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# UNTANGLING RACE/GENDER ECONOMIC INEQUALITY: THE CASE OF BLACK WOMEN AND MEN

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## Introduction

The urgent need for a more comprehensive and accurate grasp of racial economic inequality cannot be overstated. It could potentially have profound consequences for the social and economic organization of this society. The current predominant theories employed to explain racial economic inequality as a whole do not adequately capture Black men and women's position and experiences in the modern economy. Many theories approach Blacks' economic position monolithically, without an understanding of the diversity within the Black population. Different fissures of inequality shape the contours of Black America; among those that are particularly salient to economic inequality are class status, educational attainment, gender, region, age, skin color,<sup>1</sup> and immigrant status, to name a few. I focus here on gender. The purpose of this paper is to complicate the notion of racial economic inequality generally, in the hopes of yielding a more nuanced picture of inequality, and more specifically to illuminate the role of gender in shaping Black men and women's economic lives.

The labor market is one of the most critical sites of race, gender, and class inequality. Currently, however, we have only a limited understanding of the confluence of both race *and* gender on individuals' experiences in the labor market. Researchers who undertake the study of this inequality typically address only race inequality or gender inequality; rarely both. This leaves us with an inaccurate picture of all workers' experiences in the labor market. Workers' attributes are not separated when they enter the labor market, nor are the effects of such attributes on labor market outcomes.

Dill and Zinn (1990) present one of the most compelling arguments to study race and gender inequality simultaneously. They reason that using a race/gender approach is not just to study women of color, but all individuals in relation to these ascribed characteristics, and the impact they have on their life experiences and chances. Focusing on only one dimension of social inequality, (race or gender) renders only a partial understanding of inequality as it is experienced by all individuals:

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<sup>1</sup> The relationship between skin color variation among African-Americans and socioeconomic status was demonstrated in Keith and Herring, 1991.

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The constructs of race, class, and gender do not apply simply to people of color and women, rather they are categories which classify all members of our society. Everyone is affected by their location in each of these categories in the same way that we are all affected by our position in the age structure...

Thus, to fully understand the varied facets of inequality between Whites and Blacks, a comprehensive understanding of the intersection of these hierarchies is critical.

Highlighting one angle of this intersection, gender differences between Black men and women, I argue in this paper that there is evidence to suggest that Black women and men have unique labor market experiences relative to one another. On many dimensions their experiences overlap, and on others they diverge. I also contend that these points of departure cannot always be distilled to a residual effect of gender discrimination for Black women once the effect of race is taken into account. It is difficult to pull the two apart, as inequality is more complex than an additive approach would suggest. Black feminists have posited that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The following section provides some evidence to illustrate this and to situate Black women and men's economic circumstances.

### **Evidence of Economic Inequality Between Black Men and Women**

Black men and women all experience deprivation relative to Whites as a function of their race. However, as illustrated by their wage disparities in Table 1, they differ substantially between one another on one of the most vital components of economic well-being: earnings. Among full-time workers, Black men make significantly more money than do Black women. This figure represents differences only among full-time workers. Once part-time workers are included, the disparity is greater, given Black women's greater propensity to work part-time and the lower wages that result. The wage disparity between full-time workers is most likely attributable to occupational differentiation or segregation between Black women and men. Black men are

**Table 1**  
**Median Wages of Full-time Workers by Race and Gender**

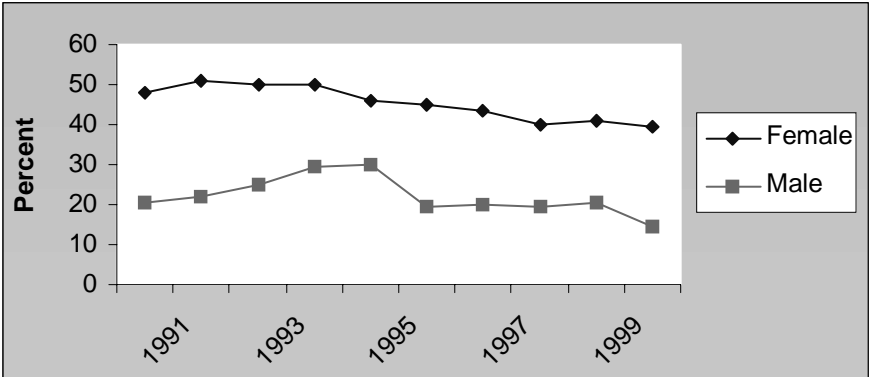
	<b>1995</b>	<b>1998</b>
<i>White men</i>	\$29,432	\$31,980
<i>White women</i>	\$21,580	\$24,336
<i>Black men</i>	\$21,372	\$24,336
<i>Black women</i>	\$18,460	\$20,800

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1998

more likely to work in ‘male’ jobs which typically pay better, and Black women are more likely to work in ‘female’ jobs, which typically pay less. Occupational segregation is measured by the index of dissimilarity, which ranges from 0-100, with 0 being the least segregated, and 100 being the most. The segregation score for Black women and men is 57, which is the same score for occupational segregation between White men and women (King 1992). The point is that Black women and men are not necessarily in the same economic boat, as many theories would suggest. They are segregated once in the labor market and have different outcomes as a result, which are reflected in the wage disparities.

Poverty is another critical dimension along which there are gender variations among Blacks. A substantial amount of attention has been given to racial disparities in poverty. Black poverty rates have consistently been about two to three times that of Whites. Less attention has been paid to the fact that Black women actually have significantly higher rates of poverty than Black men. Figure 1 compares poverty rates among Black female-head only households to those of Black male-head only households. The percent of poverty among Black female-head only households is two to two-and-a-half times that of the Black male-head only households. Thus, while poverty is a problem for Blacks as a group, it is most severely concentrated

**Figure 1**  
**The Percent of Poor Households among Black Female-head Only and Black Male-head Only Households\***



\*Includes Black Female-head and Male-head only households with no wife or husband present (includes households both with and without children).

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1999

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among Black female-head only households. These disparities in poverty are most likely a result of the disparities in wages and occupational segregation, described above.

Employer perceptions about workers are also an important factor to take into account when considering the experiences of Black women and men in the labor market. Kirschenman and Neckerman's 1995 study found that employers' perceptions were shaped by assumptions about both race and gender. Their stereotypes about Black men were different than those about Black women, but they were both racialized. Collins' (1990) claim that Black women are subject to racialized stereotypes which are gendered may illuminate findings such as these. Presumptions about Black women as welfare queens, promiscuous, and mothers of numerous children, may influence the decision-making of many employers.

In search of theories to explain these disparities, Browne (forthcoming) reviewed the existing literature on race and gender economic inequality and found that:

There was a strong need for a comprehensive treatment of women of color in the labor market that a) provided quantitative data on labor market trends, b) engaged the prevailing theories of race inequality in economics and sociology, and c) developed a perspective informed by the centrality of both gender and race. Too often, empirical studies on labor markets are based on narrow theoretical models that give gender and race short shrift, while more innovative and promising theoretical discussions remain highly abstract with little empirical base.

### **Moving Forward**

In order to build more comprehensive models of race/gender economic inequality, one of the most pressing problems of how to move from theory to empirical models must be resolved. There are many possible approaches to unraveling the race/gender intersection; these approaches are informed by the subject of inquiry. As I am interested in race/gender economic inequality, I begin with a profuse literature on racial economic inequality. The evidence presented in the previous section demonstrates that labor market outcomes are different for Black men and women. What we do not know is whether their paths *to* the labor market and their experiences in navigating through the market are also distinct. My approach is to begin with race and then to bring in gender, in the hopes that once we understand and better specify the mechanisms that generate racial inequality, we can then pose the question of whether or not these same mechanisms operate similarly for Black women and men.

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## **A Model for Understanding Economic Inequality for Black Men and Women**

To construct a model to understand both Black men and women's economic situation, encompassing both its commonalities and departures, I look to the interrelationship between two systems of exclusion, residential segregation and occupational segregation. Conceptually, I engage a race-based theory proposed by both Massey and Wilson to examine Black women and men's labor market outcomes. They posit that the exclusionary structure of residential segregation reproduces racial economic inequality. Social and economic isolation from Whites, presumably where mainstream economic activity is concentrated, disadvantages Blacks in the labor market, segregating them into occupations away from Whites and White men, who have a hold on the best jobs in the market. They are effectively disconnected from resource-rich job information networks which are critical determinants of labor market outcomes. Specifically, I am asking whether or not the theories proffered by Wilson and Massey about the link between residential segregation and labor market stratification operate in the same way for both Black women and men.

We know that in the labor market Black women's relative deprivation to White men is configured differently than Black men's. It remains to be seen whether or not Black women and men's path from segregated residential spheres to the labor market and their experiences in navigating the labor market are also distinct, particularly since we know from the occupational segregation literature that once they arrive in the labor market they are segregated from one another. Once in the labor market, the phenomenon of occupational crowding segregates Black and White women and men into different jobs. The question I am interested in is if Black men and women get sorted into Black jobs, male jobs, female jobs, Black female jobs, or Black male jobs. Questions such as these may lead us toward a richer understanding of racial economic inequality.

### **Conclusion**

Dill and Zinn (1990) pose an intriguing question for social scientists to address: 'How do the existences and experiences of all people, men and women, different racial-ethnic groups and different classes shape and mold each other?' As individuals trade social and economic resources in the labor market for good jobs, it is essential that we understand how race and gender status fit into that process, which ultimately stratifies workers in the labor market. An emerging agenda to examine individuals' life chances in the context of the many social categories which shape their lives carries enormous potential to redefine and more productively characterize race/gender economic inequality in American society. These multiple hierarchies operate in 'complex and confounding ways' and demand equally complex and comprehensive theories and analyses to adequately capture their interactions.

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