

Unequal Burden

Challenges Facing Black Women Social Workers

Introduction

Social workers provide a myriad of services to individuals, families, and communities, including counseling and psychotherapy, social and health services, case management, advocacy, and other support and resources.¹ The multifaceted nature of social work makes it challenging to define. Nevertheless, it is important to note that social work has its own code of ethics and values, and to be officially recognized as a social worker, one must obtain licensure and approval from the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB).

Social work is a type of human services work in that it "focuses on meeting human needs through an interdisciplinary knowledge base, focusing on prevention as well as remediation of problems, and maintaining a commitment to improving the overall quality of life of service populations."² Social work is also a form of care work, as care workers "provide a face-to-face service that develops the human capabilities of the recipient."³ Care workers help

maintain a healthy population and workforce, which makes care work essential to the economy and society. However, social work is often underexplored in care work literature, which is a significant oversight considering social workers' important contribution to the overall well-being of society.

Like most caring professions, social work is undervalued, resulting in social workers often earning low wages, experiencing poor working conditions, and incurring a high student debt burden due to the high costs of education.⁴ Although there is a dearth of research examining the specific experiences of Black women social workers, Black women are disproportionately represented in social work, and as such, the profession is a unique case study for analyzing intersectional inequities.⁵ **This research brief highlights the workplace challenges, barriers to licensure, financial difficulties, and high rates of burnout that Black women social workers experience.** It concludes with some general recommendations for advancing Black women in social work.



Black Women Social Workers Face Pay Inequities, Financial Difficulties, and High Student Debt

Occupational segregation and race and gender discrimination contribute to low pay for Black women social workers. Throughout history, Black women's labor in the United States has been undervalued. This has resulted in significant material impacts, such as lower wages, which limit Black women's economic mobility and quality of life. Although Black women have consistently had the highest labor force participation among all women and have contributed greatly to economic growth in the US, they continue to face an earnings gap (in 2022, Black women earned 66.5 cents for every dollar a White man earned⁶) and continue to be overrepresented in care and service jobs.⁷ **Black women's overrepresentation in social work contributes to the earnings gap they experience.**

The low compensation of social workers leads to financial insecurity, which negatively impacts their well-being, their families, and their ability to effectively carry out their work. The Illinois Partners for Human Services surveyed 857 community-based full-time frontline human service workers in Illinois and found that 82 percent of social workers self-reported not making a living wage.⁸ Those surveyed expressed difficulties affording necessities such as housing, food, and medical care, compounded with student debt. Two-thirds of respondents said they have considered leaving the community-based health and human services sector due to insufficient wages, a lack of work-life balance, and feelings of undervaluation by society. Similarly, in New York City, 27 percent of core human service workers are "near-poverty," and 20 percent receive food stamps compared to 9 percent of other public sector workers there.⁹ Because they are overrepresented in the sector, the insufficient wages of social workers disproportionately harm Black women, forcing them to choose between their work and their needs.

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Although most social work jobs require advanced degrees, the pay does not always reflect this level of education and experience. Despite 44.9 percent of social workers having a master's degree, social workers are underpaid compared to other workers with similar education levels.¹⁰ Using data from the US Census Bureau of Labor Statistics, IWPR's analysis shows that social workers with master's degrees earn a median salary of \$75,000, compared to \$90,000 for all other workers with master's degrees, resulting in an earnings gap of 16.7 percent. This gap increases to 22.2 percent among Black social workers with master's degrees, who earn only \$70,000 annually.¹¹

A major contributing factor to low salaries for Black social workers (both men and women) is that they are overrepresented in private, not-for-profit, tax-exempt, or charitable organizations (35.6 percent of Black social workers compared to 33.0 percent of all social workers).¹² Social workers employed in these organizations earn significantly less than those in private for-profit organizations and federal government agencies. For example, in New York, essential social workers employed in the nonprofit sector earn a median salary of \$45,000, which is 20 percent less than their counterparts who are employed in the public sector and 30 percent less than those employed in private hospitals.¹³

The undervaluation of social work occurs even before entering the workforce. Most, if not all, social work jobs require bachelor's or master's degrees. **Because Black women face significant barriers to educational attainment, they are more likely to take out much larger loans than White women and have greater difficulty paying them back.**¹⁴ Carrying a heavy student debt burden impacts future earnings, labor mobility, and overall financial well-being.¹⁵

The financial difficulties Black women social workers experience are worsened by the prevalence of unpaid internships among social work students.¹⁶ Students in accredited master of social work (MSW) programs participate in field placements, which allow them to gain real-world experience in the social work sector.¹⁷ While field placements enable students to directly explore and engage in their career possibilities, they are often unpaid. **Unpaid internships reinforce the racial wealth gap because they disproportionately harm Black women, who are less likely than White women to afford the cost of taking an unpaid human services opportunity over paid work.**^{18,19} These unpaid internships normalize the undervaluation of human services to aspiring social workers since they are not compensated for their care work.

Black Women Social Workers Face Disparities in Licensure and Exam Passage Rates

Black women also face difficulties obtaining licensure to practice social work by the ASWB. In 2022, the ASWB released a report on pass rates for the various social work exams it administers. For both the licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) and licensed master social worker (LMSW) exams, Black test takers consistently had lower first-time pass rates than test takers of all other races.²⁰

Between 2018 and 2021, the first-time LCSW and LMSW exam passage rates for White women were almost two times higher than the first-time passage rates for Black women (at 83.8 percent and 44.7 percent, respectively, for LCSW, and 85.6 percent and 45.1 percent, respectively, for LMSW).²¹ The ASWB attributes these disparities in pass rates along racial/ethnic lines to socioeconomic hardship, as well as pervasive gender and racial stereotypes eroding test takers' confidence. This "stereotype threat" may hinder performance, particularly on diagnostic exams of intellectual ability.²² They insist that these patterns in pass rates are not ASWB-specific and exist among other professional licensure exams.

Social work organizations have expressed concern that the racial disparities in obtaining licensure are a direct product of the ASWB exams. According to the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), "The institutional barriers experienced by thousands of practitioners to receive the highest level of licensure are not a failure of the test takers but a failure of the testing process."²³ Many test takers described the ASWB exams as being written from a white perspective, where



whiteness and heteronormativity are accepted as the norm and everything else as an “other.”²⁴ Some test takers described how various privileges—such as whiteness, access to test preparation, and financial security—contributed to their test performance. These privileges are disproportionately not afforded to Black women and may explain the disparities in test performance.



The National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work (NADD) and the National Association of Social Work (NASW) found the ASWB racial disparities data alarming and stated their lack of confidence in the ASWB exams to promote equity within the field. In response to the data release, NADD wrote that the data “clearly evidence extreme racial and age biases in the exam” and “reflects a crisis in the profession.”²⁵ In early 2023, the NASW released a statement saying they oppose the ASWB social work licensing exams and are against the codification of the exams as a requirement of licensure.²⁶ Additionally, NABSW demanded that ASWB release additional data on the “differentiation and scoring process” as well as make important

changes to the licensure and exam process, including providing alternative pathways to licensure and “including modular testing and conditioning for the exam.”²⁷

Black Women Social Workers Experience High Rates of Burnout

Social workers commonly experience burnout and even vicarious trauma resulting from demanding workloads, a lack of work-life balance, and constantly working with clients in distress.²⁸ As Black women social workers face racist and sexist stereotypes of being strong and able to tolerate high levels of stress, they often are expected to manage exceedingly high caseloads.²⁹ In a 2023 qualitative study of the workplace stress experiences of Black women social workers, the women interviewed gave several examples of unrealistic workplace demands, including “large amounts of paperwork, large caseloads, and multiple job roles with a lack of support, limited resources, and inadequate time to complete everyday tasks.”³⁰ **High workplace stress impacts employees’ overall well-being and, for Black women, may contribute to the “weathering” or adverse health outcomes they already experience because of systemic inequities they face over the life course.**³¹

Conclusion

Care workers provide essential services that contribute to the overall health and well-being of the economy and society. Although social work and human services work have received limited attention in care scholarship, these workers are an integral part of the care sector. Their work contributes to a more empathetic and equitable society for all people, especially members of marginalized and underserved groups.

Like most caring professions, social work and human services work are mostly comprised of women (and, disproportionately, Black women). This brief is focused on Black women social workers, as they face significant barriers to advancement in the field, including pay inequities, student debt, disparities in licensure and exam passage rates, and high rates of burnout.

To ensure that Black women can continue performing and making their livelihood from social work, policymakers and advocates must make greater efforts to assist social workers with alleviating student debt and increasing compensation. Licensure boards such as the ASWB should scrutinize licensure exams to ensure they are not reproducing racial inequities. Some states, such as Illinois and Rhode Island, have even removed the ASWB exam as a requirement for becoming a licensed social worker, demonstrating more equitable alternatives to the exam.³² The gatekeeping of licensure disproportionately hurts Black women looking to practice social work, preventing diverse candidates from entering a predominantly white field.

Additionally, organization leaders, managers, and supervisors should work to decrease workloads and increase workplace flexibility for Black women social workers to prevent burnout. Organizations should also provide access to mental health services to support social workers' mental wellness and overall well-being.

Issues facing Black women in social work mirror gender and racial justice issues in society at large. In our forthcoming policy brief on this topic, we will provide specific recommendations for how policymakers, institutions, and advocates can address the disparities mentioned in this brief, which, in turn, will help create a more equitable society for all.

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Endnotes

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