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Chair of Sociology

# **The Impact of Black Women in American Society**

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## ***Introduction***

In a world where minorities are more and more at danger, even though the international communities have worked hard on creating and building up new models of societies with the support of two charters: the “Charter of United Nations” and the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, the level of separation among people living in a same society is wider than ever. Minorities are harmed in different ways and such violence can be manifested in a physical way: as for example the multiple tortures that gays were obliged to receive in the region of Chechnya, a city situated in Russia.

Other components of the societies are devalued in a way which it is not only physical, but also psychological. By thinking in these terms it is easy to highlight the discriminations made to black people, for example, starting from the years of segregation in the US where people of colour could not attend the same school as white people, or had different bathrooms based on their skin colour. Another category which has always been discriminated and excluded from many aspects of the social and political life is the category of women: to demonstrate such assumption it is possible to see that they have been deprived of the right to vote until 1948, the year when the states of the United Nations signed the above mentioned “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”. The importance and impact of the women’s suffrage was also considered as a right and it was defended by the “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women” signed by 189 States in 1979.

Today women are still considered a minority in modern societies and are subjects to several discriminations that can penalize them in areas such as university, job or even family. Such discriminations can vary basing on their ethnic origin. In fact, there are fields where, for example, black women are more discriminated than white, Asian or Latin women. These differences can depend on the geographical area or the cultural level of the community in which women live. It can be easy and logical to think that today the most discriminatory countries should be the ones where education is not developed or where governments and constitutions have not imposed their will for what concern the violation of the basic human rights, but sometimes it can be found that the most problematic areas are the ones that are globally considered and called “developed countries”: this situation is familiar in the modern US where after the last presidential elections, that have seen Donald Trump elected as the President, the preservation of the above mentioned rights is not anymore considered as a priority as it should be.

This has been demonstrated by the project that Trump had of building a wall to separate the US from Latin America and his continuous spread of fear towards what he considers “different” from the white American men archetype.

Following this path, it is obvious that also women are at risk: if the situation of white women is on the edge, the situation of black women is even worse. This category has been designated not only as a target by the chauvinistic community, but also by racists which are not able to accept the fact that today the freedom of expression, to vote and to work are the same for every human being, despite skin colour or gender.

### ***Present Situation of Black Women in America***

Black women have played, since always, a huge role in providing the development of the United States: they guided the nation as leaders and their presence was fundamental during the fights against racial segregation in 50s and 60s, the creation of movements to give equality treatments to the black community and to make the Voting Rights Act of 1965 pass.

In the present days, black women are the representation of one of the most active groups of voters in the US and they are working as leaders in many initiatives, such as Black Lives Matters, Say Her Name and the “National Domestic Workers’ Movement for Fair Labor Protections and Dignified Working Conditions”. After the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the American community has not given to black women the stage they deserved: in fact, their category represents the highest labor force rate of participation among women in the entire nation. The problem comes when talking about the education granted to this group of women: here they not have, usually, the same access which a white woman has, and this can lead to a concentration of black women in the sector of “low-paid” jobs. In a situation where Afro-American women have access to full-time jobs, they still gain \$0.64 to every dollar obtained by a white man, furthermore they are often engaged in tasks which do not give them a lot of benefits and make them experience times of poverty.

The disadvantages provided by black women have raised so many critics throughout last years, as for example the necessity to bring back their image in the modern American society and remember that they have been important for the creation of movements fighting for equality, civil rights and freedom.

Their intervention was crucial during the year 1965, the date which marked the passing of the Voting Rights Act, and they were also active in making pass legislations concealing the change of restrictive voter identification laws (which were an obstacle for many ethnic groups to have the right to vote): additionally, black women represented the most active group of voters in the country in 2016.

There has also been a research to explain the electoral strength which black women have in the USA, the answer has been found thanks to “The Brookings Institution and the Higher Heights Leadership Fund (hereafter Higher Heights)”, who has worked to build up a database capable of containing elected officials at the federal, state, and municipal levels and also aspirate candidates. The first results showed that there are three main reasons for black women to be successful in the elections:

1. The first reason can be argued by analyzing the density of black people living in a certain district: this would automatically lead to the fact that such cases are successfully correlated to black women’s victory during elections in 2016 (the data collected demonstrated that almost two-thirds of black women were elected by a district mostly composed by black residents, mostly more than 50%).
2. Also, as second point, it can be highlighted the fact that after the last mayoral elections it has been shown that black women are likely to be elected also in districts which are not majorly inhabited by black citizens (in fact, more than a third of all black congresswomen and female state legislators got the major number of votes in districts with high density of white people too).
3. To finish this data analysis, black women are given the chance to occupy a representative political office by the votes they collect in States with a high number of black residents and also by constituencies whose inhabitants are mostly white people, and thanks to that one-third of those seats were contested by black women in the 2016’s elections.

According to this dataset, in 2016 black women composed the 6.6% of the population in the nation and 6.5% of citizens with a legal age for voting and 3.1% of them were engaged to be elected for federal or state office: when we go in detail, it is possible to see that this group of women running during the elections were 18 US representatives, 1 US senator, 193 state representatives, 67 state senators, 1 lieutenant governor and 5 mayors. After the voting procedures, black women obtained a high number of seats, counting 62% of them in districts with a high number of black citizens, and 77% in districts with a minority of white people citizens. Furthermore, since that year, black women are now guiding seven of the most populated cities of the country and are working on bringing their representation in the electorate. Of course, a crucial feature is the party to which the candidate is part of, for this reason from the dataset is visible that out of 285 black female candidates 280 were

Democrats (the majority of those elected officials were supporter of a Democratic Party) and the other 5 were Republicans.

One common thing is that all the black women involved in the ballots were not chosen because of their ethnicity, meaning that there are different ways to achieve electoral success. Even if black women candidates were highly voted by constituencies where the black population was superior to the white one, there has been also cases where the majority of candidates voted where black women and the constituency was not totally inhabited by black citizens. This new trust that the American society is given to black female politicians probably comes from the fact that, during these last decades, black women have granted a lot more access to education and are able to generate a high-trust feeling in their voters (of any ethnicity of appurtenance) thanks to the political experiences they work on after their graduations. In fact, the National Center for Educational Statistics has reported in 2016 that, between 2009 and 2012, the percentage of black women who decided to attend college institutions had improved about the 9.7% and this could have affected the way they are perceived as officials.<sup>1</sup>

## ***CHAPTER 1 – POLITICS***

### ***Michelle Obama***

Even if black women have been hampered in emerging within the modern American society, we have examples of personalities who have contributed to demonstrate that they are an important source of development. One of those who can be mentioned and who is well known worldwide is Michelle Obama: she is the actual wife of Barack Obama (President of the USA from 20<sup>th</sup> January 2009 to 20<sup>th</sup> January 2017) and she has been the first Black First Lady of the nation; besides this nominee, Mrs Obama is also an Ivy League graduate and has worked as a lawyer after her studies at Harvard Law School. Then she has started a new path in the private sector. In 1991 she began her career in public service starting as the assistant of Richard Daley, Chicago's mayor at that time, then she was promoted to "city's assistant commissioner of planning and development". After two

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<sup>1</sup> Andre Perry, "Analysis of Black Women's Electoral Strength in An Era of Fractured Politics", *Brookings*, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/analysis-of-black-womens-electoral-strength-in-an-era-of-fractured-politics/>



years, in 1993, she became the “executive director for the Chicago branch of Public Allies” (a program whose aim was to teach leadership skills to young adults). Then, in the year 2002, Michelle Obama was able to cover the position of “executive director of community relations and external affairs” for the University of Chicago Hospitals and in 2005 she was named “vice president” and worked for the Chicago Council in the Global Affairs sector.

After her husband’s election, she wanted to be in the first line to give help and to support many programs, projects and causes: in fact, she has been able to build up a solid initiative to improve the health state of her country and she also fought to grant more access to educational opportunity.

For what concern the first project mentioned, the First Lady planned and realized a new garden situated in the White House (on the South Lawn) in April 2009: starting from this, she would have then created the so called “Let’s Move!” initiative, where she brought to light the issue of obesity which affect children and teenagers and the necessity to give access to healthy food.

The next year, in 2010, she was able to contribute to the drafting of a legislation on the free access to high quality food and to make it pass. This helped many schools to improve the quality of their meal nutritional standards, have a larger scale of options for healthier meals for pupils and students and gave the possibility to have access to school lunch for free or at least for a cheap price.

During 2011, Michelle Obama co-created the Joining Forces program which has as aim to call and get-together all the Americans citizens to help service members, soldiers, veterans and their families and give them wellness, job opportunities and school education.

After some years from when she left her position as the First Lady of the United States, Mrs Obama decided to write and publish her autobiographical book “Becoming” to discuss about inequality, feminism and the goals she has been able to fulfil even before entering the White House. When thinking about the First Lady (also known as “FLOTUS”, which stands for “First Lady Of The United States”) we imagine the President’s wife as woman with no public or political duties to perform and who has no voice for her country. Michelle Obama completely changed this perspective, starting with the acknowledgment that she gave about what a woman in that position can really do. One fundamental example should be the one showing that the First Lady can be able to help a law pass, such as the one concerning the health and obesity issues of children.

Her impact was one of the strongest ever had by any US President’s wife. In fact during her last years in the White House a Gollup poll showed that she received an approval rate equal to 64%, which was also higher than Barack Obama’s one; also after her period as the First Lady was ended, her approval ratings did not lowered but remained stable and strong as the first ones.

## ***Carol Moseley Braun***

For years, it has been quite rare to find an Afro-American woman who directly worked within the American political system: with the entry into office of Carol Moseley Braun in the Senate in 1991, the USA had its first ever black woman Senator and the only second black Senator since the Reconstruction Era. During the period while she was serving her country, she changed it by advocating for civil rights problems and making legislations about families, education and crime matters. She started her political path in 1978, after her studies and her graduation in political sciences at the University of Illinois in 1969, by being elected as one of the representatives of the Illinois state house; after a decade, in 1988, she became the Cook County in Illinois and was recognized as the first African-American to recover that position.

She then decided to run for Congress when she understood that “The Senate absolutely needed a healthy dose of democracy”. Then she observed: “It wasn’t enough to have millionaire white males over the age of 50 representing all the people in the country.” She started her run for office in the Senate in November 1991, she succeeded and won against her two opponents (Dixon and Alfred Hofeld) by obtaining the 38% of the primary vote. After her first victory, Moseley Braun had to face other strong politicians in the general election: one of those was Richard Williamson, who was defeated by Ms Moseley Braun who received a total of 53% of votes.

Her influence and impact were significant by that moment because she became the first woman to serve on the powerful Finance Committee and the second woman who worked for the Senate Judiciary Committee. Furthermore, she was in the first line for what concerned the creation of social legislations by signing the Child Support Orders Act, the Multiethnic Placement Act and the Improving America’s School Act.

Her role was prominent also in other fields, such as problems addressed to the condition of women and African-Americans; she made a set of legislations which were able to help and protect divorced and widowed women and she funded the “Sacagawea coin” to recognize black women and she wanted to highlight the importance of equality and was also a public speaker when it came to defend women against sexual harassment, especially in 1995 when she decided to take part to a group with other five of her women colleagues in the Senate to denounce the sexual misconduct of Senator Bob Packwood of Oregon.

Moseley Braun contributed to the safeguard of the history of her city by starting a project for the

construction of a National Park Service to gain money to preserve the historic Underground Railroad (an old network composed by ways and houses which were built during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were used by African-American slaves to escape from the USA and go to Canada or Nova Scotia).

## ***CHAPTER 2 - TELECOMMUNICATION***

### ***Oprah Winfrey***

Of course, politics is not the only way to influence the modern society; media tools today have increasingly developed the possibility to communicate and spread messages in different and fast ways. Telecommunications are one, among many others, method to influence people and this has been amply demonstrated by the celebrity black woman Oprah Winfrey, a tv personality and conductor of her own television show, who has been able to introduce many modifications within the society thanks to her charisma and uniqueness. She was able to go forward the stereotypes and to show that being an Afro-American girl during the years 60 and 50 was not enough to stop her from earning her space in television news in 1973. She started her path by becoming the first Afro-American TV correspondent on the channel WTVF-TV, also she hosted many talk shows before going back to Chicago to host A.M. Chicago, a morning show. Even starting from this point, Oprah was capable to make her show the number one rated talk show in the Chicago market (an important USA market) in just one month. “The Oprah Winfrey Show” became famous in 1985 and it will soon become one of the most broadcasted talk shows, hitting 144 countries, and the tool through which she has become and still is one of the most influential people in America.

The mogul’s main actions and objectives towards her media job have always been those of trying to teach the Americans to be more educated and benevolent. To start spreading education, Oprah decided to announce her “Oprah’s Book Club” in 1996: this was a moment where she would have picked a book and discussed it with her public thanks to her television talk show and the web. Her initiative was so influential that more than 60 of the books she selected were able to become bestsellers. She has also established the “Oprah’s Angel Network” which is a charity with the aim of helping women and their children to have more access to education.

Beside her action in the cultural area, Oprah has also left the mark for what concern the political sphere: in fact, Bill Clinton, in 1993, transformed into a norm a national database which contained

convicted child abusers which Oprah had established at the beginning of the 90s; the bill took the name of “Oprah Bill” reminding her 1991 “National Child Protection Act”. A problem she had was to publicly be a supporter of Barack Obama, which made her lose a part of her audience, but did not stop her from rooting for the future USA President.

Her impact during Obama’s campaign, when he was running for President, was strong enough to influence the voting decision-making of citizens: in an article called “Oprah Worth a million votes to Obama?” written by Brian Stelte, it is shown by two economists, Craig Garthwaite and Timothy Moore, that after Winfrey decided to openly defend Obama and made an appearance with him during his campaign, Obama’s votes largely improved and passed from 423,123 to 1,596,995. She also demonstrated to be involved in charity by donating about \$40 million dollars to grant access to scholar education for girls and also the construction of an Academy for Girls in Johannesburg.

Her contribution in the media sphere and her devotion to try to empower people and spreading her benevolent messages through her tv show, her YouTube channel, her website and her book club have granted Ms Oprah much respect in the USA: in fact she has been included, during 1999, by Time magazine on its list of the “100 most influential people in the world” and even after her choice to stop working on her “The Oprah Winfrey Show” she maintained the “title” of “The Queen of All Media” and was considered “the most trusted names” in America, for these reasons Forbes put her in the 234<sup>th</sup> place on the list of world billionaires.

Winfrey was also able to survive during the 1994, when there was a raising in critics towards talk shows who were labelled as “trash talk tv” and her show’s classification was starting to collapse against the competitors Ricki Lake and Jerry Springer; during that time the tv host announced that she would have brought modifications to the show and would have focused on talking only about positive topics. After a decade, Oprah survived against the critics and took her show back to the top ranks becoming a cultural icon to the Americans and to the world.

When talking about ethnicity it is important to underline the intervention she made during the first season of her show: she once set it in a Georgian region called Forsyth County, a place which has not been inhabited by a single black person during the last 75 years. Her presence triggered an intense change and after 25 years Forsyth County counts around 7,000 Afro-Americans inhabitants. So far, Oprah Winfrey has demonstrated throughout these years that it is not impossible for an Afro-American black little girl to stand in the misogynist society and become a strong and successful black woman. Christina Geer, associate professor of political science at Fordham University and author of “Black Ethnicity: Race, Immigration, and the Pursuit of the American Dream”, talked about Oprah’s influence and relationship with the American society: “She is the

first black billionaire, so in the black community she holds a special place because she has shown the promise of going from abject poverty to unimaginable success.” As a woman “she’s shown that it is possible to become a millionaire, and then a billionaire, without having a husband who does it for you.” (Oprah has had a romantic relationship with her partner Stedman Graham since 1986, but they never married).

## ***CHAPTER 3 – LITERATURE***

### ***Maya Angelou***

In the process of making a change in the reality of America, politics has not been the only realm of action for black women. They have influenced the culture and education also through their abilities of giving birth to art, such as literature, music and dance.

The emersion of this category in this domain was slowed down during the different eras: the first temporal space which can be underlined as one of the most difficult ones for black people were the 60s. Starting from there, for many decades the feeling of fear of an ethnicity who was persecuted and separated from the rest of the community just because their skin color made them “inferior”, gave to movements, groups of activists and writers, the impulse to emerge and fight for their freedom and rights.

This was the period in which a black woman who decided to become a writer, called Maya Angelou, started her fight thanks to the power of words. She became the first African American woman to work as a streetcar conductor in San Francisco during the World War II period, where many jobs were left by men who joined the army and women were able to fill them. After her period of work, she went back to high school and graduated; after her graduation she started to take part into many civil right activities and started to elaborate her ideas about freedom and equality. She became the northern coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization which saw the light during the year 1957 and which was created by Martin Luther King Jr. (with the original name of "Southern Leadership Conference, advocates for the rights of African-Americans in the United States”).

In the 50s, Maya Angelou decided to take part, with other African American writers in New York, to the “Harlem Writers Guild” to incite and support the publication of literary, poetry and other written works by black authors. It was during those years that the writer started to elaborate her

masterpiece, “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”, which was an autobiographical work which was published in 1969.

Her book drew for her a completely new path as a black woman, in fact she was recognized as one of the first African American women who managed to talk about their personal story and life in a public way. Many critics rated or commented her work as a writer and highlighted all the changes she brought to the USA society as an African-American woman living in the segregation period; to the linguist John McWhorter, Maya Angelou contributed to the creation of an entire ensemble of pieces of art which have been able to elevate black literature and support and defend black culture at the same time, he stated (referring to Angelou’s works): “a literary manifestation of the imperative that reigned in the black scholarship of the period”. Also, writer Julian Mayfield exhorted by saying that Maya Angelou’s books paved the way of perception of her culture in a way that was extraordinary, not only for a black woman, but also referring to African Americans writers as a whole.

Thanks to her autobiographical work, she has gained the respect of an entire nation and also the nominee of spokesperson for blacks and women. Talking about this, the writer Gray Younge said: “Without a doubt, [...] America’s most visible black woman autobiographer” and “a major autobiographical voice of the time. [...] Probably more than almost any other writer alive, Angelou’s life literally is her work”.

Als (a scholar) stated that her works had such a great resonance that they were able to inspire and increase the number of black feminist writings in the 70s, especially because of the period in which such books and autobiographies were written, as to say, soon after the American Civil Rights Movement. He also added that Angelou’s writings were about her experiences, her thoughts, her ideas, not about politics and not aimed in talking about feminism, but, however, they were capable to set other female writers free and let them talk about themselves without being afraid of being judged by others’ thoughts.

Today there has been a massive usage of Angelou’s writings as references for education in modern American society too, in fact “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings and Gather Together in My Name” is still used today as a tool to talk about racism and, according to teacher Jocelyn A. Glazier, it is impossible not to be influenced, in a positive or in a negative way, by Maya Angelou’s work: this happens because she was able to write down her experiences in a way that makes the reader aware of the condition of black people during segregation era and, for this reason, especially white readers, can accept their superior-status or not paying attention to it by demonstrating that they feel to be superior.

Daniel Challener, an educator, wrote in 1997 a book called “Stories of Resilience in Childhood”

and studied the stories in “Caged Birds” to show how children dealt with resilience; he also stated that this book has been helpful to understand the difficulties that kids can have (as Maya when she was a young girl) and how to overcome them.

Angelou’s work was also useful in the medical area: here a psychologist, called Chris Boyatzis, has claimed that her books allowed him to plan theories and make researches about child development topics such as the effect of abuse, ego resilience, sibling and friendship relations, gender issues, puberty and many others.

### ***Deborah Gray White***

So far, the situation which black women are living now in America has been analyzed thanks to the many successful impact that they have brought to the country: Deborah Gray White has studied and highlighted the fact that successful black females in the US are considered, sometimes, “threatening” by the society. She knows it by experience, giving the fact that she is Board of Governors Distinguished Professor of History, she is professor of Women’s and Gender Studies at Rutgers University-New Brunswick and she is also chair of the Department of History at the School of Arts and Sciences. White also was involved in the project called “The Black Atlantic: Race, Nation and Gender” at the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, she was a research professor at the Rutgers Institute for Research on Women, and she is chair of the Rutgers University Committee on Enslaved and Disenfranchised Populations in Rutgers History.

During her career, she has written several books and some of them focusing on the history of black women in the US; she also created a monograph known as “Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South” and it was widely appreciated by the readers, it was also recognized by the Organization of American Historians as one of the 100 most admired American history books. Because of her triumphs, she can directly understand what goes against successful black women: “People think it’s only black men who appear threatening, and that’s not the case,” she says. “They [black women] have to be fearful of police brutality. They have to be concerned that they don’t appear too aggressive. Go shopping, and you may be tracked as a potential shoplifter. Walk down the halls of your office, and your coworkers may wonder what right you have to be there”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "The Reality Of Being A Black Woman In America", *Rutgers Today*, 2019, <https://news.rutgers.edu/feature/reality-being-black-woman-america/20181008#.XY-VmS1aZQI>

She fights to grant to all the black women in the country the social justice they deserve: she started by analyzing the difficult that black women have to receive legal recourses in case of rape: “As inconsistent as the law was in regard to white women,” says White, “it was just totally nonexistent for black women.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, black women had to wait until the end of the Civil War for the recognition of some rules against their sexual assaults.

Furthermore, White is not just known for her knowledge on enslaved black women, but also for her studies on the culture of Afro-Americans too. Her last work, “Freedom on My Mind, Volume I: A History of African Americans, With Documents; Let My People Go: African Americans 1804-1860; and Scarlet and Black, Volume I: Slavery and Dispossession in Rutgers History”, she revealed that one of the founders of the Queen’s College (Philip Livingstone) was a slave trader and also that the person from whom the University of Rutgers took its name (Henry Rutgers), was a slaveholder. In 2016, during an event to promote her book, the professor highlighted the fact that Rutgers’ campus was built up by black slaves; also, the first president of the college (Jacob Hardenbergh) was a slave holder. After these revelations, the University was obliged by the committee to change the of the New Brunswick’s College Avenue Apartments into Sojourner Truth Apartments (in honor of the abolitionist and slave who was owned, with his family, by Hardenbergh), to give the name to the footpath situated near to Voorhees Mall Will’s Way and Old Queens after the slave who worked to build the old Queens, and to change the name of the Kilmer Library with the name of the first black graduate in that college in 1982, who was called James Dickson Carr.

White also focused on the various activists movements, from the present and from the past, which fought for equality principles and freedom; she pointed out that black and LGBTQ women were the main founders of movements which had a solid impact in the US society, such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the #MeToo movement, stating: “These women,” she says, “have stepped up and said, ‘Hey, black lives matter, gay lives matter, they matter, and we’re going to bring it all to the table’”, to underline the explicit intervention of minorities to raise their voices and make their situation public.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



## ***CHAPTER 4 – ACTIVISM***

### ***Dorothy Height***

Modern black females have been inspired by the “old” activists and personalities who fought for freedom and rights at the very beginning. This is the case of the activist and professor Dorothy Height, whose story started after her studies at the New York University, where she obtained a bachelor’s in education and a master’s in psychology, and then became part of the Harlem Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA). In a short time, she became the leader of this group and soon then, after a meeting with the African American’s leader Mary McLeod Bethune, she started to work for the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). In 1957, she became the fourth leader of the organization by fighting to end the massacre of African Americans and trying to rebuild the justice system. During her 40 years period as a leader in the NCNW, Height helped and financed civil rights activists and also encouraged black people to register to vote in the South.

Thanks to her experience as a pioneer in the Civil Rights Movement and her organizational skills, she was called as counselor by prominent personalities such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Lyndon B. Johnson.

In 1963, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom which she organized with other activists, she was able to get on stage as a speaker even if the program of the March did not provide any women to talk on stage, leaving a significant mark in the gender gap that was still present in the equal rights movements.

Not only her work was resonant in the US, but she was also a professor at the University of Delhi, in India and served the Black Women’s Federation of South Africa; thanks to all her efforts and victories during the Civil Rights Movement, Height received many awards in the United States, such as the Citizens Medal Award from President Ronald Reagan in 1989 and the Congressional Gold Medal in 2004.

## ***CHAPTER 5 – SOCIOLOGY***

### ***Patricia Hill Collins***

On the sociological side, an important name to which refer talking about strong black females is Patricia Hill Collins. She is a Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland and has been the President of the American Sociological Association; her fame comes by the variety of works that she has written and also her ideas about “multiple oppressions”, “intersectionality” and the “outsider within”. In one of her sages, “Looking Back, Moving Ahead: Scholarship in Service to Social Justice”, she uses the concept of C. Wright Mill of putting into dialogue her life, history, experiences and try to analyze two social locations which helped her in created her intellectual work:

1. Her six-years period working in Boston, Massachusetts for community schools’ movements
2. Her career as a professor in the African American Studies department.

Describing her first experience she talks about the St. Joseph’s Community School which aimed at creating links between the working sphere and the African Americans of the surrounding neighborhood. She describes a place full of differences, with people of any age, education, gender and religion; the situation was on the edge, but Collins and her colleague’s objectives were to provide education to the poor African American children of St. Joseph. Everyone was captivated by her methods of teaching, analysis and empower the community; she took advantage of the period in which she lived, where Black People Movements were starting to raise and started to focus on that topic, to look for pieces of information that would have allowed her to teach her pupils how to focus on a problematic in a critical and objective way.

The sociologist responded to these reactions by keeping her way on teaching, not only at a middle school level, but also to a college level, how to deal with social justice, and to do this she kept on planning classes which highlighted the issues of inequality, but in a way, which would have been comprehensible by everyone.

After this experience she started to work as a professor at the African American Studies Department of Cincinnati, and her time there from the 1980 to 1990 was hard because at that time, such department, was not provided with the same importance and respect as other programs.

She decided to stay as an opportunity and a challenge to spread her social justice values; her classes were mainly composed by women and working-class students, so she worked hard to find a precise way to transform her lessons in a comprehensible way for them.

At the end of her period as a professor, she took time to write other written works on focusing on what generates social injustice and how to let the others aware of the existence of social justice, and

she did this with the usage of sociological constructions and expressed them through the theme of intersectionality and how it can change and transform scholarship, research and social actions.

## ***bell hooks***

bell hooks has also played a central role as critical thinker, cultural theorist and sociologist and focused her works especially on the problems brought by cultural differences, race and feminism. In principle, she was a literature professor and decided to analyze cultural studies in the 1980 with several written works: “Ain’t I A Woman?: Black Women and Feminism” and “Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre”. In her books, hooks wants to underline the impact of power structures in marginalizing black women within the society.

She has also studied how popular culture represents race and the effects which such representation has upon social relations and education.

She made a project called “Cultural Transformation”, where she created a series of videos, in 1997, explaining her vision with regards to critical thinking and how it influenced women and racial justice and the link that exists between pedagogy and popular culture. The word pedagogy describes the process of learning which students acquire from their teachers and vice versa. bell hooks explains that the white students she used to be a teacher to, felt really stable about their future, a feeling which was rare in poor schools in black communities. The environment is the difference between the white privileged students and the black students from Harlem: the first ones conduct a style of life which allows them to only focus on education to improve their future life, black students from Harlem used to have children at a young age, do some mansions to maintain themselves and education was just an instrument to give them the possibility to get a job, and not to empower their life’s quality.

The sociologist thinks that critical thinking should be used not only by disadvantaged categories of people, but also by those who are part of the “rich” portion of the society, because critical thinking is a process which allows individuals to go in depth and analyze their life.

hooks uses this construction to study why there is a specific point of view within the society which marginalize white women and black people and highlights the problematic in the cinema and music industries to normalize inequality issues, such as the reason why good looking women from Hollywood are casted in movies just to cover the part of the sex worker who gets raped, and not to

emphasize their complex journey. In such cases, during the development of the plot, male characters appear as the hero of the story, and female characters are not fully involved in the narrative of the movie and have restricted dialogues. Here some questions are raised: “Why does Hollywood tell stories the way they do, with racism and racist sexism at the core? Why cast a Black kid in the role of a thief? Why is it James Earl Jones who voices the villain in Star Wars – who decides that a deep Black male voice represents evil? Why was Spike Lee seen as a “failure” in Hollywood at the peak of his career? Does an increased consumption of “Black culture” by White, privileged youth help eliminate social inequality, or is “Blackness” simply a commodity?”<sup>4</sup> In the end, hooks wants to raise awareness of what is projected on the screen: the reasons behind the decision of telling a story in a given way, which voices are more highlighted and which ones are silenced.

She also analyzes the way which the news describes race, gender and crime and she took as an example the episode of Australia, where there is no interest in Aboriginal women’s deaths case, the scaremongering over Sudanese-Australians, the situation of migrant-Australian youth who are excluded from the society and how the media give importance and emphasize White Australians problematics.

hooks gives importance also to the impact which music can have within society as a tool which can spread messages (positive or negative ones) on a large scale, giving explanations about mainstream music especially, which is presented as a pioneer of sexual liberation, but in reality is used in a way that enhance racism and sexism); also, rap music can be represented as something “real” but it is just a well-built product, ready to be sold to the masses. The specific case problem with rap culture, is the one which sees rap music creating a caste within the black female society, promoting a specific type of body (the skinny one most of the times) and straight-haired black women over black women with typical African hairstyles.

These kinds of phenomena tend to denigrate more and more the figure of black women, giving them problems when dealing with the working life. This crisis arises when a black woman tries to go against racism and sexual standards, trying to apply for jobs typically held by men, and in these cases they are denied professional opportunities; in fact, women represent just 7% of directors all around the globe and most of them are part of the majority ethnic groups (as for examples white women). Also, when white women are the conductress of a story, they usually distort it, highlighting the romantic part and ignoring the intersection of gender and racial inequality.

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<sup>4</sup> "Bell Hooks On Critical Thinking", *The Other Sociologist*, 2019, <https://othersociologist.com/2018/09/22/bell-hooks-on-critical-thinking/>

To end it, hooks states that, apart from the improvement of digital and visual communications, reading and writing are still two fundamental tools to practice and empower an individual critical thinking; the sociologist herself admits that all the books which she has read in her life have contributed to build and create “major radical interventions” in her everyday experiences. When speaking about the importance of literacy, she said: “We cannot over-value enough the importance of literacy to a culture that is deeply visual. I mean rather than seeing literacy and the visual and our pleasure in the visual oppositional to one another, I think we have to see them as compatible with one another. I don’t think we will get much further in terms of decolonizing our minds. So that we can both resist certain kinds of conservatizing representation and at the same time create new and exciting representations.”<sup>5</sup>

Now moving forward it is possible to analyze her most known books “Ain’t I a Woman” and “Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center”, which underline, one more time, the issue of black women who are marginalized within the American society and are excluded from racism and gender issues. Her work raised up critics from every point of view, negative and positive, from African American people and from feminist thinkers, because she pointed out the controversial situation of empowering only certain portion of discriminated groups. She argued about black women’s needs being underrepresented by white feminists. These assumptions paved the way to black women feminists and “third world” feminists to deal with internal issues among feminists of different ethnicities.

bell hooks has also criticized the Western society because it harms the perception of minorities, as an example she underlined the need for popular culture to stay away from hegemonic ideals dealing with racism, sexism, homophobia and classism which can deteriorate Blackness in a negative way. Analyzing hooks’ works is possible to capture their essence, which can be translated as “intersectionality”: thanks to her studies on such theme, other scholars have had the possibility to focus on specific groups’ problematics and to build up specific solutions to stop their marginalization.

Her analysis on cultural studies is shown in “Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations”: here she gives her opinion about “interlocking systems of oppression that constitute our “culture of dominance””. Also, she cites in “Sisters of the Yam” the idea that black women, in order to actuate a “self-recovery”, have to tell their stories, emphasize and surround them with a level of importance equal to the one of a political statement. This philosophy has helped a lot of hooks’ students who have had experiences of pain related to sexism and racism, opening a debate focused on black women’s needs and giving them the chance to support each other to spread the ideals of social

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

justice.

Her strong impact has also been recognized in the education field, where she was inspired by her meetings and working experiences with Paulo Freire; at the beginning of “Teaching Community” she uses one of his quotes “It is imperative that we maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite”. Freire’s influence on hooks works was prominent to her literacy and consciousness sides and helped her with “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, where she has introduced the concept called “education as the practice of freedom”, where, as she said: “education is more than mere conveyance of information: it is about practical wisdom for moving towards living more justly with each other in a world too often framed by dominant strength of white people”.<sup>6</sup>

She emphasized the important role a teacher can have during students’ formation: it is her/his job to choose if empower systems of oppression or to go over them. Also, it can be used the “pedagogy of hope” approach, where students are taught the discipline of love, respect, benevolence and community to decolonize students’ minds.

bell hooks developed her interest in the power of education also because, when she was a young student, she has had a majority of black women teachers and felt to have a mission. They taught to their students that they all have the same possibilities as others to become thinkers, people of culture and gave her the dream of becoming an educator: “My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness. As teachers we believe that learning is possible, that nothing can keep an open mind from seeking after knowledge and finding a way to know”.<sup>7</sup>

“Teaching to Transgress” was bell hooks’ very first written work about education and was published in 1994. It is an ensemble of various essays using the “self-recovery” approach, writing personal events in an anecdotal way; she used this style in order to be read and understood by the vast majority of people, being her a pioneer of progressive education: “To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Bell Hooks On Education | Infed.Org", *Infed.Org*, 2019, <http://infed.org/mobi/bell-hooks-on-education/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

As a feminist, she puts her literacy at the first place, because without critical, writing and reading abilities many men and women cannot be included in the feminist awareness, political debates and the labor force. To her, the ability of writing and reading are fundamental to minorities, because they give access to the possibility of coming up with a critical perspective about the society they live in.

She was inspired, again, by Freire's works on critical consciousness and used a similar "praxis" form as Freire's one: an ensemble between action and reflection which students and teachers have to be aware of, teachers have to be acknowledged of the fact that they are human being, in this way they will be capable to teach in a non-prejudiced way.

bell hooks put into analysis the power and authority "issue" which raises anytime there is the approach between teacher and students, saying that her aim is to put herself in the position of who has the authority and gives it some limitations, but then she is intended to understand how both teachers and students can stay in the same classroom without any of these two "groups" being the dominant one. The problem of domination, before coming to the macro-area of the classroom, comes to the micro-area: in fact, there are episodes of domination among students, differentiated by gender, ethnicity and sexual practice. She wants to create a community, a classroom perceived as "a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership".<sup>9</sup>

Her criticisms towards traditional educational approaches come from the awareness that modern ideologies are shaped by the influence of mass media. She openly criticizes the effects of media communications on US society: "No one, no matter how intelligent and skillful at critical thinking, is protected against the subliminal suggestions that imprint themselves on our unconscious brain if we are watching hours and hours of television".<sup>10</sup>

She fears that most of the community is going to have a weak approach to critical thinking and goes toward impartial learning conveyed by pieces of information acquired watching television shows. In her works, this is known and studied as the "decolonization of ways of knowing", where she highlights the necessity in society of movements calling for people's education, developing a critical thinking capable to end the domination at every stage of its existence; this urge in order to try to change the educational system so that students are not under the strong control and effects of what she calls "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" or other ideologies, and develop a system which is capable to give students the chance to expand their analytic skills and empower their capacity to think in a critical way.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

## ***CHAPTER 6 – HEALTHCARE***

***Linda Goler Blount***

One phenomenon which is still high (in terms of statistics) in the US is the level of mortality for black women who give birth, and the statistics on such crisis are enormous: is counted that more than 700 women die each year in the nation because of pregnancy or childbirth, this leads to a three times higher maternal mortality rate for black women than white women.

On December 2018 it has been approved the bill known as the Preventing Maternal Deaths Act, which has set funds equal to \$12 million for five years to start researches and investigate on the circumstances which cause death among black mothers.

This problem has set a mark for many associations who are now working together or on their own to bring plans and strategies to expel the issue: the organizations who are at the head of the research projects are, for example, the National Birth Equity Collaborative and the group of Black Mamas Matter.<sup>11</sup> Other interventions have been made by a group of black women mayors of the nation who set policies which will be addressed to the problem without waiting for federal intervention.

Monica Simpson, who is the executive director of the Sister Song Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective in Atlanta, Georgia, made an intervention: “We can’t just talk about our reproductive health and rights from a single-issue lens. Our lives are much more complex than that [...] The way that the multiple layers of oppression show up in our world is not the same way that privileged communities get to experience these issues. This is why black women came up with the term ‘reproductive justice,’ which is looking at connection between the very real social justice issues that come into our lives every single day.”<sup>12</sup>

Black women detain a leader position in this fight, which not only want to underline the problems this category has to deal with on birth-death, but also with the healthcare black women are provided with at a global level.

During last years, there has been an increased level of organizations (guided by black women)

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<sup>11</sup> [www.nationalgeographic.com](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/2018/12/maternal-mortality-usa-health-motherhood/). (2019). *American Women are still Dying at alarming rates while giving birth*. [online] Available at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/2018/12/maternal-mortality-usa-health-motherhood/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



whose aim was the one of try to invest in the research field and help improving the health conditions of African-Americans females. Linda Goler Blount has worked a lot in this area, especially after her promotion as President and Chief Executive Officer in February 2014 of the Black Women's Health Imperative. This organization was found in 1983 and since then it has put a lot of efforts to help the physical and emotional conditions of more than 21 million of black women and girls all around the US.

Blount, as President of the Imperative, has provided her skills to move the organization into achieving its objective of health equity, reproductive and social justice for black women; before her career in the association, she worked as Vice President of Programmatic Impact for the United Way of Greater Atlanta (always in a program based on health principles). Before this mention, she has been the first-ever National Vice President of Health Disparities at the American Cancer Society and was leading strategies dealing with health equity policies and social initiatives.

Linda Goler Blount has on her back 25 years of experience in many sectors and companies, both involved in the private and in the public sector, as strategic business manager at The Coca-Cola Company and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as an Expert Scientist; furthermore, she has covered the position of consultant to government ministries in Germany, Barbados, Malawi and Trinidad and Tobago.

Before starting her career in the health sector, she ended her studies with a Master of Public Health, Epidemiology at the University of Michigan, and starting from this she has started paving her path through the health equity cause; in fact, not only she is the president and CEO of the Imperative, but she is also a member of other organizations: American Public Health Association and National Association of Health Services Executives, always in the first line to help other black women to have an easier access to health services and cares, and to help the scientific researches with funds and new plans of action.

## *Conclusion*

This thesis wanted to underline the importance, in a strong country such as the United States of America, of the presence of black women and the privilege of that country to have had their influence and benefits, which have brought radical changes, especially from a sociological perspective and have permitted an observation on how stereotypes can influence a whole society, but also on how these ones can be deconstructed with action.

This analysis about the impact of black women in the USA has highlighted the position and the engagement taken by these female actors, showing a degree of cooperation within fields which have been dominated by men for a long time (such as education, politics and economics) and a direct influence in the growth of a society which still today denigrates their position as individuals able to bring an effective change.

It is important to understand that black women have worked hard to fight their way in a male-structured nation, where stereotypes lead to denigration, and denigration is an open world of difficulties for a woman who wants to emerge and stand to make a difference.

Problems of this nature are evident due to the lack of equality: this is seen as a concept, or an idea, but it has to become a priority in a country where the gap between men's and women's wages, to make an example, is still visible and it is not taken into serious consideration; also, the concepts which are at the basis of prejudice against black women are of various kinds: it is possible to state that American people, by an historical point of view, have neglected minority groups' rights, as the ones addressed to people of color, and even after the signature of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" the situation has not changed completely. In the USA there are still groups of black people, men and in particular women, who fight against prejudice and want to clarify that they are not just an ethnical group, but a consistent part of the society and want to be treated as such.

It would be plausible to suppose the hypothesis which wants to point out the fear of a society against the success of a minority made up by black females in a community which has privileged the position of white people, specifically white men: such theory would be thinkable by analyzing the continuous modification of the USA society, perceived as a "change of roles", where there are chances of success and growth even to those who were denied such opportunities.

The radical change in a country who is large and ethnically diversified can be a turning point from many aspects; it would be useful to assume the resonance, even at the international community level, that such progress would bring. But, for obvious reasons, this transformation has to be headed by black women at first; their actions have already demonstrated a high magnitude of importance, the modifications produced by bell hooks, Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey and many others, are

just a starting point to spread awareness that black females exist, that they are fundamental for the development of the country and that such evolution does not have to be considered as a particular or peculiar event, but it has to be recognized as necessary, not only for the advancement of the American society and the international scenario, but also by a sociological point of view, where women of color stop to be identified as just a useless portion of the community.

The acknowledgement of these progresses can be observed and studied from all the women who have left a mark, or who have paved the way to a critical thinking about how crucial their influence has been; this empowerment has demonstrated the evidence that, even in a country where minorities are still considered inferior in certain circumstances, these women have been able to go against the prejudices against them and to build something to give to future generations of young girls of color who will have to think of other innovative ways to demonstrate that they are equal to any other American citizen and capable to continue the process of influence left by the other black females. The final assumption, which is possible to derive from the impacts and influences mentioned, is that it would be hopeful to believe that skin color will not be a tool of judgement when talking about a woman, that a black woman will be able to be treated in a respectful way and not be denigrated or disrespected just because she is considered at a lower level than a man or, worse, than a female of another ethnicity.

## *Summary (in italian)*

L'introduzione alla tesi "The Impact of Black Women in American Society" (tradotto: "L'impatto delle donne afroamericane nella società statunitense") si apre con una descrizione della situazione che ancora oggi molte minoranze, definibili tali per colore della pelle, religione, sessualità o genere, subiscono in molte società, moderne e non. La creazione di trattati o dichiarazioni sulla tutela dei diritti umani non è servita, nella maggior parte dei casi, a prevenire eventi spiacevoli tra cui azioni violente nei confronti di questi gruppi di persone.

Il tipo di violenza non è esclusivamente fisico. Esso può anche essere esercitato in forma psicologica: basti pensare agli anni della segregazione razziale in America, dove gli uomini bianchi potevano essere padroni di schiavi neri, e questi ultimi erano discriminati rispetto alla maggior parte delle attività riservate alla "razza" bianca come, per esempio, il poter frequentare le stesse scuole, poter andare negli stessi spazi pubblici, il diritto al voto.

Se la situazione, in quegli anni, era sgradevole per gli uomini di colore, peggiore era lo scenario per le donne nere, che rientravano in una categoria classificata debole sia per il colore della loro pelle, sia per il loro genere; basti pensare che il diritto di voto per le donne arrivò dopo la "Dichiarazione Universale dei Diritti Umani" del 1948 approvata dalle Nazioni Unite. Successivamente, nel 1979 venne firmata da 189 Stati la "Convenzione sull'eliminazione di tutte le Forme di Discriminazione contro le Donne", che segnò un'importante svolta nei confronti di tale categoria debole. Questa svolta non riesce a persistere in contesti dove le donne si trovano in difficoltà se messe a contatto con delle realtà in cui gli uomini sono i dominatori della società, o nelle quali anche due donne di appartenenza etnica diversa si ritrovano a subire tipi di discriminazioni differenti (una donna asiatica, per esempio, ha un livello di discriminazione meno alto rispetto ad una donna nera in una società sviluppata come gli Stati Uniti).

Comunemente si pensa che la diffusione del pregiudizio in un paese possa dipendere dal suo sviluppo economico o dal livello culturale dello stesso. Invece le problematiche riguardanti l'insufficiente salvaguardia della parità dei diritti degli individui sono notoriamente presenti anche nei cosiddetti "paesi sviluppati", che pure sono caratterizzati da un solido equilibrio istituzionale, un'economia florida ed un sistema scolastico accessibile a tutti, mentre spesso tali condizioni non ricorrono in altri paesi.

L'esempio degli Stati Uniti di Donald Trump può aiutare a far comprendere come, effettivamente, in uno dei paesi più grandi ed evoluti della storia contemporanea ci si preoccupi poco della tutela dei diritti umani.

In questo contesto è possibile analizzare come le donne nere siano state tenute in disparte e in scarsa considerazione all'interno della società statunitense, ostacolando nei loro sforzi di produrre dei

cambiamenti positivi. Le continue limitazioni provenienti dalla società maschilista americana, che hanno posto impedimenti alle donne afroamericane a causa del colore della loro pelle e del loro genere, non sono però riuscite a evitare che alcune di esse si distinguessero in campi d'azione che, per decenni, erano stati ritenuti di dominio prettamente maschile. Prima tra tutte è Michelle Obama, ex-first lady americana e moglie del primo presidente nero degli Stati Uniti d'America Barack Obama, che si è fatta portatrice di una nuova prospettiva nella società, rappresentando una figura di donna capace di essere non solo, simbolicamente, un punto d'appoggio per il marito mentre ricopriva quell'alta carica, ma anche e soprattutto un esempio di come sia possibile agire in prima persona, in qualsiasi ambito, per migliorare e sensibilizzare la società. L'efficacia del suo contributo si riallaccia anche alle sue qualifiche accademiche (come la laurea in giurisprudenza presso l'Università di Harvard) e agli anni di servizio prestati come assistente del sindaco di Chicago, Richard Daley, nel 1991. I suoi interventi per il benessere della sua gente sono iniziati con una campagna mirata all'educazione alimentare, chiamata "Let's Move!", per garantire il libero accesso a pasti salutari nelle scuole di ogni ordine e grado, al fine di contrastare il problema dell'obesità infantile e giovanile. Dopo il suo periodo come First Lady, Michelle Obama ha pubblicato la sua opera autobiografica, intitolata "Becoming", dove affronta tematiche quali l'ineguaglianza, il femminismo e gli obiettivi che aveva già raggiunto prima di entrare alla Casa Bianca. Il suo impatto fu uno dei più forti mai registrato come moglie di un presidente americano, tanto da farle ricevere un tasso di approvazione pari al 64% (registrato da un sondaggio Gallup), più alto anche di quello del marito.

Un'altra donna capace di influenzare gli americani, non in modo diretto con la politica bensì con la televisione, fu Oprah Winfrey. La sua influenza a largo raggio fu resa possibile grazie al suo programma di successo, "The Oprah Winfrey Show", mandato in onda per la prima volta nel 1985, che fu subito trasmesso in più di 144 paesi. Il suo intento fu quello di educare, attraverso il suo show, gli americani ad essere "educati e benevolenti". Per quanto riguarda il primo aspetto, Oprah aprì una rubrica chiamata "Oprah's Book Club" nel 1996, nella quale presentava dei libri su diverse tematiche sociali. Il secondo scopo, invece, fu raggiunto con la formazione di un network chiamato "Oprah's Angel Network" per aiutare le madri in difficoltà ed i loro bambini ad avere un accesso facilitato nel mondo dell'educazione (donò per prima 40 milioni di dollari per la costruzione di un'Accademia per ragazze situata a Johannesburg, mirata a migliorare la scolarizzazione femminile). La sua popolarità fu così imponente che, durante la campagna presidenziale di Barack Obama, si stima che il suo intervento in merito avrebbe fatto guadagnare al futuro presidente degli Stati Uniti più di un milione di voti. Ciò fu realizzabile grazie all'elevato share che il suo programma riuscì a raggiungere e a mantenere negli anni, rendendola notoriamente un'icona per la

tv americana, tanto da farle guadagnare la nomina ed il titolo di “Regina di tutti i Media”. Ciò le fece anche accumulare un patrimonio miliardario (ad oggi, 2019, ammonta ad una cifra di 2,7 miliardi di dollari americani netti) che la fece apparire alla 234esima posizione sulla rivista “Forbes” nella lista dei miliardari nel mondo.

Oprah Winfrey - come annunciato da Christina Geer, professoressa di Scienze Politiche nell’Università di Fordham - è riuscita a raggiungere una posizione di rilievo elevata grazie ai suoi sforzi e sacrifici, dimostrando che gli ostacoli imposti dalla società non possono sempre impedire ad una donna nera di avere, grazie al proprio lavoro, delle entrate pari o di gran lunga superiori rispetto alla maggior parte degli uomini bianchi che la circondano.

Quanto alla scena politica, Carol Moseley Braun passò alla storia come prima senatrice nera e intervenne a livello pratico nel campo dei diritti civili, impegnandosi su provvedimenti legislativi riguardanti la famiglia, l’educazione ed i problemi legati alla criminalità. Si candidò nel 1991, ottenendo il 38% dei voti primari e battendo, in questo modo, i suoi due avversari (uomini e bianchi) Dixon e Alfred Hofeld; dopo la sua prima vittoria dovette affrontare, durante le elezioni generali, altri politici di rilievo (uno di questi fu Richard Williamson) e ottenne, anche in questo caso, la vittoria ricevendo un totale di voti pari al 53%. La sua influenza fu forte anche in altri ambiti: per esempio per la tutela delle donne e degli afroamericani. Inoltre, Carol Moseley Braun ideò delle norme legislative in grado di tutelare le donne vedove o divorziate. Infine, nel 1995 in Senato decise, insieme ad altre sue cinque colleghe, di partecipare a una denuncia per molestie sessuali rivolta contro il senatore dell’Oregon Bob Packwood.

Oltre alla politica anche la cultura è riuscita ad essere, sin dai tempi più antichi, uno strumento capace di far trasmettere il proprio messaggio e la propria voce alla maggior parte degli individui di una popolazione: per questo motivo Maya Angelou decise di usare la sua vocazione per la scrittura al fine di esprimere le sue idee sull’uguaglianza in modo semplice e comprensibile.

Dopo aver concluso la sua vita accademica decise di dedicarsi all’attivismo verso i diritti umani, oltre a diventare, in seguito, una dei coordinatori del “Southern Christian Leadership Conference”, creata da Martin Luther King Jr.

Durante gli anni 60 iniziò la stesura della sua prima opera “Io so perché canta l’uccello in gabbia”, un’opera autobiografica che la rese una delle prime donne afroamericane a parlare pubblicamente della propria vita privata. I critici letterari hanno talora classificato l’autrice come un pilastro della letteratura nera (grazie alle esperienze durante il periodo della segregazione razziale da lei riportate). Altri hanno detto che la sua scrittura ha consentito la diffusione di altre opere, non solo di donne nere, ma di autori afroamericani in generale.

I contributi della Angelou hanno si sono dimostrati utili anche in campi inaspettati, come ad

esempio nell'educazione, ove la sua opera autobiografica è stata utilizzata per capire le difficoltà e gli ostacoli dei bambini all'interno delle scuole, così da poter trovare delle soluzioni per aiutarli a superare queste avversità, o nella psicologia, come affermato dallo psicologo Chris Boyatzis, in cui i suoi libri sono serviti per condurre ricerche e formulare teorie su come rielaborare argomenti complessi in modo tale da poter essere spiegati a dei bambini.

Dal punto di vista culturale è considerato decisivo anche il lavoro della professoressa di Storia e "Gender Studies" Deborah Gray White. Questa nell'arco della sua carriera ha scritto svariati libri sulla storia delle donne nere in America, sottolineando la "paura" che la società può avere nei confronti di queste ultime, le quali a seguito di ciò sono spesso intimorite dalla brutalità delle forze dell'ordine. Pertanto, esse si forzano a non apparire "aggressive", al fine di tutelarsi. Gray White ha lottato per difendere i suoi principi partecipando alle manifestazioni del movimento "Black Lives Matter", oltre ad aver fatto continuamente campagna per dare alle donne nere la giustizia sociale che meritano.

Il campo dell'attivismo è sempre stato uno spazio aperto alle opinioni di tutti, da quelle sbagliate a quelle giuste. Dopo la sua laurea nell'Università di New York in psicologia, Dorothy Height ha voluto dedicare una vita all'attivismo, incominciando col diventare la coordinatrice dell'organismo denominato "National Council of Negro Woman" (NCNW), per usarlo come trampolino di partenza. Donna, attivista e nera, Dorothy Height fu in prima linea nella battaglia per porre fine al massacro degli afroamericani negli Stati Uniti e cercò anche di portare avanti cambiamenti all'interno del sistema giudiziario. Height ha contribuito per 40 anni a finanziare economicamente altri attivisti per i diritti umani ed è stata chiamata a ricoprire il compito di consigliere da personalità di prestigio, come Eleanor Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower e Lyndon B. Johnson. È importante sottolineare che, grazie alle sue conquiste nel campo dell'attivismo, Dorothy Height si è guadagnata una medaglia d'oro del congresso nel 2004 e la medaglia al cittadino da parte del presidente Ronald Reagan nel 1989.

La sociologia ha anche avuto un ruolo importante nel formare donne nere in grado di intervenire nella società ed aprire dibattiti su nuove prospettive, capaci di rinnovare il pensiero comune.

In questo contesto è collocabile la sociologa Patricia Hill Collins, donna afroamericana e professoressa di Sociologia presso l'Università del Maryland, già presidentessa dell'Associazione Sociologica Americana, conosciuta soprattutto per le sue opere scritte su temi quali le oppressioni multiple, l'intersezionalità e l' "estraneo all'interno". È riuscita a costruire una proposta intellettuale valida tramite la fusione di alcune delle sue esperienze. Queste possono ricondursi al periodo di sei anni in cui lavorò a Boston per i movimenti scolastici della comunità, nonché alla sua carriera come professoressa nel dipartimento di Studi Afroamericani. Un esempio riconducibile alla

sua esperienza in campo scolastico è quello della scuola di St. Joseph, luogo dove la Collins insegnava ai bambini e ragazzi poveri di origine afroamericana, riuscendo a catturare la loro attenzione con i suoi discorsi sull'emancipazione razziale e portando allo scoperto le difficoltà correlate alla disuguaglianza a base etnica.

La sfida più grande fu quella di insegnare, dal 1980 al 1990, nel dipartimento di Studi Afroamericani a Cincinnati, in quanto a quest'ultimo non era riconosciuta la stessa valenza che avevano gli altri dipartimenti. La sociologa riuscì a trarre da una situazione svantaggiosa un vantaggio in termini di diffusione dei valori di giustizia sociale, decidendo di impartire lezioni a studenti lavoratori e donne. Alla fine della sua carriera accademica, la Collins decise di pubblicare altre opere, focalizzandole sull'ingiustizia e sulla giustizia sociale.

Oltre a Patricia Hill Collins, la sociologa bell hooks è stata in grado di portare alla luce temi importanti quali l'intersezionalità (come la sua collega), le differenze culturali ed il femminismo. La sua analisi di come certe costruzioni sociali riescano a "ghettizzare" le donne nere, quasi come a farle apparire comparse in una realtà che non appartiene loro, hanno portato in superficie critiche rivolte alla popolazione americana vista come consumistica e sempre pronta a svendere e svalutare la figura della donna nera.

Inoltre, bell hooks ha introdotto la nozione di "pensiero critico", descrivendolo come uno strumento in grado di aiutare gli individui a guardare nel loro profondo per auto-analizzarsi e comprendere il loro ruolo nella società, senza che questo venga imposto da entità esterne preposte dallo Stato.

La questione della sanità in America è stata soggetta a molte polemiche ed ha causato molti disagi, soprattutto dopo le ultime elezioni presidenziali. Una piaga che ancora è presente in una società sviluppata come quella americana è quella della mortalità post-parto. Il tasso di mortalità causato dal parto è molto alto in particolare modo nelle donne afroamericane. A ragione delle statistiche allarmanti, alcune donne si sono poste al centro della causa con l'obiettivo di superare questa crisi sanitaria. Una delle maggiori esponenti in questa battaglia è Linda Goler Blount, presidentessa e amministratrice delegata, dal 2014, di "Black Woman's Health Imperative". Grazie al suo lavoro è riuscita a sensibilizzare la società su tematiche come l'uguaglianza ma, soprattutto, l'equità sanitaria. Le sue capacità sono derivate anche dalla sua esperienza universitaria, conclusasi con un master in Sanità Pubblica, che l'ha resa la prima donna nera a diventare Vicepresidente Nazionale della Società Americana sui Tumori, con delega alle Disparità in tema di salute.



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