



The role of Black women in political leadership: Overcoming historical barriers

Details

e: carole.boycedavies@howard.edu

e: ceb278@cornell.edu

w: africana.cornell.edu/carole-boyce-davies

w: caroleboycedavies.com

Bio

Carole Boyce-Davies is a leading authority on Black Women's Writing, Black feminist

theory and African Diaspora literatures and cultures in international contexts. She is the current Professor and Chair of African Diaspora Literatures at Howard University who has held distinguished professorships at Northwestern and Cornell Universities and is Professor Emerita of Africana Studies at Cornell University. Widely published, she is the author of the classic *Left of Karl Marx*,

2008, *The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*.

Further reading

Boyce-Davies, C, Black women's rights: Leadership and the circularities of power. *Rowman & Littlefield* (now *Bloomsbury*). 2022/2023. rowman.com/ISBN/9781793612380/Black-Womens-Rights-Leadership-and-the-Circularities-of-Power

The role of Black women in political leadership

Overcoming historical barriers

- Black women's leadership has been continuous in their communities and is inevitable at current and future national and international levels.
- Black women are overcoming racial and gender-based barriers to political leadership.
- Historical figures like Shirley Chisholm and Claudia Jones have paved the way for Black women's political representation.
- Research advanced by Professor Carole Boyce-Davies (Cornell and Howard Universities, USA) emphasises the need for transformative feminist leadership models and ongoing advocacy.
- Continuous efforts by political and civil organisations are necessary to achieve actual inclusive democracy for half the world's population: women.

Black Women's Rights: Leadership and the Circularities of Power explores the transformative leadership of Black women in politics, emphasising their role in reshaping political power structures at the highest levels and within grassroots movements. The book critiques the conventional association of political leadership with masculinity, advancing new models of feminist leadership. The study draws from historical and contemporary figures such as Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Shirley Chisholm, Marielle Franco, Mia Mottley, and Kamala Harris, heralding the 21st century as a pivotal era for Black women's leadership. Through a comprehensive examination of historical and contemporary leaders, this groundbreaking and timely study highlights the pivotal role Black women play in reshaping political power structures, both at the highest levels and within grassroots movements.

The leadership of Black women in politics: Breaking barriers

Black women have long navigated compounded challenges in political leadership due to their lived experience at intersections of race and gender subordinations. Despite these barriers, their perseverance has led to groundbreaking achievements. The author, Professor Carole Boyce-Davies, illuminates the contributions of Black women to political leadership, addressing systemic forces that have historically undermined their presence. The book underscores the critical role of Black women in shaping global political landscapes, drawing attention to their ongoing struggle for equal representation.

Key themes and insights

The introduction of *Black Women's Rights: Leadership and the Circularities of Power* powerfully advocates for the advancement of Black women's roles in shaping a transformed and equitable world, contextualising their historical significance in leadership and social progress. By drawing on feminist writings and historical discourses, it frames the invaluable contributions of Black women throughout history. The narrative then transitions to examine the contemporary landscape of African literature, spotlighting the impactful work of a new generation of writers, particularly African women like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. This exploration reveals a significant shift toward narratives that explore migration, intimate relationships, and cultural identities, providing a critical lens on post-colonial societies.

Additionally, the book offers an alternative perspective on political leadership through the lens of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, illuminating her experiences and contributions to the anti-apartheid movement. This narrative is essential for understanding the diverse forms of leadership that challenge conventional norms. The text further emphasises the historical roles of Black women in

leadership, recognising figures like Amy Ashwood Garvey, who have shaped leadership paradigms across Africa, and asserts the importance of their contributions throughout history, effectively reimagining the narrative surrounding Black women's influence. Furthermore, the exploration of Black women's leadership encompasses their multifaceted roles in both political and intellectual arenas, underscoring their critical contributions to activism and civil rights movements. The analysis also celebrates the empowerment of Black favelada women in Brazil, highlighting initiatives such as that of the now legendary Marielle Franco that facilitate their active citizenship and leadership, thus reinforcing the imperative of recognising and uplifting Black women's voices in all spheres of society.

Struggles for representation and leadership

The historical exclusion of Black women from political leadership is deeply rooted in systemic layers of marginalisation. Carole Boyce-Davies highlights the ongoing challenges they face, particularly within African and diaspora contexts, where discrimination persists. The book makes clear that understanding the role of Black women in politics requires a recognition of these intersectional challenges, which continue to impact their contributions today.

This is a mandatory yet pleasurable reading in cultural studies, sociology, Black Studies, Black feminist theorising, and Black women's leadership.



As the 21st century progresses, the inevitability of Black women's public leadership becomes increasingly evident, reinforcing their pivotal role in driving transformative political change globally.

Carole Boyce-Davies forecasts the 21st century as the era of inclusive, equitable and ubuntu-responsive leaderships and worlds.

The call for equal representation

A significant aspect of the book is the urgent need for equal representation of women, who constitute half of the global population. By examining legal, political, and social contexts, Carole Boyce-Davies asserts that without equitable access to resources and representation, Black women will continue to face marginalisation. The historical contributions of activists like Claudia Jones, Audre Lorde, Fannie Lou Hamer in the United States; Winnie Mandela in South Africa, Leila Gonzalez in Brazil, serve as precursors to contemporary movements, framing women's rights as a critical global struggle.

Shirley Chisholm: Breaking barriers and exemplifying leadership

Shirley Chisholm is a central figure in the book, celebrated for her groundbreaking role in US politics as the first Black woman elected to Congress. Her courageous campaign for the presidency in 1972 challenged the entrenched norms of American political leadership and paved the way for the candidacy of VP Kamala Harris for the US presidency in 2024. Chisholm's advocacy for marginalised communities – addressing issues such as education and labour rights – embodies the potential for Black women to disrupt the political status quo.

Findings and impact: Chisholm's enduring legacy

Chisholm's influence persists today, inspiring other contemporary leaders like Stacey Abrams in the US, Dianne Abbott in the UK, Mia Mottley in the Caribbean. Her memoirs offer valuable insights into the hurdles she faced and her unwavering commitment to advocacy for the marginalised. By centring the Chisholm legacy, the book underscores the importance of recognising the historical and ongoing contributions of Black women in political leadership.

Paving the way for the future

The leadership of Black women in politics stands as a testament to their resilience and a challenge to traditional power dynamics. Figures like Shirley Chisholm and Claudia Jones operating in the same time frame have laid a foundation for future generations to continue dismantling barriers. Carole Boyce-Davies' work emphasises the critical role Black women play in shaping a more inclusive political landscape. As the 21st century progresses, the inevitability of Black women's public leadership becomes increasingly evident, reinforcing their pivotal role in driving transformative political change globally.

This research study and political assertion is a significant contribution to the discourse on Black women's rights and leadership, marking a crucial step towards their international recognition and empowerment. With the book now circulating globally, it aims to inspire and engage new audiences in the ongoing struggle for equality and justice. As the 21st century unfolds, Black women are leading the charge for transformative political change, continuing the legacies of dynamic ancestors who produced subsequent generations of intellectual and political activists.

Personal response

What initially inspired your interest in studying Black women's political leadership, and how has this passion evolved throughout your academic career?

My initial work was on Black women's writing with a desire to find and account for those women who charted activist pathways that inspired writers as well. For this reason, there is a chapter on literary activism. Identifying the Black women who made political contributions and also delivered speeches or wrote about them has amplified knowledge of the historical contributions of Black women to finding analyses to disrupt normalised status quo realities.

In your research, you highlight the transformative leadership of figures like Shirley Chisholm and Claudia Jones. How do you see their influence reflected in today's political climate, particularly among young Black women leaders?

Both Shirley Chisholm and Claudia Jones worked in New York in a similar time frame of the early 1950s one inside the political machinery of the Democratic Party USA and one outside of it in the CPUSA and in a grassroots context. There would have been some political public understandings of a common pursuit as both defined Black women as being the unspoken source of racial capitalism but simultaneously having the capacity because of this to transcend sedimented absence of leadership assumptions.

Your work emphasises the intersectional barriers Black women face in political spaces. What do you believe are the most pressing challenges Black women still encounter today in gaining political power, and how can these challenges be addressed?

The most pressing challenges are public perceptions of Black women's assumed roles as care providers at even several political levels rather than thinkers and producers of knowledge to advance our global situation. One still sees uninformed public attacks at the highest levels suggesting more knowledge is needed about these histories of Black women's combined articulations of alternative paradigms

Looking ahead, what areas of Black women's political leadership or feminist scholarship do you feel are underexplored and deserve more attention in future research?

My work argues that following every attempt at political leadership by women and/or Black leaders in general, there should be a period of assessment in which that leader, along with a research team, creates a retrospective analysis of what they achieved, what was difficult, what mistakes were made. This will move us away from just simply the joy of having a presidential library which only celebrates having a public-facing leader finally and instead provides a future pathway for those following.



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