

Tokenism and Invisible Labor of Black Women Within Social Work Education

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Abstract : As part of a larger study, this particular line of inquiry focuses on experiences of tokenism and invisible labor expected of Black women within social work education. Black women faculty members and doctoral students participated in semi-formal, in-depth interviews. All participants were identified as members of schools of social work within Carnegie-designated R-1 institutions. Several participants believed that their race independently and the intersection of their race and gender was often misrepresented by their institution as an indication of a diverse and equitable environment. These women believed they were often solicited to participate in visual materials and make public appearances to benefit the school while feeling invisible. Most of the Black women interviewed, whether faculty members or doctoral students, were the sole Black person or one of very few Black women at these schools of social work. Similarly, the Black doctoral students spoke of being “paraded around” as a prized show horse while enduring a toxic culture that lacks inclusion. These women expressed frustration and disappointment as their images and scholarship were featured on websites and within marketing materials, not the pride and joy such exposure should elicit. These experiences of tokenism were taking place while the women constantly received messages of not being good enough or not a good fit at their institution. Invisible labor refers to work that is not compensated nor formally recognized. This labor is primarily committee work and student support. Representation of Black women faculty members is limited at these research-intensive schools of social work resulting in these women being sought out by students across disciplines. Similarly, the Black women doctoral students are informally recruited as peer mentors to support those students rising in the ranks behind them. Though this work is rooted in retention efforts, it is never identified as such. All participants identified committee work related to their identities as another way they find themselves engaged in work that often goes unrecognized and underappreciated. Committee work is usually tied to identity work, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion though it rarely translates to action and improvements. This qualitative study provides insight into the lived experiences of an at-risk and under-represented demographic. Institutions can better understand how they can support this demographic. These Black women scholars have been invited into these institutions but have not historically been granted full access. These women have survived unsavory conditions through sheer determination and support found mostly outside their schools of social work. Utilizing this data as a springboard for informed and action-oriented strategic planning would allow institutions to create inclusive and equity cultures that result in Black women thriving versus simply surviving.

Keywords : education, equity, invisible labor, tokenism, intersectionality

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