




**BLACK WOMEN'S
EXPERIENCES
AT NYC BIG LAW FIRMS**

FAITH WILSON
DECEMBER 6TH, 2023
POLICY TRACK: LAW AND ADVOCACY



Rutgers Institute for Women's Leadership

- The Leadership Scholars Certificate Program is a two-year selective, interdisciplinary certificate program that prepares Rutgers undergraduate women to be informed, innovative, and socially responsible leaders.
- Leadership Scholars design and implement social action projects to expand their understanding of issues and problems and to develop leadership skills.
- This project gives Scholars the opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge they have gained about leadership, advocacy, and social change with the practical and experiential knowledge they have developed about a particular policy issue or problem through the field site placement. It also further develops leadership skills by giving undergraduates the opportunity to practice leadership through action.
- To find out more please visit the Institute for Women's Leadership's website at <http://iwl.rutgers.edu>.

The logo for the Rutgers Institute for Women's Leadership is displayed on a red rectangular background. The word "RUTGERS" is written in a white, serif font with a stylized, flowing underline under the letter 'R'. Below "RUTGERS", the words "Institute for Women's Leadership" are written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

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BACKGROUND ON WOMEN OF COLOR IN BIG LAW

- 2006: American Bar Association (ABA) study *Visible Invisibility*, attorneys that are women of color reported:
 - Feeling like they were missing out on desirable assignments
 - Being denied formal and informal networking opportunities
 - Missing client development and client relationship opportunities
 - Feeling like promotion opportunities were denied because of their race and/or gender
 - Being introduced to clients only when it would make the firm look good
- 2018: ABA report from the Commission on Women in the Profession provided:
 - 57 percent of women of color had been confused for custodial, administrative, or courtroom staff as compared to 7 percent of white men
 - Women of color were the most likely to report that they had to go “above and beyond” to get the same respect and recognition as others

MORE AMBITION, LESS ADVANCEMENT

- The ABA cited the 2019 McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org study, it identified a broader trend that women of color are:
 - More likely to seek advancement than white women
 - 76 percent to 68 percent, respectively
 - More likely to aspire to attain promotions than men
 - 83 percent of Asian women and 80 percent of black women versus 75 percent of men
 - More likely to want to be top executives than white women
 - 51 percent of Asian women, 44 percent of Latina women, and 38 percent of black women versus 39 percent of white women
- Despite evidence of greater ambition to reach senior-level and leadership roles, women of color are still significantly underrepresented as law firm equity partners and law firm leaders, making up about 3 percent of all equity partners (men and women) and 12 percent of female equity partners.

GOAL STATEMENT

- The project's focus is to ascertain how dual discrimination persists in private law firms, where and when it begins, its various ramifications, and how to lessen and eliminate impediments to career advancement. By extension, the objective of the research is to highlight the reasons for black women's lower retention rates in private firms. In turn, the objective is to produce methods to increase those rates.

LEFT OUT *and* LEFT BEHIND



The Hurdles, Hassles, and
Heartaches of Achieving Long-Term
Legal Careers for Women of Color

By **Destiny Peery, Paulette Brown, and Eileen Letts**

INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS

AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION'S COMMISSION ON WOMEN IN
THE PROFESSION

- *Left Out and Left Behind* fills a critical gap, offering empirical data and thoughtful discussion about what it means to be a woman lawyer of color
- The general experience of practicing law; how work, family, and personal dynamics influence career trajectories; the barriers that women of color confront not simply on an occasional basis but throughout their careers, even after achieving a level of success; and the factors that either drive women of color out of the profession or encourage them to stay.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

- Invisible Labor Clause
 - Described by Melaku as additional work black women must do to conform to unwritten but powerful norms about expected behaviors and actions desired in predominantly white spaces
- Inclusion Tax
 - Described by Melaku as the “additional resources” required for black women to participate in predominantly white settings. These include:
 - chemically straightening hair to create an appearance that conforms to racialized ideas of professionalism
 - expending mental energy assessing whether to address sexist or racist comments
 - preemptively structuring one’s behavior to avoid generating gendered racist assumptions and stereotypes

YOU DON'T
LOOK LIKE
A LAWYER

Black Women and
Systemic Gendered Racism



TSEDALE M. MELAKU



RESEARCH

Gain context through existing scholarship on the private legal profession

Compose abstract and annotated bibliography

(SPRING '23)



OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

structured interview guide for attorneys

Search for potential participants

(SUMMER '23 → MID-



CREATION

Extrapolate salient points from interviews

Compose, edit, and publish the article

(MID-FALL '23 → LATE FALL '23)

TIMELINE

DEMONSTRATION OF FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

Personal Definition of Feminist Leadership:

Using and implementing feminist thought and standards to reimagine and reconstruct society in all domains of life.

Feminist Leadership applied to the SAP:

- *Black Women's Experiences at Big Law NYC Firms* interrogates how legal institutions and structures perpetuate inequality, discrimination, and violence.
- This study produces tactical methods that realizes equality in the workplace and in a broader male-dominated profession.
- This study accounts for intersectionality by interviewing two queer Black women and one immigrant Black woman.

QUOTES FROM THE PRODUCED ARTICLE

“DEI initiatives have inadequately resolve the problem of gendered racism in the workplace. One attorney refers to it as ‘fluff’ with regard to its impact on structural change.”

“Big Law firms miss out on the potential talents With Black women being among the most ambitious, their fire is snuffed after countless encounters with gendered racism.”

”The field of Big Law is undeniably competitive. Yet, this competitive nature should never give way to discriminatory practices. Black women in this field often face a harsh reality that goes beyond competition.”

“While the goal is eradicate this unfair workplace culture, colleges and law schools should prepare Black women students through mentor program opportunities, professional workshops, and self-advocacy programs.”

IMPACT OF THE SOCIAL ACTION PROJECT

- IMPACT
 - Combats the dearth of scholarship on Black women in Big Law
 - Identifies problems that Black women confront in the profession
 - Provides solutions for mitigating gendered racism in the workplace
 - Encourages the continued pursuit of Big Law careers
- PROJECTED IMPACT
 - Personal implementation of strategic navigation of Big Law spaces to work against career dissatisfaction
 - Expansion of the study with more attorneys across the country
 - Creation of an interest group for Black Women in Big Law at future law school

EVALUATION RESULTS + NEXT STEPS



FEEDBACK:



The draft of the article received positive feedback from peers



Ensure that the article makes students its main audience



What's Next:



Produce a long-form article for the Rutgers Undergraduate Law Review



Publish the article in the Rutgers Daily Targum newspaper

NOTE TO FUTURE SCHOLARS:

Dear Future Leadership Scholars,

You may notice, when conducting preliminary research for your SAP, that there is not much scholarship on your subject. Please do not let this discourage you from pursuing the idea, nor let it dissuade you from calling out the problem. You are a leader, and you may be one of the first or few to interrogate that subject. There is much joy in bringing a struggle to light; when it is seen, it can be solved.

*Sincerely,
Faith Wilson, Class of '24*

THANK YOU

- **Project Advisor Dr. Arlene Stein**
- **Institute for Women's Leadership Scholars & Staff**
 - **Professor Trigg**
 - **Sasha Taner**
 - **Julie Rajan**

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