From Washtubs to Boardrooms: The Economic Mobility and Labor Legacy of Black Women in America

Executive Summary

An Exclusive Report for Unerased Black Women Speak

By Rhonda V. Sharpe, Ph.D. and Lily S. Johnson

Table of Contents

The History of Black Women's Labor

In 1995, 87-year-old washerwoman Oseola McCarty donated $150,000—her life savings—to fund scholarships for Black students at the University of Southern Mississippi. Her act of generosity emerged from wages earned in one of the most undervalued occupations in America. McCarty's story exemplifies a persistent paradox: Black women have consistently driven economic and social change from the post-Civil War era to the present through entrepreneurship, labor activism, and mutual aid (Jones, 1985), yet their economic mobility remains constrained by intersecting systems of racial and gender discrimination. These systems operate through occupational segregation (Cunningham & Zalokar, 1992; Darity & Mason, 1998), wage suppression (Mason, 1995; Pettit & Ewert, 2009), wealth extraction (Hamilton & Darity, 2017; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995), and policy exclusion (Katznelson, 2005). By 2022, Black women's median net worth stood at $14,020—95% below the median net worth of the overall U.S. population, $284,000.

Black women's economic mobility matters for multiple, interconnected reasons. Even a college degree does not guarantee economic parity. Black college graduates face unemployment rates nearly twice that of white college graduates (Jones & Schmitt, 2014). Closing the economic gap for Black women would unlock economic growth by reducing the inefficient underutilization of human capital; advancing women's equality globally could add $12 trillion to the GDP, with racial equity gains offering similar returns (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015). Black women's wealth-building is key to breaking intergenerational cycles of inequality: parental wealth predicts children's economic outcomes across generations, and Black families' limited asset accumulation perpetuates disadvantage (Chetty et al., 2020; Hamilton & Darity, 2010).

Occupational segregation continues to concentrate Black women in undervalued care and service work, a key factor in explaining the wage gap (Hegewisch & Hartmann, 2014). Moreover, economic security enables political participation and civic engagement, which are necessary for the democratic governance. COVID-19 widened racial inequities because pre-existing economic vulnerabilities limited Black women's capacity to weather shocks (Brown et al., 2021; Wilson, 2021). Therefore, Black women's mobility is not merely an equity issue but an economic efficiency and democratic imperative.

Understanding how these contemporary barriers emerged requires an examination of the historical strategies Black women developed to claim economic independence. This study deliberately separates historical narratives from contemporary data analyses. Presenting historical agency from 1865 to 2000 as a continuous narrative prevents chronological fragmentation and establishes context before readers process complex economic tables that show current barriers. This historical foundation begins with the Reconstruction era, when newly freed Black women exercised greater autonomy over their labor and organized collective demands for fair compensation.

Historical Pathways

In July 1881, African American washerwomen in Atlanta leveraged established networks from communal laundry work to organize the Washing Society, mobilizing 20 to 3,000 members to demand higher pay and workplace autonomy (Hunter, 1999). Working in private households, washing and ironing, gave them independence from direct supervision, enabling collective organizing (Hunter, 1999). Their strike inconvenienced white households throughout the city (Hunter, 1999). When authorities threatened arrests and new taxes, the washerwomen wrote directly to the mayor to defend their labor rights (Hunter, 1999). Though the strike's resolution remains undocumented, it demonstrated that African American women's labor was vital to the New South's political economy, challenging narratives of compliant Black workers promoted by white business elites seeking Northern capital (Hunter, 1999). The 1881 strike remains one of the most noted labor actions in the urban South during the late 19th century, and its organizing tactics influenced Black women's labor activism for 87 years (Hunter, 1999).

Nannie Helen Burroughs (1879-1961) transformed these spontaneous organizing tactics into formal institutions (Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021a). A labor leader and rhetorician who treated Black women's liberation from poverty as a question of both spirit and structure, Burroughs sought to assert Black women's humanity through broad educational purpose, which was to instill pride in their gender and race, and to equip them with tools to confront the racial, classed, and gendered barriers of Jim and Jane Crow America through faith and labor organizing (Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021a). Her womanist labor project placed Black women into more stable employment by building a national unionizing platform rooted in Black women's experiences of waged domestic work rather than in white women's reform agendas (Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021b). She established institutions and organizations that fought for civil rights, women's suffrage, and women's labor legislation both before and long after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, insisting that Black women's concerns did not end at the ballot box (Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021a).

In 1909, she founded the National Training School for Women and Girls, the largest school for Black women and girls in Washington, D.C., to improve their working conditions and reopen pathways closed by racial and gender inequality in the labor market (Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021a). She followed this with the National Association of Wage Earners in 1921, the first Black women's national labor organization of the twentieth century. In 1924, she co-founded the National League of Republican Colored Women to advocate for Black women's voting rights (Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021a). Burroughs operated outside the support of the state and mainstream white women's labor organizations, relying instead on Black women's networks and associations to seek justice for themselves and their communities (Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021a).

Through her school and organizing work, she created training opportunities for Black women workers, including teaching bookkeeping, business practices, and domestic science (Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021a). She demanded higher standards and better pay from white employers, reframing domestic skills as economic and political expertise (Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021b). In her speeches and writings, she cast maids, laundresses, and other domestic workers as a collective labor force, providing the groundwork for later worker organizing, including unions and strikes (Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021b). She applied theological and institutional principles to the labor tactics that washerwomen had already developed, as in the 1881 Atlanta strike, with its collective rate-setting and threat of a citywide stoppage (Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021b).

Her work clarifies the historical economic foundations of Black women's lives, beginning with the reality that domestic service and laundry work are the jobs where Black women have been confined, and refusing to treat those jobs as marginal (Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021b). Instead, she frames them as the core of Black households' cash income, as training grounds for business and organizing, and as the terrain on which Black women would fight for justice for all, displaying low-wage Black women's labor as a central site of Black struggle and working-class power (Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021b).

Alice Childress (1916-1994), a playwright, novelist, and actress, brought these organizing traditions into cultural representation (Elliott, 2019). Her work, particularly *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life* (1956), emphasized that unregulated domestic labor requires structural solutions, such as unionization (Elliott, 2019). Through relatable characters, Childress shows how employers devalue domestic work and deny workers protections available even in other low-wage occupations (Elliott, 2019). Her narratives exposed how exclusion from labor law enabled wage theft, arbitrary hours, and benefit denial, making clear that Black women's depressed earnings stemmed from policy and ideology, not personal failure (Elliott, 2019). Childress bridges how Black women's domestic labor has been lived, represented, and operated as an organizing site (Elliott, 2019). She humanizes domestic workers and insists that their labor demonstrates their central economic role, not disposability (Elliott, 2019). By rooting critiques in intimate conversations between Mildred and Marge, Childress models how Black women's storytelling and kitchen-table discussions become political education (Elliott, 2019).

Dorothy Bolden (1920-2013) built directly on these foundations, transforming Atlanta city buses into mobile union halls in the 1960s, where domestic workers shared wage information, discussed workplace abuse, and learned organizing tactics (Sherley, 2023). In 1968, she founded the National Domestic Workers Union of America (NDWU), leading over 10,000 members nationwide for more than three decades (Sherley, 2023). A veteran of civil rights marches alongside Rep. John Lewis, Bolden built on her organizing experience to establish job placement programs, negotiate training for members on contract negotiation and wage standards, and require union membership to include voter registration (Sherley, 2023). The NDWU emerged as an influential political force in the Atlanta and Georgia elections (Sherley, 2023). Bolden legitimized domestic work on an unprecedented scale, creating the first powerful institutional voice advocating for higher wages and improved working conditions for an occupation systematically excluded from formal labor protections (Sherley, 2023; Slotnick, 2019). The evolution from the 1881 washerwomen's spontaneous strike to Burroughs' institutionalization to Bolden's sustained union demonstrates how Black women built collective bargaining power across generations, despite systematic exclusion from formal labor protections (Hunter, 1999; Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021b; Sherley, 2023).

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) functions as a contemporary institutional vessel for this pattern. Founded on April 23, 1921, in Chicago as the Building Service

Employees International Union (janitors, elevator operators, window washers), it became the SEIU in 1968 to reflect its growing membership across healthcare, property services, and public employment (Rothfelder, 2018). It now represents over 2 million workers (Rothfelder, 2018). In healthcare, SEIU represents nursing assistants, home-care workers, dietary staff, cleaners, and other nonprofessional hospital and nursing home workers—a workforce that is overwhelmingly female and heavily Black, Latina, and immigrant (Rothfelder, 2018). The SEIU functions as a contemporary institutional vessel for the pattern established by laundresses, domestic workers, and hospital aides: Black women leading from feminized, undervalued jobs in care and service, transforming "women's work" into a site of political leadership, insisting that labor is central to both the economy and community survival while pushing unions toward democracy and anti-racism (Rothfelder, 2018).

Occupational segregation continues to sort Black women into a narrow range of low-wage jobs, which has been identified as a primary cause of pay gaps (Cunningham & Zalokar, 1992). Employers have historically limited Black women to domestic and essential care/service jobs (Cunningham & Zalokar, 1992). This creates "crowding," in which too many qualified workers compete for too few positions, driving down wages while increasing employer profits (Bergmann, 1974). In 1940, nearly 60% of working Black women were domestic or farm laborers, earning just 44% of white women's wages (Cunningham & Zalokar, 1992). By 1980, gains in access to factory and clerical work brought relative wages near parity, but occupational and industry segregation still accounted for approximately half of the remaining gap (Cunningham & Zalokar, 1992). Studies from 1966 found that areas with stronger anti-Black attitudes had worse Black occupational standing, which was unrelated to education differences but tied to discrimination (Bergmann & Lyle, 1971). Even today, Black women in essential roles, such as nursing or teaching earn 11-27% less per hour than white men in the same jobs (Austin, 2024).

Washerwoman Oseola McCarty (1908-1999) earned low wages in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, never finished elementary school, and never married, yet through disciplined saving, she accumulated over $250,000 (Koten, 2013). In 1995, at the age of 87, she donated $150,000 to endow scholarships at the University of Southern Mississippi for Black students who could not otherwise afford college (Koten, 2013). The donation sparked national attention, including a White House visit, the Olympic torch, and an honorary doctorate from Harvard (Koten, 2013). McCarty's bequest performs what wealth transfers rarely accomplish for Black families: fronting tuition, reducing student debt, and opening professional pathways for Black students. While Black working-class households, especially women, remain structurally locked out of asset growth, McCarty transformed wages from stigmatized "women's work" into capital funding for higher education. It emerged from undervalued laundry work and a political decision to invest in Black students rather than in personal consumption. This choice redirected the fruits of labor that historically subsidized white comfort toward Black collective futures. Because McCarty's story inspired hundreds of additional donors and is now institutionalized in the McCarty Legacy Society, her working-class financial decision catalyzed broader educational opportunity structures despite persistent racial wealth gaps (Koten, 2013).

The 2025 Communities of Color Index documents that organizations serving American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Black/African American, and

Hispanic/Latino communities received $16.0 billion — 2.9% of total charitable giving in 2022 — with no single group reaching even 1% of overall donations (Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2025). Black women sit at the intersection of the groups least capitalized by this philanthropic system: they carry the lowest median net worth of any demographic group ($14,020 in 2022), the highest student debt burden relative to income, and the thinnest inheritance flows — the precise conditions that standard wealth-transfer models identify as prohibitive to giving (Hamilton & Darity, 2010; Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2025).

McCarty's $150,000 bequest is analytically significant because it occurred despite those conditions, not in their absence. She converted a lifetime of underpaid laundry work into educational capital without foundation infrastructure, inherited assets, or the wealth buffers that enable giving to other demographic groups, making her choice an act of structural resistance rather than charitable surplus (Durán, 2001; Koten, 2013). That Black women give at this depth from this position of structural deprivation is not a footnote to philanthropy research; it is evidence that the standard model, which treats giving capacity as a function of wealth, systematically undercounts Black women's contributions and misreads their motivation (Durán, 2001). McCarty's bequest is a blueprint for reparative philanthropy from below precisely because it redirected the fruits of labor that historically subsidized white comfort toward Black collective futures — and did so from the bottom of the wealth distribution.

One hundred and forty years of organizing traditions demonstrate Black women's economic agency. The 1881 washerwomen organized spontaneously (Hunter, 1999). Burroughs institutionalized their tactics through formal training and national organizations (Popp & Phillips-Cunningham, 2021a, 2021b). Childress documented and humanized their work (Elliott, 2019). Bolden sustained the NDWU for 32 years (Sherley, 2023). SEIU carries forward this tradition today (Rothfelder, 2018). McCarty converted labor into an intergenerational wealth transfer (Koten, 2013). However, these strategies have confronted—and continue to confront—structural barriers that organizing alone cannot overcome.

Methodology

This study examines three questions:

1. What historical pathways have Black women forged to achieve economic independence?
2. What structural barriers persist in limiting economic advancement?
3. What policy interventions can narrow the economic gaps?

This study employs an intersectional and stratified economic framework. Crenshaw (1991) demonstrated that single-axis analyses of discrimination render Black women's experiences invisible when race and gender are examined separately. Darity's (2005) stratification economics reveals that group identity affects economic outcomes beyond individual characteristics: discrimination operates through group-based treatment, and intergroup inequality persists through mechanisms that individual achievement cannot overcome. Sharpe (2019) shows why data disaggregation is essential: comparing Black women to All Women isolates race effects, and comparing them to Black men isolates gender effects, thereby identifying disadvantages that are often obscured by aggregate statistics.

To answer the questions posed in this study, we used data from the Survey and the American Community Survey. We used data from the 2010, 2013, 2016, 2019, and 2022 Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF). Data from the American Community Survey (ACS) is from 1880 through 2024. The sample consists of survey respondents aged 18 and older for all tables except educational attainment, which includes respondents aged 25 or older. By including respondents over 65 years, we can observe wealth transfers that occur later in life and student loans carried by older populations.

Most analyses report dollar amounts in nominal terms (the actual dollars for each survey year) because our primary focus was on documenting disparities between demographic groups within the same year. Our analysis examines Black women's economic outcomes by comparing four overlapping demographic groups: Black women, Black men, All Women, and the Overall Population

Ain't I a Woman

In 1851, Sojourner Truth challenged the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, to reconcile idealized femininity with the lived reality of Black women's labor (Truth, 1851). Truth catalogued her physical work—plowing, reaping, husking, and chopping—and her capacity to "work as much and eat as much as a man," interrogating why protective gender norms excluded those who performed the most arduous labor. More than a century later, Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" (1978) asserted a different dimension of Black womanhood: self-defined confidence and inner strength that defied Western beauty standards and the narrow definitions of femininity. Both works document characteristics that economic data later confirm: Black women's sustained labor force participation across generations, their concentration in occupations requiring physical and emotional labor, and their resilience within structures that simultaneously depend on and devalue their work.

The 2020–2024 period was a setback. Married Black mothers lose the earnings edge that they briefly held. In 2024, married Black mothers aged 25–34 earned $41,141 compared with $44,432 for all married mothers—a $3,291 gap. For ages 35–44, Black women earned $51,426 compared with $56,569 for all women, a $5,143 gap between the two groups. Simultaneously, never-married, childless Black women remain behind. Women aged 25–34 earned $39,084 compared with $46,284 for all women, a $7,200 gap. Women aged 35–44 earned $47,312 compared with $52,455 for all women, a $5,143 gap. These patterns are consistent with evidence that post-2010 austerity, weakened unions, and the pandemic recession eroded public- and service-sector employment gains that had briefly closed earnings gaps for married Black mothers.

Structural Barriers ~ Educational Attainment

Between 1960 and 2024, Black women's educational profiles shifted from low schooling to expanded college and graduate credentials, a transformation rooted in the Civil Rights era's dismantling of exclusionary barriers. In 1960, 88.7% of Black women lacked a high school diploma; by 2024, this share had dropped to 7.3% (see Table 4). Over the same period, the share of those holding a bachelor's degree rose from 1.5% to 18.9%, while the combined share of those holding master's, professional, or doctoral degrees grew from near zero to 14.2% (see Table 4). This shift marks Black women's movement from domestic and agricultural work—which employed two-thirds of Black working women in 1940— to occupations that require formal credentials (King, 1993). However, this mass entry into professionalized labor occurred alongside the erosion of public-sector stability and the rise of debt-financed education, complicating the economic returns on these degrees.

Black women face labor market penalties that cannot be reduced to the additive effects of race and gender discrimination. Bailey (2008) coined *the term misogynoir* to name the specific hatred, disregard, and objectification directed at Black women — a form of animus distinct from the racism experienced by Black men or the sexism experienced by white women. In labor markets, misogynoir operates through credential discounting: Black women's qualifications are devalued more heavily than those of Black men or white women with identical training, and their professional authority is routinely questioned in ways that compound rather than simply combine racial and gender penalties (Bailey, 2021). A related but analytically distinct mechanism is racism. Wingfield's (2019) term for the interlocking of racial and gender stereotypes that creates barriers for people who occupy both subordinate race and gender positions across groups. Together, these mechanisms explain why Black women with identical education and experience as white men earn 11% to 27% less within the same occupations (Wilson, 2021): the labor market does not add a race penalty to a gender penalty; it produces a distinct positional disadvantage for Black women that generic diversity initiatives, designed to address single-axis discrimination, structurally cannot reach.

Structural Barriers ~ Occupational Segregation

Black women's labor market position deteriorated in 2025, with unemployment rising from 5.3% in 2024 to 6.2%—nearly double White women's rate (3.2%) and 1.5 percentage points above Hispanic women (4.7%) (see Table 5). Black women maintained labor force participation (62.2%), nearly identical to that of Hispanic women (62.0%) and 4.5 points higher than that of White women (57.7%). By December 2025, Black women's unemployment peaked at 7.3%, the highest rate in four years, while 113,000 Black women lost jobs over the year (Nir, 2026). The employment-population ratio for Black women dropped from 59.5% in 2024 to 58.3% in 2025, falling below that of Hispanic women (59.0%) and 6.2 percentage points below that of Black men (64.5%). Black women experience unemployment approaching Black men's rate (6.3%), despite labor force participation matching Hispanic women and exceeding White women.

Table 5. Unemployment, labor force participation, and employment-population ratio, 2003-2025

Statistics	2003	2007	2010	2015	2019	2020	2022	2024	2025
Unemployment rate									
Black men	10.4%	7.9%	17.3%	9.5%	6.0%	11.8%	5.8%	5.9%	6.3%
Black women	8.5%	6.9%	12.9%	8.2%	5.0%	10.1%	4.3%	5.3%	6.2%
Hispanic women	7.8%	5.5%	11.4%	6.5%	4.1%	11.0%	4.1%	4.8%	4.7%
White women	4.4%	3.6%	7.2%	4.1%	3.0%	7.3%	2.9%	3.2%	3.2%
Labor force participation rate									
Black men	71.5%	71.2%	69.5%	67.3%	68.1%	65.7%	68.0%	69.0%	68.9%
Black women	63.9%	64.0%	63.2%	62.1%	62.5%	61.2%	63.0%	62.8%	62.2%
Hispanic women	58.1%	58.8%	59.5%	58.4%	60.4%	58.8%	59.9%	61.6%	62.0%
White women	59.9%	60.1%	60.0%	57.5%	58.0%	56.8%	57.1%	57.8%	57.7%
Employment-population ratio									
Black men	64.1%	65.5%	57.5%	60.9%	64.0%	58.0%	64.1%	65.0%	64.5%
Black women	58.5%	59.6%	55.1%	57.1%	59.4%	55.1%	60.3%	59.5%	58.3%
Hispanic women	53.6%	55.6%	52.7%	54.6%	57.9%	52.4%	57.4%	58.7%	59.0%
White women	57.3%	57.9%	55.6%	55.1%	56.2%	52.7%	55.4%	55.9%	55.8%

Source: Calculations by the Women's Institute for Science, Equity and Race using the 2024 American Community Survey and Decennial Census Data. www.ipums.org

Several factors have driven this deterioration. Federal employment cuts disproportionately affect Black women, with their federal government jobs declining by 30% compared to 11.6% for all women (McFadden, 2026). Approximately 300,000 Black women exited the labor force between May and August 2025 (AAACDFI, 2025). The unemployment gap between Black and White women widened from 1.9 percentage points in November 2024 to 3.5 points by November 2025 (Bunker, 2025). Economists attribute this widening to increased discrimination as labor markets soften, and employers face larger candidate pools (Bunker, 2025).

The 2025 deterioration continues the 23-year pattern. From 2003 through 2024, Black women maintained labor force participation rates 4-6 percentage points higher than White women while experiencing unemployment rates 2-4 percentage points higher (see Table 5). In 2003, Black women's unemployment (8.5%) was 4.1 points above White women (4.4%) and 0.7 points above Hispanic women (7.8%). Black women's labor force participation (63.9%) exceeded that of White women (59.9%) and Hispanic women (58.1%) in year. The Great Recession (2007-2010) amplified these disparities. Black women's unemployment increased by 6.0 percentage points (from 6.9% to 12.9%), compared to 3.6 points for White women (from 3.6% to 7.2%), 5.9 points for Hispanic women (from 5.5% to 11.4%), and 9.4 points for Black men (from 7.9% to 17.3%) (see Table 5). The employment-population ratio of Black women decreased by 4.5 percentage points during this period (from 59.6% to 55.1%). This ratio fell 0.5 points below that of White women (55.6%) but remained 2.4 points above Hispanic women (52.7 %). Black women maintained labor force participation (63.2% in 2010), 3.2 points above White women (60.0%) and 3.7 points above Hispanic women (59.5%), respectively.

Between 2019 and 2020, Black women's unemployment increased 5.1 percentage points (from 5.0% to 10.1%), compared to 4.3 points for White women (from 3.0% to 7.3%), 6.9 points for Hispanic women (from 4.1% to 11.0%), and 5.8 points for Black men (from 6.0% to 11.8%) (see Table 5). The employment-population ratio for Black women fell from 59.4% in 2019 to 55.1% in 2020—a 4.3-point drop. This decline matched Hispanic women's decline (from 57.9% to 52.4%) but exceeded White women's decline by 3.5 points (from 56.2% to 52.7%). The 2020-2022 recovery was uneven. By 2022, Black women's unemployment (4.3%) had fallen 5.8 points from the 2020 peak but remained 1.4 points above White women (2.9%) and 0.2 points above Hispanic women (4.1%) (see Table 5). The employment-population ratio of Black women climbed to 60.3% in 2022, increasing by 5.2 percentage points from 2020. This ratio exceeded that of White women (55.4%) by 4.9 percentage points and Hispanic women (57.4%) by 2.9 percentage points. Black women's labor force participation recovered to 63.0% in 2022, 5.9 percentage points above White women (57.1%) and 3.1 points above Hispanic women (59.9%). Black women returned to the workforce at higher rates than other women, but unemployment gaps persisted.

A comparison with Hispanic women shows how Black women's disadvantages intensified between 2019 and 2025. In 2019, Hispanic women's unemployment (4.1%) was 0.9 points lower than that of Black women (5.0%) (see Table 5). The labor force participation rates were nearly identical (60.4% vs. 62.5%). By 2025, the unemployment gap widened to 1.5 points (4.7% vs. 6.2%). The participation rates converged (62.0% vs. 62.2%). The Hispanic women's employment-population ratio (59.0%) exceeded that of Black women (58.3%) in 2025. This reversed the pattern from 2003 to 2022, when Black women maintained employment ratios that were higher than or equal to those in 18 of 20 years. Between 2019 and 2025, the employment-population ratio of Hispanic women rose by 1.1 points (from 57.9% to 59.0%). The ratio of Black women fell by 1.1 percentage points (from 59.4% to 58.3%), a 2.2-point reversal in the relative position of Black women.

Black women enter economic downturns from positions of high-Labor market attachment but face disproportionate job losses. Over 23 years, Black women maintained labor force participation 3.5 to 5.9 percentage points above that of White women (see Table 5). Black women experienced unemployment 2.0 to 4.1 points higher than White women every year. Black women's participation matched or exceeded Hispanic women in 19 of 23 years. Unemployment among Hispanic women exceeded that of other women in 20 of the 23 years. This pattern, a consistent labor supply coupled with higher unemployment, demonstrates structural barriers operating independently of work effort. Recovery periods restore employment levels without closing the underlying gaps. Black women's unemployment fell from 12.9% in 2010 to 5.0% in 2019, but remained 2.0 points above that of White women throughout. The 2025 deterioration repeats this dynamic. Economic slowdowns disproportionately harm Black women because of the persistence of structural barriers across business cycles.

Black women's high labor force attachment, combined with chronic "last hired, first fired" exposure, means downturns do not just interrupt employment; they push Black women into more precarious, lower-paying work, even when overall unemployment falls. During COVID-19, Black women were concentrated in frontline jobs, most of which were associated with layoffs, health risks, and care burdens. In the 2025 slowdown, they were disproportionately affected by federal cuts and the dismantling of corporate and public sector DEI infrastructure (Banks, 2019; Nelson, 2025). As DEI programs are rolled back and hiring pipelines narrow, the same women whose employment signaled recovery in 2020–2022 again shoulder the earliest and steepest job losses (National Partnership for Women & Families, 2026).

The High Cost of Higher Education

Higher educational attainment has not translated into proportional wealth gains for Black women because the financing mechanism imposes a distinctive burden. The preceding section documented that Black women's bachelor's degree attainment rose from 1.7% in 1960 to 36.5% in 2024, yet real earnings fell between 2010 and 2024, and the college wage premium collapsed 45.5% in real terms. A key driver of this paradox is debt. Black women finance their degrees at higher rates, borrow more than their peers, and repay more slowly, a pattern that converts higher education from a wealth-building tool into a mechanism of wealth extraction (Addo & Zhang, 2024; Houle & Addo, 2018).

This section examines three dimensions of this burden using 2016–2022 Survey of Consumer Finances data. First, it measures the scale of student debt and compares it across demographic groups. Second, it documents the debt-to-income ratios that constrain Black women's capacity to service that debt alongside other financial obligations. Third, it analyzes monthly payment burdens and zero-payment rates, which reveal how debt persists as a suspended claim on future earnings, even when current payments are paused. Together, these measures show that student loan policy — designed as race-neutral access expansion — functions as a racially stratified tax on Black women's human capital investment (Hamilton & Darity, 2017; Houle & Addo, 2018).

The Higher Education Amendments of 1992 expanded loan access at the precise moment that Black women began entering college in substantial numbers. However, this timing was not neutral in its effects. Black women drew down larger loans than their white peers, enrolled in lower-return fields shaped by decades of occupational segregation (as documented in the preceding section), and entered repayment with lower starting wages and without the family wealth buffers — homeownership equity, savings, inheritance — that allow other groups to absorb debt service costs. The result is a structural trap: credentials rise, debt rises, and net wealth does not rise.

Table 13. The Widening Gap: Student Debt Burden in Real Terms, 2016–2022
All dollar amounts adjusted for inflation to 2022 purchasing power

Group	Metric	2016 (2022$)	2022	Change
Black Women	Student Debt	$14,076	$14,976	$900
	Income	$41,986	$40,111	($1,875)
	Debt-to-Income Ratio	33.5%	37.3%	+3.8 pp
Black Men	Student Debt	$4,307	$7,673	$3,366
	Income	$85,360	$87,009	$1,649
	Debt-to-Income Ratio	5.0%	8.8%	+3.8 pp
All Women	Student Debt	$6,872	$6,590	($282)
	Income	$54,016	$54,863	$847
	Debt-to-Income Ratio	12.7%	12.0%	-0.7 pp
Overall Population	Student Debt	$3,236	$3,328	$92

Group	Metric	2016 (2022$)	2022	Change
	Income	$154,870	$165,082	$10,212
	Debt-to-Income Ratio	2.1%	2.0%	-0.1 pp

Source: Calculations by the Women's Institute for Science, Equity and Race (WISER) analysis of the Federal Reserve Board's Survey of Consumer Finances, 2016–2022.

Between 2016 and 2022, Black women carried the highest student debt burden, increasing from $14,076 to $14,976 in constant 2022 dollars (see Table 14). While other groups experienced real income gains, $1,649 for Black Men and $10,212 for the overall population, Black women's real income declined by $1,875, creating a divergence of $12,087 in purchasing power compared to the overall population. Black women's debt-to-income ratio increased from 33.5% to 37.3%, while the ratio for All Women decreased by 0.7 percentage points, and the overall population's ratio decreased by 0.1 percentage points. Black women's student debt increased by $900 in real terms despite the income decline. This pattern occurred during a period of 22% cumulative inflation that eroded nominal wage gains across all groups, but Black women uniquely experienced both declining real income and increasing real debt simultaneously (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

These data demonstrate a structural barrier operating at the intersection of inflation and monetary policy. Black households, on average, face more volatile inflation because their consumption baskets have a higher share of goods with price swings (food, energy, and necessities), making it harder to plan budgets, save, or build assets (Lee, 2022). This volatility compounds structural barriers, such as wage gaps and occupational segregation, eroding the purchasing power of low-wealth groups, even when average inflation is similar across races.

Passing It On: Wealth Accumulation

The preceding sections documented how Black women invest in education at rising rates, carry the heaviest debt burdens among all groups, and face real income declines, even as other groups gain. These patterns produce a predictable downstream effect: constrained wealth accumulation in the long term. Student debt absorbs income that could otherwise flow into savings, homeownership, or investment; depressed wages limit the surplus available after servicing that debt; and the absence of family wealth buffers means each economic shock—job loss, medical emergency, caregiving obligation—erodes whatever assets Black women manage to build (Addo & Darity, 2021; Hamilton & Darity, 2017).

Wealth operates differently than income. Income measures current earnings, and wealth captures the cumulative stock of resources available to a household for emergencies, investment, and intergenerational transfer. A household earning $40,000 with $14,000 in net worth occupies a fundamentally different economic position than one earning $40,000 with $284,000 in net worth, even though their paychecks are identical. The first household cannot absorb a job loss, fund a child's education, or make a down payment without borrowing; the second can do all three. For Black women, whose median net worth stood at $14,020 in 2022 against an overall population median of $284,000, this distinction is not abstract; it defines the boundary between economic participation and economic precarity.

Owning Our Homes

Down payment assistance is the most direct route to expanding black homeownership. About 7 in 10 renters say saving for the down payment is the biggest barrier to buying a home, and local programs that provide up to $50,000 per household have produced measurable results (Ballard Brief, 2025; Down Payment Resource, 2024). In the Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity program, which invested $1.48 million to support 119 Black families, the share of participating households that successfully purchased a home rose from 11% to 47% (Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity, 2025). National research finds that an extra $5,000 in down payment assistance increases the share of lower-income households that buy homes by approximately 15% (Ballard Brief, 2025). Morgan Stanley estimates that closing the Black–white homeownership gap would create approximately 800,000 jobs and generate $400 billion in tax revenue (CNBC, 2020).

Student debt relief addresses this compounding barrier. Black borrowers hold approximately $1.72 in student debt for every $1.00 held by white borrowers ($32,047 versus $18,685), which delays or prevents homeownership (National Housing Conference, 2022). Black holders of bachelor's degrees own homes at lower rates than white adults who dropped out of high school (Nation's Mortgage Professional, 2024; Brookings Institution, 2024). State programs such as Maryland SmartBuy (up to $30,000) and Illinois SmartBuy (up to $40,000) pay down student loan balances when borrowers purchase a home. Young Black homeownership declined by 11 percentage points between 2000 and 2019, locking an estimated 900,000 Black households out of ownership (Urban Institute, 2023; Nation's Mortgage Professional, 2024).

Community land trusts create permanently affordable housing in gentrifying and previously redlined neighborhoods. These trusts, now numbering more than 225 nationally, pair below-market land prices with down payment assistance of up to $40,000 per household and long-term resale limits that keep homes affordable across market cycles (Brookings Institution, 2024; Rondo Community Land Trust, 2024; Thaden & Pickett, 2020). A multi-city study found that neighborhoods with community land trusts were about three-quarters less likely to gentrify than similar areas without them, and the trusts increased racial diversity while maintaining middle-class homeownership rates (NYU A3, 2021; Thaden & Pickett, 2020).

Reparative credit programs target residents of communities that were redlined or otherwise excluded from fair lending practices. In Evanston, Illinois, the city provides $25,000 housing grants plus complementary bank loans at reduced interest rates to residents of historically redlined areas (Belonging Institute, 2022). The City of Tulsa established a beyond-apology housing reparation program by executive order (City of Tulsa, 2024). Special-purpose credit programs, authorized under the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, allow race-conscious lending and have been shown to reach more borrowers of color and reduce homeownership gaps more effectively than race-neutral programs with the same budget (Greenlining Institute, 2023; Sagrestano et al., 2023). These programs accept credit scores as low as 580 and expand mortgage access for borrowers with non-traditional credit histories (Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity, 2025).

The Black homeownership rate fell to 43.9% in the second quarter of 2025 — about 44 cents of homeownership for every $1.00 (0.44) of white homeownership — driven by rising unemployment and federal workforce reductions (Scotsman Guide, 2025). Across the 50 largest metropolitan areas, the gap stands at 26.7 percentage points (43.6% versus 70.3%), and Black mortgage applicants face denial rates of 16.4%, nearly triple the 5.8% rate for White applicants (Down Payment Resource, 2024; LendingTree, 2026).

Making the Economy Work for Black Women
The "Black Women Best" Framework

The Black Women Best framework uses Black women's economic and health outcomes to test whether the economy is working. If Black women, who have been systematically excluded and exploited since the nation's founding, can thrive, then the underlying institutions and markets are likely to deliver broadly shared gains. Black Women Best understands Black women to include cis and trans women and femme-identified people, including nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people who are perceived as feminine. Centering Black women, therefore, also centers the other marginalized identities they hold, including being queer, disabled, immigrants, and criminalized, and requires policy that confronts racism, sexism, queerphobia, ableism, and xenophobia together.

Under this framework, an equitable economy is one in which Black women have stable incomes, adequate wealth buffers, access to care, and real bargaining power in labor markets and households. Because the U.S. economy was built, in part, on Black women's unpaid, coerced, and underpaid labor, and because underpayment persists through wage gaps, occupational segregation, and weak protections, Black Women Best treats repairing these dynamics as foundational rather than peripheral.

Key policy agenda
A Black Women's Best Agenda centers on the policy levers that most directly change Black women's constraints as workers, caregivers, and community anchors. For this study, five elements are central:

- Healthcare access. Universal and affordable access to maternal, mental, and reproductive health services is non-negotiable, given Black women's heightened exposure to health risks and care burdens. This includes coverage for pregnancy and postpartum care, culturally responsive mental health support, and reproductive justice understood as the material ability to decide whether, when, and under what conditions to parent.
- Paid leave. A floor of at least 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave covering childbirth, serious personal illness, and care for family members is required to treat Black women's time as an economic resource, rather than an elastic buffer. Because Black women are overrepresented in jobs without paid leave, particularly in essential services, this provision directly raises their effective income and reduces the earnings penalties associated with caregiving job interruptions.
- Childcare affordability. A childcare subsidy structure that caps out-of-pocket costs at no more than 7 percent of household income aligns with treating care as infrastructure rather than a private luxury. Given Black women's dual position as both childcare workers and primary users of childcare to maintain employment, public funding that lowers family prices while simultaneously raising wages and standards in the sector boosts earnings and stabilizes labor supply.
- Workplace protections. Vigorous anti-harassment enforcement, guaranteed paid sick leave, and predictable scheduling respond to the conditions faced by Black women in segregated, low-wage occupations, where job quality is poor and legal protections are often weakest. Building worker power—through unions, sectoral standards, and enforcement capacity—is treated as a macroeconomic input because it enables Black women to capture more of the value they create and counter concentrated corporate power.

- Tax policy. Expanding refundable credits, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit, and ensuring full refundability directly raises after-tax income for Black women who face persistent wage penalties and often support children and extended kin on constrained pay. In the Black Women Best frame, these credits are part of a broader redistribution away from centuries of extraction—in which, for example, Black women forfeited an estimated $ 50 billion in wages in 2017 alone through underpayment that showed up as cost savings to firms.

Delivering this agenda requires sustained federal investment on the order of tens of billions of dollars annually; in this paper, I reference an estimated range of 85–120 billion dollars per year as a benchmark for the required investment. Black Women's Best treats that outlay as an asset purchase: by reducing Black women's precarity through income support, care infrastructure, and worker power, policymakers can expect higher productivity, lower involuntary unemployment, and reduced spending on poverty-related programs over time. In other words, centering Black women is a strategy for macroeconomic resilience and growth, not just a corrective measure for past harm.

Conclusion

One hundred and forty years of data document a consistent pattern: Black women enter labor markets at high rates, accumulate credentials faster than any demographic group in the post-civil rights era, and still exit each economic cycle with lower wages, heavier debt, and thinner wealth than comparable groups. This is not a pipeline problem or human capital deficit. It is a structural outcome, produced by policy choices—and therefore changeable by those same choices.
The three questions posed in this study have answerable, data-grounded responses.

Black women built economic agency through collective labor organizing (1881 Atlanta washerwomen), institutional infrastructure (Burroughs's National Training School, National Association of Wage Earners), cultural documentation (Childress), sustained union building (Bolden's NDWU, SEIU), and intergenerational wealth redirection (McCarty's scholarship bequest). These strategies were innovative and durable, but insufficient to overcome policy architectures that excluded Black women from the New Deal labor protections, GI Bill benefits, and residential capital markets that built white middle-class wealth in the twentieth century (Katznelson, 2005).

On structural barriers: occupational segregation concentrates Black women in care and service roles paying 30–50% less than male-dominated fields requiring equivalent credentials; the college wage premium for Black women shrank 45.5% in real terms between 2010 and 2024; student debt-to-income ratios for Black women reached 37.3% in 2022, twenty-five percentage points above the national average (2.0%); and median net worth ($14,020) stood 95% below the overall population median ($284,000) in 2022. The 2025 unemployment rate of 6.2% — nearly double White women's rate of 3.2% — and 113,000 jobs lost over the year confirm that structural gaps widen rather than close during downturns (Nir, 2026).

On policy: the evidence points toward interventions that operate on wealth, not just income. Baby bonds, full funding of HBCUs and minority-serving institutions, universal child allowances, and anti-discriminatory enforcement in credit and housing markets address structural mechanisms rather than symptoms (Hamilton & Darity, 2010). Student debt cancellation directly addresses documented debt-to-income compression. Strengthening the enforcement of occupational desegregation and extending domestic worker protections — the legal exclusions that Bolden's NDWU spent 30 years fighting — would narrow the occupational wage gap. In the near term, restoring federal employment protections for Black women in public-sector jobs — cut by 30% in 2025 while the overall federal women's workforce fell by only 11.6% — is both the most urgent and the most reversible policy failure documented in this study (McFadden, 2026).

Black women's economic positions are not artifacts of their choices. This is an artifact of the structure. The organizers, educators, writers, and workers documented in this study did not fail to act; rather, the structures failed to yield. Policies that directly confront these structures are the appropriate and overdue response.