caribbean males to fill teaching positions in doctoral and research institutions. This new trend has probably reduced Black women's chances more than any other. Second, the new found Black male networks have had major success in assuring members get support and information on academic jobs. Major questions need to be raised about these trends and more attention focused on unearthing and correcting root causes of specific discriminatory treatment of Black women in university faculty hiring and promotion.

## **Background: Are Black Women Prepared for Academic Teaching and Research Careers?**

Black women were historically all but excluded from higher education jobs until the 1960's. With passage of

the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960's, dramatic increases took place in enrollments at the university level. The impact was particularly felt in doctoral and professional degree programs. Between 1976-77, immediately following the passage of civil rights legislation and 1995, the last year reported by the US Department of Education, Black women doctoral degree holders grew by 80 percent compared to 70 percent for white women:

**Table 1: Changes in Doctoral and Professional Degrees for Black Women**

Year	Black Male	Black Female	White Male	White Female
1976-77	766	487	20,032	6,819
1978-79		734	534	18,430
				7,705
1980-81		694	571	17,310
				8,598
1984-85		561	593	15,017
				8,917
1986-87		488	572	14,813
				9,662
1988-89		490	575	14,540
				10,342
1989-90		533	612	15,102
				10,691

Source: US. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, *Doctoral Degrees, 1976-77 to 1989-90 Table 255* (Washington D. C., 1992). Years are as given in source and not sequential.

As Table 1 indicates, Black women were highly successful in increasing completion of doctoral degrees or 26 percent over the period 1976 to 1990. This compares to losses of 30 percent by Black men and a 25 percent loss by white men. At the same time, this occurred when the number of degrees awarded to both Blacks and whites declined overall, while those awarded to Hispanics increased by 30 percent and to Asian Americans nearly doubled. Black women nonetheless could be considered the most successful population among women degree holders, passing male counterparts in the number of degrees conferred by 1990.

There are no real explanations for the contraction of Black men doctoral degree completions compared to white male declines. White women, as affirmative action candidates, clearly did gain doctoral slots in programs, in some cases, at the expense of white male enrollments. But Black men as affirmative action candidates, would benefit from recruitment preferences. One explanation offered is that Black men were diverted to more lucrative professional degrees which are easier to achieve and are better compensated than PhD's. This, however, is not borne out by statistics on the most sought after professional degrees, medicine and law. Indeed, it is Black women who have made the most spectacular gains in professional degrees. In 1976-77, according to US education statistics, professional degrees conferred to Blacks totaled 2,537, with 30 percent conferred on Black women. By 1989-90, however, of a total of 3,389 professional degrees awarded, fifty two percent were awarded to Black women. Medicine and law serve to illustrate further. Black women earned 463 MD's in 1989-90, compared to 424 earned by Black men. In the case of law, Black women earned 956 law degrees in 1989-90, compared to only 762 law degrees earned by Black men. This reduction in Black male candidates whatever the cause, however, still does not explain why the status of Black women still did not improve.

Other key achievements by Black women were in diversifying their fields of specialization into science and technology. Although Black women do tend to remain over concentrated compared to others in education and psychology and other social sciences, Black women are obtaining doctoral degrees in life sciences, health sciences and physical sciences. By 1997, 1,450 or 34.8 percent of Black women holding doctorates were working in the physical, life sciences and engineering and 2,630 or 63 percent were working in social and behavioral sciences. Thus despite a continuing lag in appointments in these new fields (see Table 2 below), Black women have nonetheless taken the important risk of pushing ahead in non traditional fields of study.

### **What Kind of Payoff Do Black Women Doctoral Degree Holders Get in the Workplace?**

Despite overwhelming success in gaining doctorates, Black women continue to face considerable odds in translating individual effort and achievement in obtaining doctoral degrees into mainstream positions and rewards. One way to look at success is to examine the

kind of occupations Black women enter following completion of the degree and second, the reward structure and success Black women have, once employed.

As with all PhD's, Black women have three principal employers: higher education, industry and government. Black women are more likely than white women and men or Black men to be employed in universities and 4 year colleges (56.1% compared to 54.7% for Black men; 48.7 for white women and 44.8 for white men) and far less likely to be employed in industry (12 percent, compared to 23 percent for Black men and 20 percent of white women) and more likely to be employed in government or 15% compared to 9 percent for Black men, 10 percent for white women and 11 percent for white men.<sup>1</sup>

In higher education, where most Black women doctoral degree holders are employed, patterns contrast in the dominant tasks performed, to the disadvantage of Black women. First, Black women do more teaching, administration and services and less research, both applied or basic, than do white women and Black and white men. This pattern has a generally negative impact on traditional academic mobility tracks. Since research is key to promotions on academic ladders and much of the "services and administration" performed by Black women is in the non-academic arena, Black women are less linked to the people and decisions to the arena where tenure and promotions are made as well as research and publications and other professional discourse.

The type of university setting of employment plays a critical role in mobility, by providing (or not) support for research and publication, travel to professional conferences, computing facilities and libraries. Higher status institutions – doctoral and research institutions – typically provide course release time for faculty to work on special projects and research to enhance their status. Two- and four-year colleges typically do not. In the employment setting, Black women face a far bigger disadvantage than others. They are more likely than Black men to be employed in two- and four-year and in state colleges characterized by high teaching loads.

Faculty appointments have multiple characterizations however, and they vary in stability, pay and prestige. In the faculty hierarchy, tenure track appointments carry potentially permanent status, non-tenure track (part time, and various lecturer categories) do not. To achieve

tenure, however, is complex and varies considerably in its ease by field, timing, type of institution and many would say, race and sex. Tenure is achieved by passing through a complex procedure of performance and "peer review". Tenure seekers must first be hired in the right job, secondly during at least five years of employment, usually pass two reviews based on achievement in research, teaching and service.

Much has been made of the complexity and subjectiveness of the tenure process. Much research on discrimination against women and minorities has noted that the culture of departments and disciplines lie at the center of discrimination. As the American Sociological Association's committee on the status of women pointed out, women and minorities are not always "socialized in the prevailing norms and values regarding research, publication, grants, teaching and other activities."<sup>2</sup> Token status and isolation of Black women also hurts, serving to reduce tenure chances.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the overwhelming dependence by Black women on employment in university and college settings, it is useful to examine the "payoff" in status and compensation in this sector, compared to others. According to 1997 government data, Black women's main responsibilities are in teaching and administration, and far less than others in R&D as the following distribution of work shows:

**Table 2: Primary Work Activity of Doctoral Scientists and Engineering 1997**

Primary work activity	White Male	White Female	Black Male	Black Female
R & D	40.9	31.7	31.4	23.2
Applied	19.8	15.4	16.6	12.1
Basic Research	13.1	12.5	9.8	7.5
Teaching	21.8	25.5	32.0	29.0
Management and Administration	17.7	13.8	17.3	21.2
Professional Services	10.1	21.7	9.2	19.6

Source: National Science Foundation/Division of Science Resources Studies, *Survey of Doctoral Recipients, Table 48* (Washington D.C., NSF, 1997).

Data indicate that Black women are highly likely to work in relatively low status occupations, such as non-science and engineering post secondary teachers where

the proportion of Black women is over 10 percent, compared to around 5 percent for Black men, and 8.6 percent for white women. Black women holding doctorates are also more likely to work in non-scientific managerial positions than Black men, white men or white women.

Some of this disadvantage in occupation and work settings is related to the teaching status of Black women compared to others. While Black women doctoral holders are more dependent on academic settings for work, they also are more likely to work in less prestigious institutions, where teaching loads are heavy and research and publications less likely to be supported. Government data supports this: statistics indicate that Black women doctorate holders, are less likely than both Black men and white women to receive Federal government support for their work.<sup>4</sup>

As noted above, Black women are more likely than Black men, for example to teach in two- and four-year colleges, and less likely to teach in doctoral research institutions. According to 1997 data for example, 7.4 percent of Black women teach in non-four year or doctoral institutions, compared to 4.1 percent of Black men, 4.8 percent of white women and 2.1 percent of white men.<sup>5</sup> These lower status institutions are undoubtedly reflected in the substantially lower rewards in the form of appointment status and pay.

### The Ultimate Payoff: Status and Pay of Black Women

The disadvantages noted above are carried over into lower status and pay for Black women compared to others in higher education. Black women are more likely to work in part time, non-tenured positions than others. According to 1995 data<sup>6</sup>, 9.0% percent of Black women worked part time; 9.4 percent worked full time outside their field and 2.5 were unemployed. This compares to 5.2 percent of Black men working part time, 10.0 percent working full time outside their field and 2.1 percent unemployed. While white women also work at high part time levels, other advantages such as higher salaries, better support and more tenure opportunities, compared to Black women, may act as compensation.

Black women generally fare poorly compared to others in rank, suggesting that mobility is considerably less for these doctorate holders than others. Black women are less likely to be tenured or hold the rank of full profes-

sor. Fully 18.2 percent of Black women hold positions where there is no tenure system for the position held, and 9.1 percent are not on a tenure track, compared to Black men where 10.7 percent have no tenure for their position and 7.1 percent are not on a tenure track.

Black women rank consistently below Black men and white men and women in tenure status as well. This reflects a generally longer time in rank before promotion for Black women, as well as the failure for many to reach full professor status.<sup>7</sup> According to NSF data, forty five percent of Black women faculty held the rank of assistant professor (untenured), while 27.2 percent were associate professor with tenure and 9.0 percent were full professor in 1995. This compares to 30 percent of white women at assistant professor level; 23.3 at associate level and 18 percent at the level of full professor. For Black men, the numbers are 28.6 assistant professors; 32.1 associate professors and 25.0 full professors.

All of these factors of disadvantage, institution type, research support, tenure rank and status, are reflected in salaries paid. Although there is no data which accounts for differences in pay caused by years in rank, median annual salaries for specific age groups for full time doctoral scientists for 1995 indicate a systematic disadvantage for Black women faculty as the table below indicates:

**Table 3. Median Annual Salaries for Full Time Employed Scientists and Engineers**

<u>Occupation and Age</u>	<u>Women White</u>	<u>Women Black</u>	<u>Men White</u>	<u>Men Black</u>
<i>Science and Engineering Total</i>				
20-29	31,000	33,000	36,000	36,000
30-39	43,000	43,000	50,000	47,000
40-49	47,692	47,500	58,800	48,900
50, over	39,344	34,000	62,000	54,000
<i>Life and related sciences</i>				
20-29	20,000	-	21,000	-
30-39	33,000	27,800	39,500	31,000
40-49	45,000	36,300	48,500	48,000
50, over	43,400	33,000	60,000	53,000

**Table 3. (Cont'd)**

<u>Occupation and Age</u>	<u>Women White</u>	<u>Women Black</u>	<u>Men White</u>	<u>Men Black</u>
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*Physical and related sciences*

20-29	29,000	-	25,000	-
30-39	40,000	45,000	42,500	43,000
40-49	46,000	-	57,800	45,000
50, over	44,900	-	65,000	47,000

*Social and related sciences*

20-29	23,000	-	25,000	-
30-39	35,500	34,200	39,000	49,900
40-49	41,500	37,800	48,600	35,000
50, over	47,400	29,000	59,000	63,000

Source: National Science Foundation, Median Annual Salaries...1995, *Women, Minorities and Persons With Disabilities in Science and Engineering* (Washington D.C.: NSF, 1998), Appendix, Tables 5-27.

As data from NSF indicates, the salary disadvantage Black women suffer occurs at each stage of individual careers, as well as across fields. In life sciences, for example, where merit based considerations would be expected, Black women are systematically paid less than Black men, and white women and men. In the social sciences where Black women are heavily concentrated, Black women earn less both when age is taken into account and within each of the five sub fields documented in NSF data. Black female political scientists, for example, earn a median annual salary of 45,000, compared to 71,000 earned by Black men, 60,000 earned by white men and 51,800 for white females. In the field of psychology, Black women earn 52,000, compared to 57,000 for Black men, 53,000 for white women and 65,000 for white men. Only in sociology do Black women earn competitive salaries with Black men and white women, but they still earn \$1,000 less annually than white men.

**Conclusion - Which Way for Black Women?**

Black women face a singularly tough challenge in today's academic market both owing to constraints on career ladder access and by choices they make. Career ladder access problems are more severe than most research to date implies. New data, however, reveals that Black women are likely to face barriers in initial appointments to university faculties. Despite the expansion of Black women, and the shrinking number of Black males, Black women do not profit from affirmative action goals and enforcement in academia. Indeed one of the most sobering facts from new data is the replacement of Black men by African male non-citizens to meet affirmative action goals. Currently more

than one third of academics classified as "Black males" in fact are African and this constitutes the highest percentage of foreigners of any academic population. This "preference" not only leaves Black women out of the recruitment pool, but it may have important consequences on the philosophy and knowledge brought to the classroom and research and calls into question the motives of white institutions in expanding recruitment of white women, while reducing recruitment efforts for Black women. Tenure and pay reflect recruitment and hiring disadvantages. A glass ceiling, reducing promotion chances for Black women appears to consist of a combination of reduced support (for important grants to perform research and publications) and time off to conduct professional duties. Thus fewer Black women obtain tenure, or are promoted to full professor. This lack of success reinforces the problem: young Black female doctoral students are far less likely to find mentors, or to achieve in the research arena, if they never see Black women in mainstream faculty roles. Finally, all of these factors reduce the possibility of Black women forming networks to fight their own causes. Both Black men and white women have aggressively organized very effective networks over the past decade to undermine glass-ceiling problems, and both hiring and pay have been helped by such efforts. Networks also explain the proliferation of grants from mainstream foundations and federal sources, which are now targeted for "women"'s research.

Black women, however, also make choices that may damage their own case in reaching status positions in academia. Although enormous gains have been on the doctoral degree front, there are problems in both academic choices and smart career moves. This is epitomized by choice of field specialization, by occupational position and most of all, by failure to follow mainstream academic trends. Fieldwork shows high concentrations in clinical psychology and education, for example; both are strong applied fields, with high concentrations of Black women, white women and Black men, making competition high. The choice of clinical psychological also limits the chances of Black women to enter influential and lucrative academic teaching and research, or obtain corporate research positions. Black women are also oversubscribed in "student services" types of positions out of academic tracks and into "dead-end" positions involving community affairs or other public relations jobs. Without faculty tenure status, such jobs are limiting and lack influence on course of study and the main work of the institution: teaching and research. In

academic programs, young Black women scholars have tended to resist links to rising stars in home institutions, or follow academic research directions as part of a political learning process, and instead elected frequently to focus on Black subjects and other methodologically and theoretically weak fields of study; thereby limiting future job options. Finally, there is a clear need to for Black women to establish their own network for communication and support.

For the academic community, as well as government policy and research, it is important to look at the problems of academic access Black women face. Myths abound even today about Black female "success." In fact, Black women lag considerably behind other groups in obtaining academic positions and tenure. The substitution by white institutions of African males for Black women cannot be justified. Eliminating the glass ceiling Black women face can only help future academic credibility and worth in US universities in the future.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education, 1995 *National Study of Postsecondary Faculty* 1995, Table 34 (Washington D. C.: National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996).

American Sociological Association, Committee on the status of women in Sociology (1990) *Unique Barriers Women of color Faculty Encounter in the Academy* (Washington D.C., ASA, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Moses, Y. (1989) *Black Women in Academe: Issues and Strategies*. (Report HE 022 909) Washington D. C. Association of American Colleges (ERIC Document Reproduction Service no. ED 311 817)

<sup>4</sup> National Science Foundation /SRS 1995 SESTAT Integrated Data Files, *Women, Minorities and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering* (Washington D. C.: NSF, 1998), 57.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>7</sup> J. S. Long et al., "Rank Advancement in Academic Careers: Sex Differences and the Effects of Productivity," *American Sociological Review* 58, 1993, 703-722.

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