



POWER, PRESENCE, and POSSIBILITY

Why domestic inclusion of Black women leaders is a global imperative

by Dr. Leslye Renee Kornegay, contributing writer

A Seat at Every Table Isn't a Favor — It's a Strategy

In a time when equity policies are being rolled back and diversity agendas are increasingly performative, we must ask a critical question: What is lost when Black women are left out of leadership? The answer is simple: Innovation, integrity, and insight. As I chronicle in my book “Leading to Change the World”, my journey through predominantly white institutions has taught me that Black women don’t merely adapt to systems — they improve them. And that improvement begins with domestic inclusion that recognizes our leadership as essential both to society and to the global economy.

False Inclusion: What Black Women Experience (And Why It's Unacceptable)

Too often, Black women are celebrated symbolically while excluded substantively. In “Leading to Change the World”, I describe moments where I was offered a seat at the table, only to realize the table was already set — with no intention of serving my voice.

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These experiences are not unique to me — they are echoed by countless Black women across industries. Examples of this “performative inclusion” include:

- **Tokenism without Power** — Being placed on committees or panels for optics, but excluded from real decision-making or policy shaping. Unacceptable because: Symbolic presence without influence is exploitation, not equity.
- **Idea Theft and Intellectual Erasure** — Having your innovations ignored or dismissed—until a white peer repeats them and receives credit. Unacceptable because: Black women deserve ownership, recognition, and reward for their ideas.
- **Uncompensated DEI Labor** — Expected to mentor, organize, and lead equity work on top of your formal duties — without pay or promotion. Unacceptable because: Emotional labor is labor. It must be valued, not assumed.
- **Tone Policing and Professional Gaslighting** — Being labeled “angry” or “aggressive” for advocating clearly or confidently. Unacceptable because: Leadership has no single tone — and silencing Black women reinforces harmful stereotypes.
- **Stalled Advancement Despite Excellence** — Being passed over for promotions with vague reasons like “not a cultural fit.” Unacceptable because: Fit should never be a euphemism for whiteness.
- **Silencing After Speaking Up** — Facing isolation, retaliation, or dismissal after reporting discrimination. Unacceptable because: Psychological safety is not optional — it’s foundational.

These experiences aren’t anecdotal — they are systemic. And as I share in my book, they exact a cost not only on the Black women who endure them, but on

the organizations that lose out on their leadership potential.

Why Black Women's Inclusion Is a Value-Add

Black women bring transformational assets to leadership:

- **Strategic Resilience** — Having navigated adversity and institutional resistance, we lead with clarity, courage, and a solutions mindset.
- **Cultural Fluency** — We serve as cultural translators — understanding nuance, building bridges, and ensuring authentic engagement.
- **Global Perspective** — Our lived experience resonates across diasporas. We lead not just for the moment — but for the movement.

What Organizations Must Do Now

It’s time for institutions to move beyond symbolic representation and commit to systems-level inclusion. Here’s how:

1. **Invest in Leadership Pipelines** — Fund programs that prepare and promote Black women into executive roles— not just advisory roles.
2. **Redefine Leadership Competencies** — Include emotional intelligence, cultural strategy, and justice literacy as qualifications for leadership.
3. **Conduct Transparent Equity Audits** — Review compensation, promotion patterns, and organizational culture— and act on the findings.
4. **Globalize Inclusion Efforts** — Black women should be centered in international forums, fellowships, and strategic partnerships.
5. **Sponsor, Don't Just Mentor** — Assign high-level sponsors with influence and resources, not just mentors with advice.

Strategies and Resources for Black Women Leaders

To thrive while navigating systemic inequities, Black women must remain resourced and connected:

- **Networks and Communities** — Join platforms like The Memo, Black Women Lead, and SisterCIRCLE for support and professional uplift.
- **Legal and Financial Literacy** — Stay informed on rights via the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, and engage legal counsel when needed.
- **Wellness and Restoration** — Protect your mental health. Therapy, coaching, red light therapy, and holistic wellness practices are tools of survival and excellence.
- **Global Advocacy** — Connect with organizations like UN Women, Global Black Women’s Chamber of Commerce, and African Women’s Development Fund.

The Future Is Ours to Build

As I reflect on my leadership — from being a housekeeper to an executive director, educator, and author — I know this: inclusion is not an act of charity. It is a catalyst for change. In *Leading to Change the World*, I detail how systems were not designed with us in mind — but we’ve reshaped them anyway. Now is the time for organizations to not only include Black women, but to trust, fund, and follow them.

To institutions: If you want to future-proof your strategy, invest in Black women.

To Black women: You don’t need permission to lead. You already are the blueprint. **TE**



Dr. Leslye Kornegay is an inspiring executive leader, educator, and author. Currently, she is an executive director at Duke University. Additionally, she serves as faculty in Langston University’s School of Business and Champlain College Graduate College. With 40 years of experience in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and 30 years in senior leadership roles in PWIs within higher education, Dr. Kornegay exemplifies resilience and dedication. A lifelong learner, she embarked on her educational journey at Mount Olive University, graduating in 1999 with a BS in Business and Organizational Development. She furthered her studies with an MSA from Central Michigan University, and earned her Doctor of Education in Leadership from the University of Vermont in 2012. Leslye’s passionate research highlights the experiences of Black women in leadership. She is the proud author of *Leading to Change the World: One Black Women’s Journey into Positions of Leadership in PWIs*, set to inspire readers with its release in September 2024. As the founder and CEO of The Kornegay Foundation, a nonprofit philanthropic organization, and Kornegay Consulting, LLC, she is committed to empowering others and leading change. **PHOTO PROVIDED**