

Black female leaders take more career risks than any other leaders to reach the top

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Black female leaders take more career-focused risks than any other leader – including white female leaders – to reach the top leadership positions, according to new research from Durham University Business School.

The researchers also found that the challenges and negative experiences faced by black female leaders 200 years ago are still prevalent today, with very little change in the types of challenges these leaders have to overcome to secure a top position. The researchers say that this is because of the challenges that the intersectionality of being black, and a woman can bring in comparison to white female leaders or black male leaders.

These are the findings from research by Dr Spyros Angelopoulos, Associate Professor at Durham University Business School, alongside colleagues from Cambridge University Judge Business School, Cranfield School of Management, The University of Sydney Business School, and Charles Sturt University.

The researchers reviewed data on female leaders, spanning 200 years, to understand the challenges in their careers, and how they overcame these to become globally recognised leaders. The researchers studied female leaders from all races, to understand the distinct challenges they faced in becoming a leader.

The researchers studied the speeches, as well as the career paths of female leaders spanning 1850-2019, including famous figures such as Rosa Parks, Michelle Obama, and Oprah Winfrey, to understand the risks they took and the challenges they discussed.

The researchers separated these female leaders' careers into three key stages: identification, progression, and achievement. The identification stage focuses on the start of a career, where the leader decides upon which field she wants to work in, and how much risk she wants to take at the beginning to do so. The progression stage focuses on the approach these leaders take to progress to a leadership role and the goals they set in doing so. The achievement stage focuses on when the leader finally gains prominence, acceptance, and social endorsement as a leader.

The researchers found that in each of the three stages, black female leaders were more likely to take risks to reach the next stage of their career, and also faced the same challenges throughout all points of their career.

“Despite modest progress in the representation of women in senior leadership positions, black women continue to face unique challenges, being promoted at a slower pace and significantly underrepresented in top leadership roles,” says Dr Spyros Angelopoulos. “The statistics reflect this disparity: in 2021, white women held 32.6% of managerial positions in the US, while black women occupied only 4.3% of such positions. It’s clear that we need to create a more inclusive environment for black women to flourish in their career, not constantly having to overcome hurdles.”

In the early stages, black women were more likely to take risks in diversifying their careers, working in

an average of 2.13 sectors, compared to white women who worked in an average of 1.59 sectors. Throughout their career, white women tended to reduce risk-taking behaviours, whilst black women increased theirs.

The researchers say that these findings clearly show that there has been a lack of progression for black female leaders, and organisations should look to broaden their diversity focus further than just employing or promoting more minority groups.

With the same challenges persisting for around 200 years, something needs to be done to improve inclusion for these leaders and ensure they do not need to take extreme risks to succeed. If black female leaders see these issues becoming resolved, and their experiences become more positive, it is likely more will look to pursue leadership roles.

If you would be interested in speaking with the researchers or receiving the full research report, please contact Peter Remon at BlueSky Education – peter@bluesky-pr.com