



# BLACK GIRLS MATTER

WHEN NATIONAL INITIATIVES TO HELP YOUTH OF COLOR  
FOCUS ONLY ON BOYS, THE NEEDS OF OUR MOST  
VULNERABLE YOUNG WOMEN BECOME INVISIBLE

BY KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW

**I**N 2012, 6-YEAR-OLD SALECIA JOHNSON WAS ARRESTED AND handcuffed in a Georgia school for having a temper tantrum. In 2007, 16-year-old Pleajhai Mervin was arrested after she dropped cake on the floor in her California school and failed to clean it up to a school security officer's satisfaction.

Tanisha Denard was arrested at her Los Angeles public high school for being tardy and wound up in solitary confinement. And last year, after 12-year-old Mikia Hutchings scribbled “hi” on a locker room wall at her Georgia middle school, she faced suspension and criminal charges for the childhood prank.

All four girls were Black.

These girls, and millions of their sisters, might well have been the students envisioned by President Obama when he spoke about the need “to tell every child in every neighborhood your life matters and we are committed to improving your life chances, as committed as we are to working on behalf of our own kids.” But girls such as Mikia, Pleajhai, Salecia and Tanisha, however, were unfortunately *not* the youth that President Obama had in mind when he gathered top civil rights leaders, captains of industry and notable celebrities to join forces to lift up the life chances of the nation's disadvantaged youth in February of 2014.

The initiative Obama launched—My Brother's Keeper (MBK)—

is a \$300 million public/private partnership designed to improve life outcomes only for men and boys of color. It targets resources and attention to youth at risk, but the glaring absence of girls suggests that they are not seen as “youth” or “at risk.”

Mikia, Pleajhai, Salecia and Tanisha were similarly out of sight and mind when Michelle Obama announced Let Girls Learn a year later. While this \$250 million initiative was designed to provide young girls innovative educational opportunities and resources to lift themselves out of poverty and improve their life outcomes, it's a *global* program: It doesn't touch on the needs of girls of color here at home.

Mikia, Pleajhai, Salecia and Tanisha represent millions of girls of color who are dispro-





portionately disciplined in school. Black girls are six times more likely than their white female counterparts to be suspended, and suspension can lead to expulsion, placing these girls at high risk of low-wage work and unemployment, homelessness and incarceration. Like their male counterparts, they mature into adulthood facing increased odds of being marginalized in the workforce, subject to high rates of interpersonal violence and facing lowered health outcomes—some estimates suggest people of color experience health outcomes 30 to 40 percent poorer than white Americans.

Yet despite evidence that they, too, face barriers that undermine their overall well-being, Black girls seemingly remain invisible within the White House's signature gender- and race-targeted initiatives.

While the president has personally emphasized the need to show Black boys that he cares about them, and the first lady has declared that “Black girls rock,” the lack of political commitment to address the obstacles that confront women and girls of color seems to arise from a belief that their brothers face such deeply disturbing

Far left: 6-year-old Salecia Johnson, who was handcuffed after a tantrum at school; top: Mikia Hutchings, faced with suspension for two-letter graffiti, with her grandmother; above: Pleajhai Mervin, arrested for failing to pick up dropped cake, with her mother



barriers that women and girls must wait. The case for such trickle-down justice is often grounded in the narrow claim that the data show men and boys of color to be exceptionally disadvantaged—an argument that Georgetown law professor Paul Butler calls “Black male exceptionalism.”

The mantra is repeated so often that leaders, stakeholders and even excluded women have been led to believe that the exclusion of girls and women is not only justified but necessary. The actual data, however, suggest otherwise.

A study recently released by the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) and the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies—“Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected”—reveals that while Black girls face some of the same challenges that destroy the life chances of their brothers, they also face many that are different.

For example, when it comes to disciplinary measures such as suspension and expulsion, Black girls face a higher level of racial disparity than their male counterparts. In Boston, for instance, Black girls were 12 times more likely to be suspended than white girls, while Black boys were only 7.4 times more likely to be suspended than their white male counterparts. In New York, Black girls were 53 times more likely to be expelled than white girls, while Black boys were expelled at a rate 10 times higher than white boys.

“Black Girls Matter” includes the voices of young women who share personal stories to illuminate the quantitative data. Young women reveal that policies of zero tolerance—which mandate harsh punishments such as suspension or expulsion—along with gender-specific burdens such as familial responsibilities, harass-

ment and violence are all contributing factors that push at-risk girls out of school. Here’s one young girl’s tale:

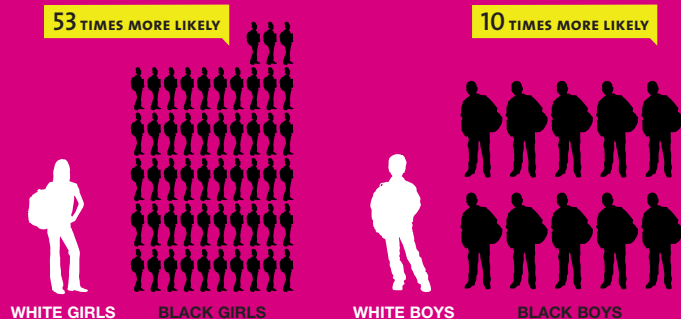
“This boy kept spitting those little spitballs through a straw at me while we were taking a test. I told the teacher, and he told him to stop, but he didn’t. He kept on doing it. I yelled at him. He punched me in the face, like my eye. My eye was swollen. I don’t remember if I fought him. That’s how it ended. We both got suspended. I was like, ‘Did I get suspended?’ I was, like, a victim.”

Girls also face a gaping absence of positive educational inducements compared to boys. Philanthropic initiatives, such as New York’s “Young Men’s Initiative,” direct educational, mentoring and other resources to boys while providing few incentives to encourage achievement for girls. “If no one is celebrating with [you], then you kind of fade and then you have that other alternative culture that is waiting for you where you will be celebrated,” said an interviewee in the “Black Girls Matter” report.

The crisis facing girls of color may even worsen in the face of male-exclusive programs developed in the wake of MBK. Mayor Muriel Bowser in Washington, D.C., for example, has proposed a \$20 million investment in boys, particularly targeting boys of color, including mentorships and a single-sex high school in partnership with Urban Prep, a nonprofit network of all-boys public schools in Chicago. At the event announcing the partnership, Washington, D.C., public schools chancellor Kaya Henderson noted that Urban Prep has achieved its results not with students who were already high-achieving, but with “the knuckleheads”—revealing the ways in which the initiative is rooted in an individualistic, deficit-based model for addressing the challenges facing boys of color, as opposed to one that addresses the structural conditions facing all youth of color.

This D.C. partnership with Urban Prep is grounded in data that show Black and Latino boys at the bottom of performance indicators. Yet Black girls are at the bottom of these same indicators as well. If you compare girls and boys within each racial group, girls always do better. But Black girls have the lowest proficiency rates of all girls, just as Black boys have the lowest rates of all boys. Boys and girls of color face realities that are much closer to each other than to white students. In math, for example, Black boys *and* Black girls in D.C. have lower proficiency rates than any other students. Moreover,

## EXPULSION RATES IN NEW YORK



## SUSPENSION RATES NATIONWIDE



SOURCE: African American Policy Forum and Department of Education, for 2011–2012 school year

Black students as a whole have the lowest attendance rates and the worst suspension rates. They also take and pass the fewest advanced placement classes of any group.

There is no reliable evidence that including girls in programmatic interventions designed to lift at-risk boys undermines the effectiveness of these efforts. But these initiatives are less driven by available facts. Instead, these programs privilege a male-centered frame. Consequently, the overall emphasis on lifting up at-risk youth takes a backseat to the prioritization of boys.

**A**NOTHER REPORT RELEASED THIS YEAR—“TOWARD OUR Children’s Keeper,” from the Institute for Women’s Policy Research—provides further evidence to suggest that arguments supporting the exclusion of women and girls are tenuous at best. IWPR analyzed 114 findings in the MBK Task Force’s report to the president and found that 78 percent were not gendered findings at all. In fact, most of the data claims made to support MBK’s male focus were actually based on communities of color as a whole, not just males. Most of the claims in the MBK report could just as easily have been used to justify a female-centered initiative or, most reasonably, to institute policies for lifting up the entire community, not just half of it.

Unfortunately, the presidential memorandum creating the MBK Task Force has further fueled a research gap about the barriers to equality that undermine women and girls of color. It requires numerous federal agencies to provide data related to boys and young men of color, but neglected to require any information gathering on the status of their sisters. Those directives limit research on women and girls that could demonstrate their needs in school and beyond.

The problem goes far deeper than data-collection requirements. Communities across the country are now employing a male-centered frame for racial-justice advocacy that marginalizes the concerns of women and girls by incentivizing local governments and organizations to adopt the goals of the MBK initiative.

Instead of funding programs to support girls of color, the White House created the Council on Women and Girls to address the needs of women of every age and race. Yet when the focus shifts to women as a whole, unique forms of marginalization that some women and girls experience are erased. Administrative officials have said that policies such as the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act and health-care reform are indicative of the ways that women and girls of color have enjoyed the attention of the administration, but these measures don’t meet the tailored responses that would be necessary if the challenges faced by the Mikias, Pleajhais, Salecias and Tanishas of our country were taken seriously.

The challenge is this: Feminists must speak out for a gender-inclusive racial-justice agenda and must champion efforts to bring a race-sensitive analysis to bear in advocating for women and girls of color. Clearly, racially targeted interventions continue to warrant support, but advocacy on behalf of gender-inclusive arguments should be based on the distinct challenges that lay at the intersection of race and gender.

Since 2014, the African American Policy Forum and the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies have been facilitating

a national series of town hall meetings focused on elevating the experiences of women and girls of color. Those who attend can learn that girls can be thrown in jail for arriving late to school; that they can be pushed out of school by sexual harassment, interpersonal violence and criminalization; and that they are disproportionately numbered among the young girls who are homeless, trafficked and subject to the catch-22 of exploitation and incarceration.

At town halls already held in Los Angeles, New York, Atlanta, Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, testimonies have shed light on the long-term consequences of racism, sexism, poverty, heterosexism, transphobia and xenophobia on the lives of women and girls of color. In response

### THE OVERALL EMPHASIS ON LIFTING UP AT-RISK YOUTH TAKES A BACKSEAT TO THE PRIORITIZATION OF BOYS.

to the lack of girls’ concerns in the MBK initiative, advocates launched the #WhyWeCantWait campaign, and have since expanded the scope of activism to address questions of violence and police abuse.

These activities underscore the wider point that girls of color grow up in the same families, live in the same underresourced communities and attend the same failing schools that their brothers do. Given these shared circumstances, it simply makes no sense to suggest that their fates are not inextricably linked to one another and that the interests of the community as a whole can be advanced by leaving girls behind.

The nation needs a gender and racial-justice policy approach that embraces the concerns of boys and girls, men and women, to ensure that the structural factors affecting all people of color are highlighted and addressed. It is impossible to forward racial justice without also centering gender equity and to forward gender justice without centering racial equity. ■

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