

The Black Woman Servant Leader

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Abstract: *There are few studies on black women leaders, in general, and black women servant leaders specifically. Previous research has categorized the ten characteristics of servant leadership developed by Spears as being agentic (masculine) or communal (feminine). The characteristics of persuasion, awareness conceptualization and foresight have been categorized as agentic, whilst the characteristics of listening, empathy, commitment to the growth of people, healing, stewardship and building communities have been categorized as being communal. These communal attributes ascribed to servant leadership have also been ascribed to women. The relationship between black women servant leaders and Spears' ten characteristics of servant leadership has never been deeply examined. However, some characteristics of black women leaders in the education and private sectors have been. Prevailing research on servant leadership has primarily been done through a Western-centric white male lens. Little is known about black women servant leaders and how intersectionality affects how they lead. Their multiple identities are believed to influence their leadership experiences, but much research has not been done in this area. Even though little research that exists shows that the number of racially and ethnically diverse leaders has increased, they are still significantly underrepresented in senior leadership positions. Men are still being promoted to managerial positions over women, and this negatively affects women of colour more. The negative stereotyping of the "angry black woman" at work has misrepresented them, leading to fewer of them being promoted. Organizations can better utilize the resources that black women servant leaders offer by implementing the Darrell Burrell Supervisory Workplace Psychological Safety Model, which supports people of colour and women. Future research should explore the impact of black women servant leaders in other sectors. Research can also examine the impact that specific servant leadership characteristics may have on black women's leadership styles.*

Keywords: Larry Spears, race, Robert Greenleaf, gender, Darrell Burrell, western-centric, intersectionality, communal characteristics, agentic characteristics, leadership styles.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of black women servant leaders and their relationship with the ten characteristics of servant leadership developed by Spears, a scholar of Robert Greenleaf, has never been examined in any great detail, based on the author's review of the literature. Previous research has examined characteristics of black women that have influenced their output in education (Lanier et al., 2022; Sales et al., 2020) and in the private sector (Scherer, 2021). The characteristics examined primarily include compassion (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015), empathy and nurturing (Hogue, 2016; Sims & Morris, 2018). The ten characteristics of servant leadership developed by Spears (2004) are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship and commitment to the growth of people and building communities. (Blanchard, 2018; Spears, 2004). Past research has recognized that these ten characteristics can be categorized into being agentic (masculine) or communal (feminine) (Hogue, 2016; Scicluna et al., 2017). The more agentic characteristics are persuasion, awareness conceptualization and foresight, whilst the more communal characteristics are listening, empathy, commitment to the growth of people, healing, stewardship and building communities (Reynolds, 2011; Tran, 2022).

Problem Statement. According to the latest census figures, women represent 50.8% of the total population of the United States, with 13.7% of this population being black women (United States Census, 2020). 2019 figures show that 53% of the African-American labour force were women, making up 47% of the total U.S. labour force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). There are very few studies on black women as leaders in general, however, and as servant leaders in particular, even though communal attributes of servant leadership are said to be embodied by women. Furthermore, the research that does exist on servant leadership has been done from a masculine viewpoint generally (Sims & Morris, 2018) and, more specifically, a Western-centric white male one (Eaton, 2020; Liu, 2017; Sims & Carter, 2019) or from the viewpoint of middle-class white women (Moorosi et al., 2018). The general problem is that there is very little known about women as servant leaders, and the specific problem is that there is even less known about black women as servant leaders and how their intersectional identities impact how they lead.

Significance of Study. The servant leadership theory is said to embody communal qualities traditionally attributed to women and exhibited in how women lead (Hogue, 2016; Sims & Morris, 2018). Historically, Black women leaders have traditionally been perceived to embody these communal attributes (Moorosi et al., 2018; Nash et al., 2020). Studies have showcased the positive impact that some of the characteristics of servant leadership have had on leaders (Giambattista et al., 2020; Liden et al., 2014; Sendjaya et al., 2018; Zubairu, 2020). These studies have examined empathy, self-awareness, persuasion, stewardship, and commitment to the growth of people (Zubairu, 2020). Existing literature has also highlighted the positive impact of other characteristics commonly associated with women, like compassionate love (Sims & Morris, 2018; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Existing literature, however, continues to be sparse on the study of black women as leaders in general and servant leaders in particular (Branche & Ford, 2021; Lomotey, 2019; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Sims & Carter, 2019). This is especially significant as the communal attributes of servant leadership are said to be embodied by women (Hogue, 2016; Scicluna Lehrke & Sowden, 2017). The literature that exists has primarily looked at black women leaders in the educational sector (Sales et al., 2020). Academically, this research will contribute to scholarly literature by further deepening the understanding of the intersections between servant leadership and gender, particularly from an intersectionality perspective.

Methodology

The methodology used for this literature review comprised primarily of electronic searches through various databases. The parameters of this research were limited to peer-reviewed articles published between 2017 and 2023, except in cases where seminal work on specific foundational concepts needed to be referenced. Key terms used in the search were Servant Leadership, intersectionality, women leaders, Black female leaders, Black women leaders, African-American female leaders, African-American women leaders, black women leaders and servant leadership and black feminist theory.

Discussion

Communal and Agentic Characteristics. Previous research has established that the ten servant leadership characteristics can be categorized into being more agentic ‘masculine’ or communal ‘feminine’ (Hogue, 2016; Scicluna Lehrke & Snowden, 2017). The characteristics that are said to be more agentic are awareness, persuasion, conceptualization and foresight, whilst the characteristics that are said to be more communal are listening, empathy, commitment to the growth of people, healing, stewardship and building communities (Reynolds, 2011; Trans, 2022). Traditionally, agentic characteristics associated with men have also been associated with good leadership (Hogue, 2016; Lemoine & Blum, 2021).

The communal characteristics of servant leadership, which are usually associated with women, i.e., listening, empathy, commitment to the growth of people, healing, stewardship and building communities (Reynolds, 2011; Tran, 2022) are seen as those characteristics found in weak and incompetent leaders (Scicluna Lehrke & Snowden, 2017; Sims & Carter, 2019). One of the main challenges that women leaders face has been termed the double bind dilemma. This is when they are accused of acting like a leader as they display agentic characteristics and, in the process, being shunned as a woman or acting like a woman and displaying communal characteristics and not being recognized as a good leader (Scicluna Lehrke & Snowden, 2017; Tran, 2022). Several scholars have touted Servant leadership as the leadership theory that can overturn this narrative because a number of its characteristics are communal (Hogue, 2016; Lemoine & Blum, 2021; Scicluna Lehrke & Snowden, 2017; Stauffer & Maxwell, 2020; Tran, 2022). Some scholars have argued that there is an equal presentation of agentic and five communal behaviours by both male and female servant leaders (Sims & Morris, 2018). Research has also established that women tend to exhibit more servant leadership attributes than men (Canavesi & Minelli, 2021; Hogue, 2016; Stauffer & Maxwell, 2020; Zubairu, 2020). Servant leadership theory could, therefore, reimagine the concept of positive leadership in a gender-neutral manner (Lemoine & Blum, 2021; Scicluna Lehrke & Snowden, 2017; Sims & Carter, 2019).

Intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989) coined “intersectionality” to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics intersect and overlap, especially in the context of the African American woman. This has been called the double enslavement of the black woman when it comes to intersecting race and gender (Vickery, 2016). It has also been called the “double whammy” and “double jeopardy” (Aaron, 2020: 47). It has evolved into a theoretical framework that encourages viewing Black women through the lens of their race and gender and the inherent social justice issues therein (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). This work initially targeted black women who had come into contact with the legal system but was soon extrapolated to include black women in all situations (Aaron, 2020; De Sousa & Varcoe, 2022; Sales et al., 2020). Crenshaw is said to have divided intersectionality into three distinct categories, which are structural, political and representational (Haynes et al., 2020). Structural highlights concealed types of systemic discrimination whilst politics enforces the double disempowerment of black women. Representational intersectionality refers primarily to the stereotyping that black women face in their day-to-day lives (Crenshaw, 1991; Haynes et al., 2020).

Many scholars, however, have cited that historically, the concept of intersectionality has been in existence for many years (Davies, 2020; Vickery, 2017) since slavery, onto the civil rights and the origins of the women’s rights movements (Liu, 2017; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Strongman, 2022). These words taken from the famous “Ain’t I a Woman?!” speech delivered by Sojourner Truth are a testament to women’s appreciation of the intersectional subordination faced by black women in 1851.

Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man-when I could get it-and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen most all sold off to slavery and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman? (Haynes et al., 2020: 754)

In more recent times, intersectionality has been used to describe other intersecting attributes like sexism, ageism and classism (De Sousa & Varcoe, 2022; Liu, 2017), which can be attributed to anyone, not just black women. Intersectionality recognizes that there are specific challenges caused by systemic structural inequalities and power dynamics due to various identities that one individual may subscribe to (Collins, 2019; Karmakar, 2022). Nash (2019) believes intersectionality is a theory, method and practice that has emerged from black feminist theory and is concerned with the challenges faced by the multiply-marginalized, especially women (Dowe, 2020). Intersectionality has also been exported internationally and

is being used as a theoretical lens through which other social inequalities in Europe and beyond are viewed (Davies, 2020). Scholars have argued that the concept should be seen as a social structural chart that can be used to interpret both the advantaged and the disadvantaged, arguing that white females and white male heterosexuals can also be viewed through an intersectional lens (Davies, 2020). Called the ‘Intersectional wars’ by Dowe (2020), arguments have now ensured as to this appropriation of the theory of intersectionality away from the black woman with race no longer being its central point (Davies, 2020; Strongman, 2022) thus once again relegating the black woman to a more inferior space (Davies, 2020). Nash (2022), however, opines that scholars of intersectionality, especially black feminists, need to allow the concept to expand and change in ways that may seem painful and unfamiliar and be comfortable in this space (Nash, 2022). Nash (2022) believes there is power in this, and black feminists should own this power (Nash, 2022).

A key challenge faced by black women due to their intersectional identities is the issue of negative stereotyping (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). The stereotype of angry black women affects their promotion rates and leads to negative career experiences (Sales et al., 2019; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Further stereotyping can be caused by the multiple identities that some black women have, i.e., race, gender and ethnicity. Apart from identifying as female and black, many black women also identify as being African, Latino, Caribbean and African-American (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). This has often caused black women to code-switch to successfully overcome some of these challenges (Sims & Carter, 2019). Partly due to their intersectional identity, previous research has shown that black women have exhibited the characteristics of servant leadership in the way they lead, primarily as they seek to improve the lives of those they lead (Aaron, 2020; Moorosi et al., 2018). Black women leaders are said to encompass empathy, care and emotional intelligence, all eight attributes of a servant leader, in their leadership styles (Moorosi et al., 2018; Nash & Peters, 2020).

Most research on intersectionality has been done on black women leaders in education (Aaron, 2020; Moorosi et al., 2018; Nash & Peters, 2020; Sales et al., 2020). However, there is very little research as to the transferability of this phenomenon to black women leaders in other sectors. Research has shown that organizations benefit greatly from people with multiple identities (Sims & Carter, 2019). A significant criticism of servant leadership is that it has not taken intersectionality into account and has primarily been viewed through a white male Eurocentric lens (Branche & Ford, 2022). It has not adequately taken gender (Penha-Vasconcelos, 2020) and race into consideration either (Eaton, 2020; Liu, 2017). Some scholars report that servant leadership upholds patriarchal and paternalistic models, thus negating women's contributions to servant leadership theory (Camm, 2019; Eaton, 2020). Previous research acknowledges that servant leaders proliferated, especially within the black churches during and after slavery (Bunch, 2013; Eaton, 2020), and yet enough attention has not been paid to this antecedence but has highlighted servant leadership as more of a Eurocentric male concept (Eaton, 2020; Reynolds, 2011). Another criticism as it relates to black women is that scholars have highlighted the fact that the word “servant” acts as a trigger to some African-Americans as it brings forth images of the slavery era and its attendant ills in the United States (Graham, 2018; Johnson, 2018; Tran, 2022; Sims et al., 2021).

Women in Leadership in the United States of America. Significant progress has been made in women's professional advancement in the United States. Before COVID-19 hit, women's representation in leadership roles slowly increased (McKinsey & Company, 2020); however, the continued absence of enough women in leadership positions in America is still a significant concern (Reynolds, 2020). Although women are still grossly underrepresented, especially women of colour (3% of all employees in the C-Suite), this was slowly changing for the better (McKinsey & Company, 2020), with a 24% increase of women into C-Suite executive level positions happening between 2015 and 2019 (Huang et al., 2019). Notwithstanding these seeming gains, however, more men were still promoted to managerial positions than women, with 85 women being promoted for every 100 men (McKinsey & Company, 2020), and women managers have decreased by 5% since 2015 (Huang et al., 2019).

Overall, a significant challenge for women attaining leadership positions in any sector has been hindered by the historical understanding that leadership is male and that attributes stereotypically aligned with being a woman (communal characteristics) cannot also be leadership attributes (Reynolds, 2020; Scicluna Lehrke et al., 2017; Tran, 2022). Women have, therefore, been trapped by the ‘double-bind’ dilemma (Tran, 2022; Vickery, 2017) of “act like a leader and be disliked as a woman or act like a woman and be perceived as an incompetent leader” (Scicluna Lehrke et al., 2017: 31).

Black Women in Leadership

Historical Context. Black women have held official and non-official leadership positions in the United States since slavery (Haynes et al., 2020; Sales et al., 2020; Strongman, 2022). Some scholars have stated that all through their lives, black women were constantly exposed to experiences that readied them for leadership roles even though they could not identify them as such at that time (Alston, 2005). As far back as 1909, a group of primarily black women superintendents called the Jeanes supervisors, classified themselves as servant leaders (Aaron, 2020; Nash & Peters, 2020). This classification complemented the collectivist nature seen amongst black people, generally and black women specifically, as they moulded communal relationships to survive (Aaron, 2020; Lanier et al., 2022). Even when black women were expected to be subservient due to being enslaved, they still led the work towards the empowerment of themselves and others within their communities (Sales et al., 2020). Unofficially, black women were integral to establishing schools and setting up associations, yet this had largely gone unrecognized in the literature until recently (Sales et al., 2020; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Black women have worked to reinforce existing communities and build communities where needed (Marina & Fonteneau, 2012). The main attributes displayed by these black women as they provided leadership were caring, supporting, and generally building up the communities in which they found themselves (Branche & Ford, 2022; Sims & Carter, 2019). More recently, theories have been developed that speak to the specific intricacies of the black woman, including Black Feminist Thought (De Sousa & Varcoe, 2020), Womanism and Intersectionality as described above (Aaron, 2020).

Research on Black Women Leaders. There continues to be scant literature on black women in leadership (Branche & Ford, 2021). They have been understudied (Lomotey, 2019) and neglected (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Sims & Carter, 2019). The existing literature has primarily examined black women leaders in the educational sector (Sales et al., 2020). Even though the limited research shows that the number of racially and ethnically diverse leaders has increased, they are still severely underrepresented in senior leadership spaces (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). More men are still being promoted to managerial positions than women, and this adversely affects black women more. Whereas 85 women were promoted for every 100 men, the corresponding number for black women was 58 (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Within the nonprofit sector, research shows that out of 100 nonprofit organizations studied, 9 out of 10 of the leaders were white males. Thirty-four CEOs in the 100 organizations were female, and only four were non-white (Branche & Ford, 2021). Therefore, there continue to be significant challenges to black women advancing into executive positions within the United States (Sales et al., 2020). Black women's intersectional identity has also affected them in terms of leadership advancement (Sales et al., 2020). Their multiplicative identity has influenced and shaped their approach and experiences as leaders, which has helped inform their understanding of existing power structures and systemic inequalities (Aaron, 2020; Nash & Peters, 2020).

Attributes particularly showcased in past research as continuing to be synonymous with black women's leadership up to the present day are providing care and support to others under their watch (Moorosi et al., 2018; Nash & Peters, 2020). Other attributes highlighted are the desire to lead collectively and engage the community (Moorosi et al., 2018). Overall, black women leaders were said to display the attributes of a 12 servant leader (Lomotey, 2019). Although some studies have concluded that women use more communal attributes while men are more agentic as they lead (Lemoine & Blum, 2021), when it comes to black women leaders, research points us to the fact that they have to use both types of attributes in order to be taken seriously as leaders (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Sims & Carter, 2019).

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conducting this review, the literature reveals that an insignificant amount of research has been carried out on female servant leaders, particularly black female servant leaders. This is although black women have led with servant leadership characteristics since slavery times (Haynes et al., 2020; Sales et al., 2020; Strongman, 2022). Partly due to their intersectional identities, black women have exhibited the characteristics of servant leadership in the way they lead, encompassing empathy, care and emotional intelligence, all attributes of a servant leader, in their leadership styles (Moorosi et al., 2018; Nash & Peters, 2020). Although there has been a 24% increase of women into C-Suite executive-level positions between 2015 and 2019 (Huang et al., 2019) and the number of racially and ethnically diverse leaders has increased, they are still severely underrepresented in senior leadership spaces (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010) and that

is especially so when it comes to black women. Organizationally, women generally remain stuck in the vacuum of displaying specific communal characteristics that may not be synonymous with competent leadership (Hogue, 2016). In addition to this, black women’s multiple, intersectional identities continue to affect their leadership advancement in the workplace (Sales et al., 2020), and there continue to be 13 significant challenges to black women advancing into executive positions within the United States (Sales et al., 2020). The negative stereotyping of angry black women in the workplace has also adversely affected the promotion rates of black women leaders in the workplace (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). However, research has shown that improving gender diversity at the leadership level leads to improved organizational performance (Lee, 2019). Research has also proven that black women’s multiplicative identities continue to mould their experiences as leaders, and this has helped inform their understanding of existing power structures and systemic inequalities (Aaron, 2020; Nash & Peters, 2020).

For organizations to make the best use of the resources that black women servant leaders bring to the table, all elements of the Darrell Burrell Supervisory Workplace Psychological Safety Model that support people of colour and women can be utilized. This model provides a pictorial description of activities that Leaders can promote to help produce a conducive environment for minority employees, in this case, black women leaders, to thrive and excel.

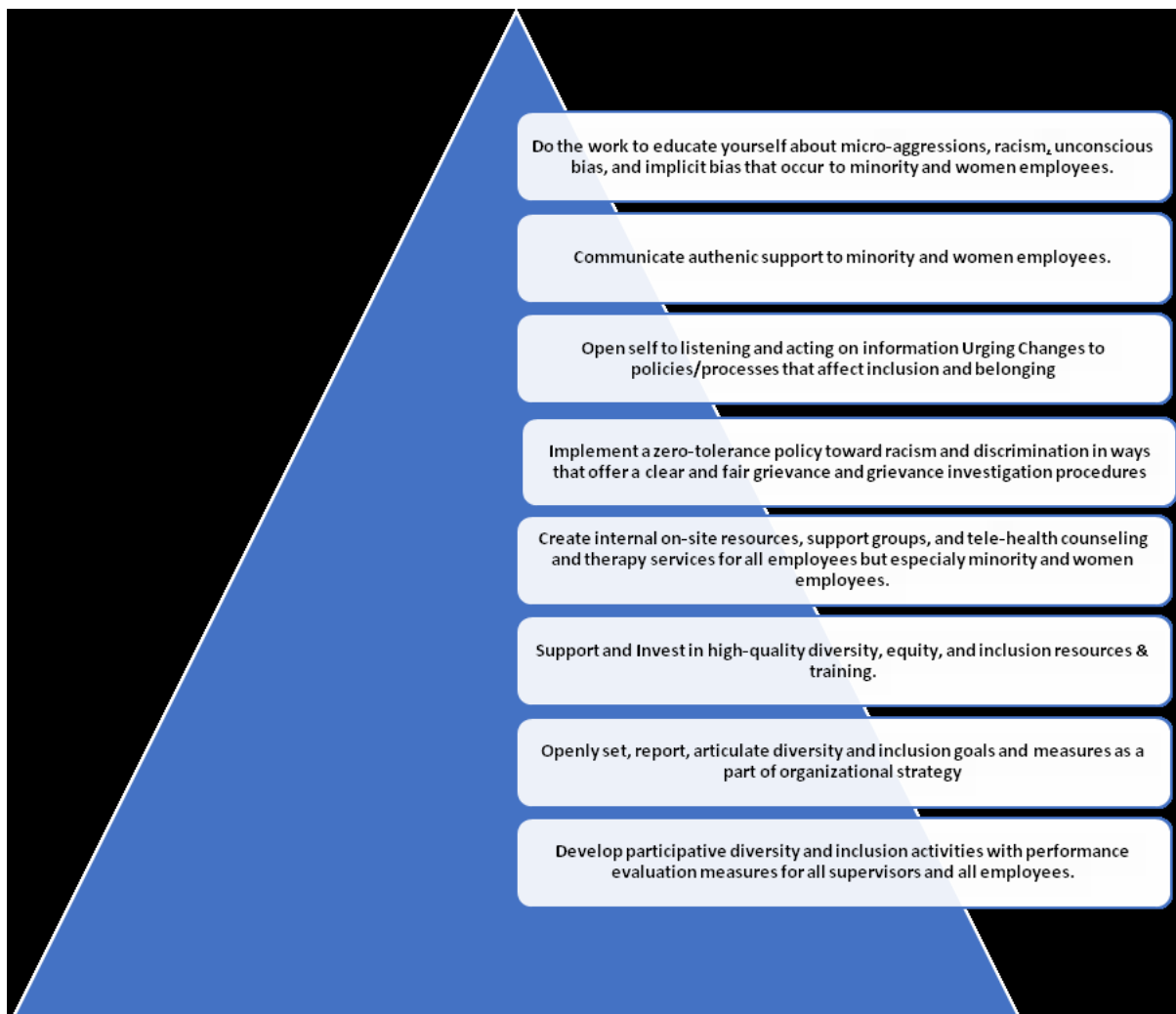


Figure 1. Darrell Burrell Supervisory Workplace Psychological Safety Model

Source: Burrell, 2022

Future Research

Future research should continue exploring the impact black women have made as servant leaders in sectors other than education. Research can also delve into black women and specific characteristics of servant leadership and how they impact their leadership styles.

Summary

The article notes the fact that scant literature on black women leaders exists and highlights the fact that black women held positions of leadership in the United States of America since the time of slavery (Haynes et al., 2020; Sales et al., 2020; Strongman, 2022) and that throughout their lives, they have constantly been exposed to experiences that prepared them for such leadership roles (Alston, 2005). It also showed that these black women have led with servant leadership characteristics throughout the history of the United States of America. The article revealed that women have traditionally been seen to embody the more communal characteristics of servant leadership, which are listening, empathy, commitment to the growth of people, healing, stewardship and building communities (Reynolds, 2011; Trans, 2022). It also revealed that traditionally, agentic characteristics of servant leadership, usually associated with men, i.e., awareness, persuasion, conceptualization and foresight, have also been associated with good leadership (Hogue, 2016; Lemoine & Blum, 2021), whilst the communal characteristics of servant leadership usually associated with women are seen as those characteristics found in weak and incompetent leaders (Scicluna et al., 2017; Sims & Carter, 2019). However, the literature reviewed has challenged this notion, showing that women have proven to be equally good leaders.

This article went on to show that, historically, intersectionality as a concept has been in existence for many years (Vickery, 2017), even though the phrase “intersectionality” was coined by Crenshaw in 1989. This concept describes how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics intersect with one another and overlap, especially in the context of the black woman. Despite these facts, academically, research on black women continues to be sparse and 16 practically, black women continue to be a minority when it comes to appoints to the C-Suite across all sectors in the United States. The article ends with the key recommendation of utilizing the Darrell Burrell Supervisory Workplace Psychological Safety Model that supports people of colour and women to aid leaders in the workplace to ensure a conducive atmosphere for black women servant leaders to excel.

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