

Diversity Experience Paper

David Schieler

Florida State University

On Tuesday, March 12, 2019 I attended the Women's Student Union screening of *RGB* along with the panel that followed. The panel featured Jasmine Ali, a former candidate for Leon County Commissioner. Through my interactions at the event, as well as the readings and class discussion regarding sexism, I have come to more fully understand the experiences of women in higher education and society at large.

As a person who identifies as a cis-gender male, I recognize I live in a system which advantages me on the basis of both my sex and gender. This is especially true within the university context, which was built in the colonial United States by and for men and did not admit women freely until the establishment of coordinate and co-education in the mid-nineteenth century (Thelin, 2011). It was this recognition that caused me to become interested in learning more about the experiences of women in higher education by participating in a Women's Student Union event. The event I chose to attend was the screening of *RGB*, a biographical documentary of Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

During the film, Ruth Bader Ginsburg spoke about her marginalization in higher education, first at Cornell, then at Harvard, and later at Columbia. At Harvard, Ginsburg was one of only nine women in a cohort with about 500 men. According to Ginsburg, at one point the Dean of the Harvard Law School asked her and her fellow woman-identifying classmates, "Why are you at Harvard, taking the place of a man?" This overt marginalization caused Ginsburg to become resolved to overcome systemic barriers to her success. In 1959, when she earned her law degree from Columbia, she had overcome many of those barriers, finishing tied-for-first in her graduating class.

Ginsburg's story, of being one of nine out of 500, may seem distant to us in 2019, however, equitable representation of women in higher education and society is still not fully

realized. Women's exclusion from full participation in United States society existed for centuries prior to the suffragist and feminist movements of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many examples of women's exclusion were given in the movie. As a basis for understanding this inequity, as of 2010 women composed roughly 51 percent of the United States population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). While a slightly greater than representative 59 percent United States college and university graduates were women as of 2011, only 26 percent of college and university Presidents were women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014 as cited in Nakitende, 2019). Additionally, in 2019 only three out of the nine Supreme Court justices are women – Ginsburg being one of them. During the documentary Ginsburg repeated her widely-publicized quote from a 2010 interview,

“When I'm sometimes asked when will there be enough [women on the Supreme Court] and I say, 'When there are nine,' people are shocked. But there'd been nine men, and nobody's ever raised a question about that. (Cohen & West, 2018).”

While this quote argues for greater than equal representation, in my opinion it does not extend beyond what is equitable given the history of misogyny and sexism in the United States. In total there have been 114 Supreme Court justices and all but six have been White men (Campisi & Griggs, 2018). Of those remaining six, four have been women (Sandra Day O'Connor, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan), while the remaining two were Black men (Thurgood Marshall and Clarence Thomas).

Related, Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari (2017) investigate the interplay of sexism with racism in the college and university context and many of their findings can be applied to Ginsburg's experiences on the Supreme Court. In this vein, Ginsburg is privileged as a White woman with what Accapadi (2007) describes as a “one up/one down” identity. This privilege is

accentuated when considering that all but one of the four women who have served on the Supreme Court have been White (Sonia Sotomayor identifies as a Latina woman). Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari (2017) highlight the importance of intersectional representation within the academy and panelist Jasmine Ali shared the importance of representation, as a Black woman in politics (Jasmine Ali personal interview, 2019). From the documentary, readings, and my discussion with Ali, my understanding of sexism has expanded to acknowledge the impact of centuries of exclusion on the present; While structural barriers may have been largely eliminated, social barriers still exist in the form of reduced representation and mentorship.

Nakitende (2019) discusses the lack of women specifically in higher education leadership. In her analysis sexist definitions of leadership put women in a double bind, where they can act congruent with gender stereotypes and be promoted to middle-management in human relation professions or defy gender stereotypes in order to be promoted in more diverse fields, but risk being viewed as inauthentic. Both cases often preclude women from the highest leadership positions within the academy. Nakitende (2019) goes on to argue for institutions to view the traits of each woman-identifying candidate for senior leadership positions as unique and not monolithic or representative of an entire gender. She suggests that such individuation would allow greater promotion and future representation of women in higher education leadership.

In the face of the otherwise presently reduced representation in higher education leadership, Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari (2017) resist marginalization through the establishment of a “sista scholar familia” (p. 90) and by challenging pervasive misogyny and White supremacy through using language such as “white” (intentionally lowercase), “womxn”, “hxrstory”, and “shero.” Prior to reading the Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari (2017) article and attending the *RGB* screening, I had noticed advertisements for “Visionary Womxn” another Women’s Student

Union event. In this first context I was unsure of why the 'e' in women was replaced with an 'x', but the event and the article together have challenged me to see the male and man domination of womxn in language. As a demonstration of this new understanding, the remainder of my reflection will use these adapted spellings.

In her discussion Jasmine Ali also highlighted the impact of gender-role congruence as being complicit in sexist oppression. This part of the dialogue was where I was the most challenged. In some senses I agree; The concept of performativity suggests that congruent, or stereotypical, enactments of gender reinforce existing definitions (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). If those definitions are sexist, then reinforcing those definitions through congruence is at least complicity with the oppressive system. I think that when we are aware of stereotypes of any identity we hold, we should be careful of how we confirm those stereotypes through role congruence. Although, in other senses I disagree; People should be allowed to perform their gender (any identities) freely, with no restrictions, including restrictions on congruence with stereotypes. Speaking from my own identity, as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I enjoy drag shows, brunch, and rainbows stereotypically more than my man-identifying heterosexual counterparts. But does enjoying those things set-back the inclusivity of the LGBTQ+ community by reinforcing role definitions? Should I instead take a liking to sports, cars, and devoid interior design? Doing so may increase the commodity of my identity but would be inauthentic to myself and my preferences. As an alternative, I remain aware of the context in which I perform my identities and what impact that performance may have on others perception of my identities, beyond myself. I also think it is important to investigate our preferential motivations. Do I preference certain things or behaviors because of role congruence or because

of genuine interest? Womxn should have the freedom to authentically perform their gender in any way they feel inclined.

The last major takeaway I had from this paper and experience came from a quote in the Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari (2017) article. “White peer colonizadores cry every week, not for people of color, but for themselves” (p. 94). This quote fits perfectly with what Accapadi (2007) described as “White women’s tears.” It was not easy to sit in a room, largely filled with womxn and listen to them discuss misogyny. I became hyperaware of the space that I occupied. But I remained in the space, determined to understand the experiences of those womxn. A signal of discomfort from me, could have shifted the power in the space away from the centered margins. I listened actively, took notes, and applied what they were saying to additional readings I had prepared.

This experience challenged me to see the importance of the social identity I explored and to see how identity politics play out across different identities. The concepts of representation, role congruence/performativity, and majoritized power, are not confined to sex or gender. As a future student affairs professional understanding womxn, and other minoritized social identities is vital for my success and the success of the students I serve. Interest convergence (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016) suggests that this recognition, of mutual benefit, will lead to change. In this case, change is my personal growth and development as a graduate student and future professional.

References

- Accapadi, M. M. (2007). When White women cry: How White women's tears oppress women of color. *The College Student Affairs Journal*, 26(2), 204-215.
- Ashlee, A. A., Zamora, B., Karikari, S. N. (2017). We are woke: A collaborative critical autoethnography of three "womxn" of color graduate students in higher education. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 19(1), 89-104.
- Campisi, J., Griggs, B. (2018, September 5). Of the 113 Supreme Court justices in US history, all but 6 have been white men. *CNN*. Retrieved from:
<https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/09/politics/supreme-court-justice-minorities-trnd/index.html>
- Cohen, J., West, B. (Producer), & Cohen, J., West, B. (Director). (2018). *RBG* [Motion picture]. United States of America: Magnolia Pictures
- Nakitende, M. G. (2019). Motivation and perseverance of women in education leadership in the United States of America. *Journal of Science & Sustainable Development*, 6(2), 75-101.
- Patton, L. D., Renn, K. A., Guido, F. M., Quayle, S. J. (2016). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Thelin, J. (2011). *A History of American higher education*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.
- U.S. Census Bureau (2012). Profile America: Facts for features. Retrieved from:
https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/cb12-ff05.html