



Journal of Liberal Arts and Humanities (JLAH)
Issue: Vol. 5; No. 5; July 2024 (pp. 1-12)
ISSN 2690-070X (Print) 2690-0718 (Online)
Website: www.jlahnet.com
E-mail: editor@jlahnet.com
Doi: 10.48150/jlah.v5no5.2024.a1

Unveiling the Power of Black Feminist Thought in Challenging U.S. Policing Methods

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Abstract

Despite society's continued focus on police brutality against the Black community, few studies center on Black women's experiences with past and current policing methods in the United States. This study examines the need to address the systemic marginalization experienced by Black women during encounters with law enforcement, underscored by their disproportionate victimization through police violence compared to their white and male counterparts. Additionally, this study highlights the context of the police mistreatment of Black individuals, which has led to social movements like Black Lives Matter, emphasizing the need for reform to rectify the historical abuse of Black women by the police. Underscoring how systemic oppression intersects with Black women's police and social movement experiences, this study advocates using the Black Feminist Thought framework to challenge patriarchal dynamics, promote intersectional analyses, and foster equitable social justice movements. Recommendations for program development and culturally competent policies are also presented.

Keywords: Black women, policing methods, Black feminist thought, social movements, intersectionality, matrix of domination

Unveiling the Power of Black Feminist Thought in Challenging U.S. Policing Methods

Evidence shows that Black women and girls bear a disproportionate burden of police violence compared to their white and male counterparts (Gonzalez et al., 2022). Social movements in the United States, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), have arisen due to systemic injustices towards Black individuals, particularly by law enforcement (Lebron, 2023; Parker et al., 2020). The movement has drawn attention to the misuse of police power within the Black community in the US, mainly focusing on the adverse impact of police brutality on Black men. Despite efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, there is a lack of studies highlighting the experiences of Black women and their interactions with law enforcement or responses from social movements focused on reforming police methods, policies, and tactics (Agozino, 2018; Palm, 2021; Walker, 2020).

This study centers on the need for direct reform, shifts in current practices, and protective procedures to identify the disproportionate and historical police mistreatment of Black women. Understanding the challenges they face is crucial in addressing the disproportionate targeting of Black women by the police. While women like Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, and India Kager received attention during the BLM movement, their names and those of other cisgender and transwomen, like Nizah Morris, Mya Hall, and Monica Jones, are frequently overshadowed and dismissed (Johnson et al., 2023; Romano, 2021). In December 2023, for instance, Texas police officer Lauren Nick fatally shot Aaliyah Anders in her home after she called the police for help (Huff, 2024). After her death, many local Black leaders decided not to press for action due to an "exceptional amount of transparency" (Olzak, 2021) and hesitation related to potential viewer fatigue. Aaliyah's case is far from unique (Edwards et al., 2019; Hollingsheada, 2022); many such cases continue to be overshadowed due to news or social fatigue (Davenport, 2015), highlighting the necessity of the ongoing discourse regarding police conduct against Black individuals, particularly Black women (Cobbina-Dungy & Jones-Brown, 2023).

Black Studies platforms offer a space for in-depth analysis and scholarly exploration of how Black women confront and defy oppressive policing in society. By examining a wide range of articles using Black feminist frameworks and empirical studies, this study enhances our understanding of the complex connections between race, gender, and power dynamics in modern policing. Revisiting the conversation on such experiences can reveal commonalities and gaps explaining the persistent criminalization of historically marginalized and disproportionately targeted groups of people (Gilmore & Pettis, 2021; Martin, 2021; Muhammad, 2022; Western & McMahan, 2022). This paper employs the Black Feminist Thought (BFT) framework to emphasize how such criminalization 1) has overshadowed the nuanced experiences of Black women and policing methods in criminal justice (CJ) research, policies, and practices; 2) intersects with Black women's experiences navigating institutions like the media; and 3) has transpired offering a deeper analysis of the disparities highlighted during social movements like the BLM, which continue to exist and disproportionately impact Black women. Our analysis presents propositions for future action, spotlighting and aiming to address gaps in current practices. By employing BFT, this study analyzes the social factors influencing criminal behavior, the impact of policing practices on marginalized communities, and the experiences of Black women.

Overview of Black Feminist Thought (BFT)

In interrogating systems of oppression, discrimination, and power, an interpretive framework that seeks to understand Black women's experiences globally is incomplete without considering the framework and facets of BFT, such as intersectionality and the matrix of domination (Alinia, 2015). BFT is a comprehensive intellectual framework that emerged in response to the intersectional oppression faced by Black women. It encompasses various perspectives, theories, and analyses that seek to understand and address the unique experiences relating to race, gender, class, sexuality, and other intersecting identities (Collins, 1990, 2000). This knowledge field emphasizes acknowledging and challenging multiple forms of oppression to achieve true social justice (Few, 2007; Langley, 2021), prioritizing uniqueness, self-definition, and self-evaluation, focusing on Black women's identities, livelihoods, and societal significance (Love, 2016), and how their unique positioning has resulted in disproportionate experiences. This study highlights the importance of utilizing an intersectional lens in analyzing Black women's experiences and interactions with police, as well as understanding how Collins's (2000) "matrix of domination" helps glean disparities existing within this group.

When examining the landscape of criminal justice practices and policies, the perspective of Black Feminist Theory (BFT) becomes central as it sheds light on the experiences of Black women. It emphasizes the fact that their interactions with police officers are often more damaging compared to those of non-Black individuals or resemble the negative experiences of Black men, yet they do not receive the same media attention (Thompson, 2021). Crenshaw (1989, 2017) introduced the concept of 'intersectionality' as a critical tool for institutions like the courts to grapple with the complexities of discrimination, including the combined impacts of gender and race. Other Black feminists have further developed this perspective, illuminating the intersecting oppressions faced by Black women, such as homophobia, religious discrimination, xenophobia, classism, and ageism (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Nummi et al., 2019; Ucok, 2020; Williams, 2021). For example, Collins (2000) identified damaging stereotypes such as the "mammy," "jezebel," "sapphire," "strong Black woman," and "welfare queen," which have historically influenced public policies, media representations, interpersonal interactions, and institutional practices, negatively impacting Black women.

The paradigm of the 'matrix of domination' sheds light on the intricate nuances that influence police responses, revealing how historical biases and societal perceptions shape decision-making processes. It illustrates the dynamics that exist for different individuals and clarifies how an individual can belong to multiple oppressed groups and be the oppressor of another group (Adeniyi et al., 2020; Turner, 2023). For instance, despite facing gender discrimination, white women often receive preferential treatment from law enforcement. Racial and gender biases frequently shape a police officer's decision to use force and its extent, regardless of whether they identify with the individual by gender or race, illustrating the complex ways in which the police respond to individuals based on historical biases, societal perceptions, and systemic methods (Boyles et al., 2022; Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2022; Thompson, 2021b). This disparity increases the risk of injuries, arrests, and recidivism rates for Black women, resulting in fatal outcomes, often after split-second decisions made by law enforcement.

The BFT framework acknowledges the interconnected nature of factors like race, gender, access to housing, and political context, stressing the importance of recognizing these identities and conditions as interconnected. It highlights four critical components for understanding Black women's perspectives and urges the centering of their experiences in academic, social, and political discourse (Adams & Lott, 2021; Hein, 2017; Jacobs, 2016; Jean & McCalla, 2020). Embracing this framework is crucial for ensuring inclusivity and empowering marginalized voices. By using the BFT framework, decision-makers, CJ stakeholders, and researchers can see how these systems discriminate against Black women in all sectors of society. It encourages open dialogue about how discrimination relates to personal identity and historical context and can illuminate the multifaceted nature of discrimination within the criminal justice system, predominantly affecting Black women (Ropes Berry et al., 2020; Williams, 2021).

Impact of Criminalization on Black Women

The institutionalized criminalization of Black women's bodies and experiences perpetuates systemic inequalities and marginalization, with Black women facing disproportionate surveillance, policing, and punishment, often as a result of intersecting forms of oppression (Gross & Hicks, 2015; Prison Policy Initiative, 2019). For instance, Black women were 1.7 times more likely to be arrested than white women in 2020 and nine times more likely to be frisked or patted down when interacting with police or searched by US Customs and Border Protection agents (Muhammad, 2022; Western & McMahan, 2022). Mehra et al. (2022) highlighted the intersections of race, gender, and reproductive status in shaping Black women's experiences with law enforcement, describing how systemic racism and structural inequalities exacerbated their vulnerability to police violence. Black women and individuals who are pregnant or parenting are particularly vulnerable to the criminalization of their bodies and experiences as they face increased scrutiny and surveillance from child welfare agencies, leading to higher rates of child removal and involvement with police (Mehra et al., 2022). Additionally, Black women who present outside of the Westernized, European viewpoint of what innocence looks like (e.g., having small facial features or lighter skin) often have harsher interactions with the court systems, receive longer sentences, and are prosecuted more harshly than their counterparts (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Cassidy & Rydberg, 2020; Freiburger & Sheeran, 2020; Garcia, 2020).

In schools, studies have highlighted the negative impacts of zero-tolerance rules and the overrepresentation of Black girls as the recipients of punitive action (J. S. Clark, 2020; Sam, 2019). Black girls disproportionately receive disciplinary action, and 43% of the young public school Black girls who have been arrested on school campuses have experienced exclusion or criminalization (Allen & Hilliard, 2022). Owing to this bias, which is often fueled by anti-Blackness (Gilmore & Bettis, 2021) and adultification, Black children are seen as pathologically deviant and diverting from societal norms. Policing under this system serves as a legal way to commit acts that cause physical, psychological, and emotional trauma to marginalized individuals, which is concerning, especially as it starts as early as age 5 (Drew et al., 2022; Nuamah & Mulroy, 2023). This makes way for harmful and unjust practices that ensure subjugation and concretization of power dynamics under the guise of maintaining American values and social order, but with the motive of disenfranchisement, capitalistic profit, and corporal punishment (Finley, 2020; Grant et al., 2022). Such legalized and socially accepted forms of violence have manifested throughout history and continue to stealthily present themselves in today's ideologies, actions, and practices (Hassett-Walker, 2020).

Aligned with classical and contemporary research examining the influence of background, economic conditions, violence, and self-perceptions about victimization, we posit that understanding Black girls' and women's backgrounds can establish a solid historical foundation and provide practical insights into overshadowed problems within the CJ system. By using BFT to recognize historical and contemporary practices and events, we encourage researchers, decision-makers, and stakeholders to gain a clearer understanding of the factors contributing to actual or suspected criminality, as well as disproportionate policing and incarceration, especially among systematically marginalized groups like Black women.

Response of Social Movements to Black Women

Throughout history, Black activists have utilized various methods to spotlight the disproportionate impacts of systemic disparities such as racism, classism, patriarchy, and capitalism (Duran & Jones, 2020). However, studies have revealed inconsistencies in the characterization and gendering of Black liberation, often neglecting the pivotal roles and contributions of Black women.

Recognizing and addressing the intersectionality of oppression is vital in achieving inclusive liberation movements. For example, the Sons of Africa (1787), the 1913 Woman Suffrage Procession, and the Civil Rights Movement overshadowed the significant contributions of Black women, showcasing the need to prioritize and uphold the roles of all members within liberation movements (Scott, 2023; Young, 2021; Hamilton, 2023). Movements focused on Black women often encounter a decline in resources and support, underlining the crucial need for sustained commitment and investment in inclusive change. These instances illustrate how a marginalized group may inadvertently perpetuate oppression, emphasizing the imperative to uphold the principles of equality and inclusivity.

Many studies have emphasized current responses from social movements related to such recognized historical marginalization. Williams et al. (2021) discussed the impact of the #BlackLivesMatter movement on structural change, emphasizing that grassroots activism can drive substantial policy shifts, disrupt entrenched power and gender dynamics, and push for transformative justice despite the challenges in translating activism into lasting institutional change. Dobchuk-Land and Walby (2021) advocated for police abolition as a community-driven response to state violence, arguing that actual safety and justice can only be achieved by dismantling existing police structures and investing in community-led alternatives that address the social determinants of crime, recognizing power dynamics like patriarchy, classism, and racism. Similarly, Phelps et al. (2021) analyzed the limitations of 21st-century policing reforms through the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Despite increased awareness and policy proposals, they argue that substantive change remains elusive, especially for marginalized communities like Black women, who have been disproportionately affected by police violence, emphasizing the ongoing struggle for justice amid institutional resistance. Examining the case of Breonna Taylor, Martin (2021) noted that while public outrage and advocacy transformed #BreonnaTaylor into a broader call for defunding the police and reallocating police budgets towards community-based safety and support systems, there has been minimal reform.

Recognizing the historical influences, learned cultural dynamics, and continued fights for true justice within these uprisings, studies highlight how social movements like BLM have borrowed tenets from previous movements (Hanink & Dunbar, 2024). As such, they consciously or unconsciously inherit some of the same power dynamics or patriarchal practices that directly impact Black women (Nardini et al., 2021), as well as the historical invisibility and social exclusion of Black women in these spaces, which is another facet emphasized by the matrix of domination. Collectively, these examples underscore the ongoing struggle for police reform and abolition, reflecting a critical need for systemic and structural changes to achieve genuine justice and the need for racial and gender equity.

Influence of Media Institutions and Public Opinion

Throughout U.S. history, the national media and public involvement have played a pivotal role in shaping social and political movements, sparking discussions on inclusivity, inequities, and marginalization (Boudreau et al., 2022; Bridewell, 2016; Norris & Rodriguez, 2019). The deaths of Breonna Taylor and Sandra Bland, initially downplayed by the media and the police, are poignant examples. The responses have been varied, from a lack of recognition of their victimhood to underestimating the severity of the situations (Harris & Cortés, 2022; Lawson, 2018). Their narratives highlight the harsh reality that Black women facing state-sanctioned violence often receive little media attention, their stories and struggles remaining invisible, potentially due to viewer fatigue or their invisibility, thereby allowing for the perpetuation of unethical policing techniques (Bennett, 2020; De Leon & Rosette, 2022). Recognizing the experiences of other individuals, such as Eleanor Bumpurs (Cedillo, 2023), Tarika Wilson (Clark, 2020), and Kayla Moore (Graham, 2022), is paramount.

While social movements provide a sense of safety, unity, and a space to highlight the continuation of unethical practices toward systemically marginalized people (Burns, 2022), Black women's voices are often discredited, overshadowed, and dismissed (Browne, 2015; Gibbs, 2023), even if reports provide evidence to support their claims (Johnson et al., 2023). For example, Levy and Mattsson (2024) found that the #MeToo movement, coined by Tarana Burke, was effective for at least two years and helped increase the reporting of crimes by 10%. However, #MeToo's popularity declined when some sexual assault allegations were proven to be false, owing to the movement's singular focus on privileged, cisgender white women (Palmer et al., 2021).

In response, many organizations that employ BFT in their practices and methods have enacted campaigns such as the *#SayHerName* campaign (Crenshaw et al., 2015) and the *#BlackWomenAreDivine* hashtag, which “emerged as a celebration of the beauty and divinity of Black women.” These movements aimed to draw attention to the often-overlooked narratives and names of Black women affected and killed by police violence, highlighting Alberta Spruill, Rekia Boyd, Shantel Davis, Shelly Frey, Kayla Moore, Kyam Livingston, Miriam Carey, Michelle Cusseaux, and Tanisha Anderson (Crenshaw et al., 2015). We recommend following suit to ensure the visibility and understanding of valued lives affected by botched police raids or overly violent practices.

While the BLM and other social movements allowed Black women to express concerns about state-sanctioned violence and called for radical institutional transformation (Bartholomew et al., 2018; Chatelain & Asoka, 2015; Garza, 2014), little progress has been made in addressing the continued violence they face (Fahs & Swank, 2022; Roumell & Gallaway, 2021). Greater salience is needed to ascertain how society and institutions plan to address the continued, disproportionate marginalization of Black women, especially regarding police conduct, and provide avenues to creating equitable methods, practices, and policies to redress past and current harmful practices enacted in the US. Utilizing BFT and the matrix of domination can assist in these analyses.

Utilizing BFT to Interrogate Oppressive Policies and Methods

BFT is a vital framework for examining the interplay between societal structures, individuals, and society. This perspective underpins policies aimed at achieving equitable justice for Black women (Harris & Amutah-Onukagha, 2019; Ritchie, 2017). Scholars and practitioners advocate for BFT to combat oppressive policies and practices. Amuchie (2015) highlighted the shortcomings of legal frameworks in addressing Black women's unique vulnerabilities, stressing the need for intersectional analysis in legal theory to tackle systemic inequalities. Douglass (2018) connected the deaths of Black women at the hands of police to historical mistreatment since slavery, illustrating the resulting physical, sexual, systemic, and ideological violence. Brown (2023) employed BFT to explain police brutality and structural violence, focusing on the devaluation of Black women's humanity and victimhood. In light of recent rollbacks in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, BFT, through its intersectional lens and matrix of domination, offers crucial insights for reforming police practices and addressing the biases against Black women in the legal system.

Despite how the BFT framework, matrix of domination, and intersection theory have contributed to understanding the experiences of Black women within the CJS, various critiques challenge their application. Some argue that these frameworks may oversimplify Black women's experiences, neglecting diversity based on socioeconomic status, geographic location, and sexual orientation within this population (Acquaviva et al., 2022; Alang et al., 2023; Cooper, 2021). Others suggest that the matrix of domination fails to provide insights into the challenges faced by Black women and may emphasize oppression at the expense of recognizing resistance and agency (Kule et al., 2019; Ucock, 2020). These critiques highlight the importance of understanding intersectionality beyond a monolithic comprehension of Blackness (e.g., considering immigration status and language) and the traditional recognition of womanhood (i.e., considering trans, queer, and gender-non-conforming individuals). Additional critiques argue that these methods are hard to root in practice and that the overall framework has been whitewashed and politicized, causing it to lose its purpose of understanding discriminatory practices, oppressive methods, and power dynamics to achieve true social justice (Collins et al., 2021).

As such, refining these frameworks to ensure that they accurately depict the complexities and diversities of Black women's lives is crucial. By considering ways that compounded identities and unique experiences, we can better understand how these intersect with systems of oppression and recognize how power dynamics shape various aspects of society. BFT allows for reexamining inclusive and equitable practices that acknowledge nuances beyond traditional measures (Duran & Jones, 2020).

Discussion

This analysis emphasized the need to employ the BFT framework in comprehending and redressing the unjust and disproportionate experiences of Black women and their interactions with various power systems.

Understanding the historical context, contextualizing current policing practices, and highlighting the systemic roots of these issues, including the violence against Black individuals, the systemic dehumanization of Black women, and the introduction of a criminalization system, all work to provide a deeper analysis into the blueprint of current police methods. Recognizing the systemic patriarchal and white supremacist ideologies that render state-sanctioned physical, psychological, and sexual violence against Black women requires greater awareness and direct intervention. Though the BLM movement and similar social movements have worked to address policing practices and stand against power misuse and racial and gender discrepancies, discussions about police encounters influenced by additional identities like gender and gender expression, sexuality, and region have often been neglected.

Using BFT, the matrix of domination, and intersectionality allows for a holistic analysis of Black women's experiences within these spaces. It promotes a deeper understanding of how multiple forms of oppression intersect and compound to shape their interactions with police. Such frameworks center the voices and experiences of marginalized individuals, often overlooked or silenced in mainstream discourse, to ensure that their unique challenges are acknowledged and addressed. Crenshaw et al. (2015) establish the goals of the *#SayHerName* movement based on BFT and intersectional frameworks and provide practical suggestions for mobilizing and empowering communities to advocate for racial and gender justice. By illuminating the structural inequities embedded within the CJS and revealing how systems of oppression perpetuate inequalities, these methods provide a foundation for advocating systemic change and equitable reform, considering all of society's actors.

Additionally, BFT, the matrix of domination, and intersectionality recognize the complexity of Black women's experiences by acknowledging individuals who hold multiple, intersecting identities that shape their experiences. This allows for understanding how various factors influence Black women's interactions with law enforcement, incarceration, sentencing, and reentry. While these frameworks highlight the structural oppressions faced by Black women, they also emphasize agency, resilience, and resistance. By recognizing Black women's capacity to navigate and challenge oppressive systems, they empower individuals and communities to advocate for their rights, demand justice, and work toward systemic change. Such perspectives provide a critique of patriarchy within social movements, including tendencies to replicate hierarchical power structures and marginalize women's contributions. By challenging these patriarchal dynamics, BFT promotes inclusive and equitable organizing that acknowledges Black women's leadership and expertise (Harris, 2021). Highlighting Black women's activism and leadership within social movements challenges narratives portraying them as victims and underscores their role as change agents. This recognition can help ensure that Black women's contributions to social movements are honored and that their disproportionate experiences with the police and CJ system are addressed, redressed, and made just.

Recommendations

Understanding the insights gained from applying BFT frameworks is crucial in shaping criminal justice policies and practices. Recognizing the intersecting oppressions faced by Black women is essential for developing effective strategies that address their specific needs. Integrating evidence-based solutions rooted in Black women's lived experiences can inform inclusive and equitable policies, interventions, and support services. By incorporating these frameworks into our analyses, we can enrich our understanding, promote social justice, and work towards a more equitable and mindful approach that considers past and current law enforcement-related traumas. These efforts are essential for creating gender and racially equitable policing that ensures the safety of all individuals.

Centering Black Women's Experiences in Program Development, Training, and Evaluations

Addressing systemic oppression requires understanding how intersecting identities shape Black women's experiences (Luna et al., 2020). To combat these disparities, we recommend using the matrix of domination to scrutinize power dynamics in policing and their impact on Black women. Policymakers and officials should analyze how oppressive systems within the criminal justice system (CJS) intersect, affecting Black women, including trans and gender-non-conforming individuals. Researchers should prioritize Black women's voices, recognizing how intersecting identities have been criminalized, creating unique vulnerabilities. This involves highlighting the narratives of Black women affected by policing, incarceration, sentencing, and reentry.

Utilizing focus groups and ongoing surveys can reveal the impact of current practices and suggest ways to achieve equitable and safe policing. Additionally, policies that perpetuate racial and gender disparities in the CJS should be reformed, addressing the social and economic inequalities that lead to involvement in the system.

Develop Culturally Competent Policies and Programming

To address systemic oppression, it is crucial to understand how intersecting identities shape Black women's experiences (Luna et al., 2020). We recommend using the matrix of domination to examine power dynamics in policing and their effects on Black women, including trans and gender-non-conforming individuals. Policymakers should analyze how these oppressive systems within the criminal justice system (CJS) intersect to impact Black women specifically. Researchers must center Black women's voices, recognizing how intersecting identities have been criminalized, leading to unique vulnerabilities. This means emphasizing the experiences of Black women affected by policing, incarceration, sentencing, and reentry. Employing focus groups and ongoing surveys can help reveal the impact of current practices and suggest ways to ensure equitable and safe policing. Furthermore, policies that maintain racial and gender disparities in the CJS should be reformed, and efforts should be made to address the social and economic inequalities contributing to system involvement.

Conclusion

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is essential for critiquing policing practices, offering a nuanced, intersectional lens to understand law enforcement's impact on Black women, communities, and society. It challenges the overreliance on policing for social issues, advocating for community-centered solutions and activism. Black feminists propose addressing crime's root causes, investing in social services, and involving communities in decision-making rather than punitive measures. BFT fosters solidarity across social justice movements, promoting collaboration against racism, sexism, and other oppressions. It highlights how US social movements often overlook Black women's experiences and provides tools to address these dynamics. By centering Black women's voices, challenging patriarchal dynamics, and promoting intersectional analyses, BFT enriches social justice movements, making them more inclusive, equitable, and effective. Critiquing policing through a Black feminist lens encourages an interconnected approach to dismantling systemic injustices, centering marginalized experiences, and ensuring policy changes prioritize the concerns of Black women and other marginalized groups, thereby working towards a just, equitable society for all.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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