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Women's History Month: On the importance of black women's history

Opinion

by Alexis Garrett Stodghill | March 1, 2013 at 7:25 PM



Two black women. © bst2012 - Fotolia.com

Women's History Month starts today, and as African-American women, we may wonder where we fit into such a celebration. Coming right after Black History Month, which is meant to ameliorate the lack of attention paid to the achievements of blacks of both genders, Women's History Month might even promote a sense of exhaustion. Didn't we just spend about thirty days championing the unsung among us? Do I really have to do it again? I do not blame anyone who balks at the idea of looking back yet one more time in order to get a firmer footing in the present.

But, for black women, a review of our particular history, whether on the macro level or within the intimate spheres of family, might be an important tool of empowerment.

Understanding our accomplishments in America, despite facing racism, sexism (and often classism), can help black women illuminate a positive self-image to counter the perceived stereotypes we see reflected back to us — images at times promoted within our subculture. Like wiping the steam away from a foggy mirror, appreciating great black women of the past and the greats still with us in the present allows us to intuit a truer perception of who we are as a collective: women building on the tremendous growth secured by our foremothers since slavery.

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“[I]f you look back at the 1960s, black women were primarily in the service sector and have made leaps and bounds in terms of college graduation rates, and the numbers who are professionals, and in some cases in management and leadership,” [Krissah Thompson](#), a journalist at *The Washington Post*, told theGrio.

Thompson wrote a groundbreaking article about the status of black women’s lives today based on the first survey in decades to gather data about our perceptions, needs, and sense of social attainment. The survey found that black women today are resilient, have high self-esteem, and are extremely hopeful. This hopefulness is rooted in the awareness of everything we have overcome to arrive at the now.

Thus, positivity requires a knowledge of history. And it is crucial for us to pass the knowledge down.

“I think that young black women do understand how much progress has been made,” Thompson said. In part of her story, *Survey paints portrait of black women in America*, Thompson tracks a family of three generations of black women, citing their personal family history as a strong success motivator. According to Thompson, “expectations were set really high based on the achievements of the grandmother who grew up during the Jim Crow era, was able to go to college, and made sure that her daughter did the same.”

Even “though some in the younger generation had questions about whether those expectations were right for them,” the two teen granddaughters in the family eventually agreed to go to college, “in part... because of how difficult life was for their grandmother,” Thompson explained in a phone interview.

“Anecdotal stories also tell the story of progress,” she further said.

Personal family histories shared by black women can only complement our broad social narratives. On the larger stage of black women’s history, of course we have [Ida B. Wells](#), [Sojourner Truth](#), and [Mary Church Terrell](#). We can learn about [Fannie Lou Hamer](#), [Bessie Coleman](#), and [Mary McLeod Bethune](#), if we don’t know the amazing stories of black women like these already.

Then there are our living legends such as [Diahann Carroll](#) and [Nichelle Nichols](#), who made history in the field of entertainment, and are still with us today.

And of course, there is the history we are all living now through sharing in the experience have having [Michelle Obama](#) as first lady.

These are all the types of women we will explore on theGrio during Women’s History Month, celebrating the cultural contributors that are significant to us, filtered through an understanding of black women’s significant struggles.

But before we can celebrate, we have to appreciate that our history is important. Some are questioning [whether Women’s History Month is even relevant](#). Following Black History Month, the participation of African-American women in a possibly superfluous celebration might seem illogical. But if remembering deeply is the magic key to black women’s proverbial strength, it might be even more important for us to cherish the past than other women. As the backbones of many sectors of the black community, our health, our energies, and our vigor are vital to moving black America forward.


Part of that power is based on our optimism. As Thompson noted, black women are more optimistic than members of other groups, in part because we can look back and smile at all we were able to do despite structural oppression. Looking back is not an exercise of idealizing the past. It is the key to building hope for an even better future.

“Just in probing the women that I interviewed, I think that most would say that that is a part of the hopefulness for today,” the writer explained about the role of our history, “because I think young women today realize — and probably most women at large — that they do not face the same kinds of glass ceilings and struggles that prior generations have.”

Those that did face such hurdles to still become doctors, lawyers, architects, activists, college-educated, and more, deserve to be saluted.

Their stories serve as beacons leading black women and all who care to appreciate them on to better things. As Women’s History Month progresses on theGrio, we invite you to participate as we fortify ourselves with the powerful histories of the famous and everyday women who have made a way for us to enjoy vast opportunities today — and believe that everything is possible, in time.

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