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Viola Davis and Barriers in Film

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It is a well-known fact that the entertainment industry can be tough to break into. This is without considering the difficulties and the discrimination that one might face alongside people that are as equally driven and qualified. As a new generation grows more and more liberal, the film industry is becoming more reflective and inclusive of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual status. Although there have been modest gains made to reach a higher level of diversity in Hollywood, we are facing the painful reality that even the outwardly liberal entertainment and film industry is still grappling with discrimination and failing to successfully represent non-white ethnicities and racial groups.

Viola Davis, currently one of the most successful actresses in Hollywood, is just one of many that are at a persistent disadvantage because of this. Davis's identity as a woman of color, as well as growing up severely impoverished has had lasting implications on her. Given the obvious lack of diversity in the cast of films being made, Davis had to face and still is facing extreme adversity to become the successful actress she is today. Davis feels that it is important to speak publicly about her troubled childhood to show her support in helping children that grew up like her. Overall, even after the deep trauma she experienced growing up and the discrimination she still faces in her own career as an entertainer, Viola Davis uses what she learned from the hardship that she overcame as well as the discrimination that she is met with every day to change the lives of other people who have faced the same experiences as her.

While it may seem hard to believe, considering her current status as a successful American actress, Viola Davis was raised in extreme poverty. She was raised in Central Falls, Road Island by her parents, Mae Alice and Dan Davis, along with five other children. Davis was

born in her “grandmother’s one-room shack on a former slave plantation in South Carolina, where her grandfather worked as a sharecropper” (Jordan, 2017, p. 78). Davis’s family struggled to make ends meet with her dad often unemployed and raising six children at the same time. The actress once said that she “would sleep with rags tied around her neck at night to keep rats from biting her in the family’s dilapidated home” (Jordan, 2017, p. 79). Davis suffered from such a high degree of poverty that there was never a time when she wasn’t hungry and recalled that she often crawled through maggot-filled garbage cans to find food for herself and her siblings. She described that she “sacrificed a childhood for food” and “grew up in immense shame” (Cohen, 2014). Davis believes that people at the bottom of the economic ladder are “too often shunted aside” and “either ignored or demonized” (Lang, 2018, p. 41). This is why her family being poor was an enormous impediment to her success and her education and why she believes that children who are poor are often invisible because that is how she personally felt growing up. She describes poor people as people who “live a life, day to day, moment to moment, where you are constantly in survival mode” (Lang, 2018, p. 41). Living in and being surrounded by poverty goes far deeper than just struggling financially; it often has far-reaching implications socially and emotionally. Because she experienced childhood hunger herself, Davis became the ambassador for the charitable program, *Hunger is*, which is “aimed at building awareness and fundraising in an effort to end childhood hunger in America.” Her devotion to this mission comes from first-hand experience and knows the pain that many children in America are still facing. The funds raised through this program directly benefit local programs focused on combating childhood hunger and improving health-related outcomes. According to Davis, “there are 15 million hungry kids in this country who are not sure where their next meal will come from” (Alexander, 2018, p. 3). One of the main problems with this is that public perception of childhood hunger vastly

differs from the reality. Because of this, Davis does not miss an opportunity to share her story so that she is able to lend a voice to this important cause and work to make a permanent change in America.

The ramifications of children growing up in poverty can be long-lasting. One of these effects include the lack of an adequate education. 27% of African-Americans live below the U.S. poverty threshold according to the 2014 U.S Bureau of Census. Often living in an economically-distressed neighborhood, they are surrounded by “joblessness, crime, and violence.” Research shows a challenging academic path for poor African-American children. The home is a crucial and major setting for children, so if a child’s home life is unstable, it is often difficult them to focus or performs well academically. “Poor African-American youth often live in dangerous, violent neighborhoods and confront stark inequalities in terms of the quality of their school environments and educational opportunities” (Gutman, 2000, p. 3). With this being said, children growing up in poor communities generally do not receive equitable representation for them to be able to pursue the career fields they want to pursue or even be exposed to the education required for those career fields. Upon completing research on social isolation of inner-city African-American families, it was found that there is an extreme lack of “opportunities for interaction with socially connected persons and access to institutional resources” (Rankin, 2000, p. 140). Given this fact derived from many different studies, Viola Davis was at a disadvantage from the beginning because the entertainment industry is one that is difficult to break into without having connections. One approach that was done to explain this phenomenon “implies that the urban poor are doubly disadvantaged – by the individual experience of poverty and by the concentrated poverty of the neighborhoods in which they reside.” Therefore, not only do they suffer from the effects of poverty as individuals, but they are also trapped in economically devastated

neighborhoods where they often lack contact with people with “the knowledge, experience, and, most important, the valuable social connections to aid them in their efforts to improve their life circumstances” (Rankin, 2000, p. 141). Without the economic support from its residents, many of the key community institutions, such as businesses, schools, churches, social clubs, voluntary associations, and community organizations, cannot survive.

Another part of Davis’s life that she has struggled with is her identity as a woman of color. She describes her experiences as “a past that’s still a part of my present” (Lang, 2018, p. 41). While Viola Davis is obviously no longer poor, her identity as not only a woman, but a woman of color is both something that she is proud of and something that she has struggled with in her career. Although prominent in the entertainment and film industry, discrimination of race and gender in the workplace is a problem everywhere. Women of color don’t get paid less than just male actors – their salaries are lower in comparison to white women. Davis emphasizes this point by saying that “there are no percentages to show the difference. It’s vast. Hispanic women, Asian women, black women, we don’t get paid what Caucasian women get paid. We just don’t. We have the talent. It’s the opportunity that we’re lacking” (Lang, 2018, p. 42). Davis also offers insight into the way that Hollywood films portray women: “People try to be too nice with women. They keep them pretty. They keep them likeable. They cater to male fantasies. They cater to the male gaze.” When choosing the roles that she wants to play and the projects that she wants to be a part of, Davis places importance on how the producers of the movie represent marginalized groups, especially people of color because “mostly white men who run the major studios tend to cling to certain prejudices when greenlighting projects” (Lang, 2018, p. 41). She knows from experience that many events in Hollywood are filled with women CEOs, producers, and actresses, yet there are very few people of color. Davis’s past was a limitation to her success,

but it also was one of the reasons that she took up an interest in film. “Film provided an important escape hatch at a key moment as she was growing up.” Davis describes the effect that film had on her as a child: “This beautiful, magical transformation happened in the midst of all that poverty. It elevated me out of my situation and stimulated my imagination. I knew I needed to make a life doing this” (Lang, 2018, p. 41).

Despite the entertainment industry being known as one of the most outwardly liberal industries, racial inequality still remains among the films being made today. In the 1960’s, “Hollywood confronted growing African-American demands for a fair share of jobs in the movie industry” (Dawson, 2012, p. 1206). By the 2000’s, there was a significant increase in the number of African-American directors, including some female directors. Despite an “overall promising increase in African-American participation in film directing that was marked by significant gains in proportional representation for black directors,” the black community continues to be underrepresented and marginalized. In film projects, the director occupies a very important role that is responsible for envisioning the final product in which they choose the cultural and social messages the film portrays. Aside from making profit, “movies are powerful tools for shaping consciousness.” Marginalized groups not having access to these films “places restrictions upon their ability to challenge perpetual racial stereotypes that influence social behavior” (Erigha, 2018, p. 1218). Moreover, with an increased number of African-American producers and directors comes a higher rate of employment of African-Americans in lower-level positions, including the cast, the screenwriters, and the music writers. A study conducted by Bonilla-Silva on racial disparities in Hollywood “indicates a racialization of institutional barriers where institutional barriers disproportionately relegate black workers to lower rungs of cinema production” (Erigha, 2018, p. 1219). Overall, “Hollywood fosters disparate treatment for blacks

and whites, relegating African-Americans to positions of subordination and disadvantage in the labor market” (Erigha, 2018, p. 1220). In an industry that remains overwhelmingly white, the available roles for African-American actors are limited and limiting.

In addition to the discussions that she has had surrounding women of color in film, Viola Davis has also voiced her opinion on the portrayal of women of color in the #MeToo movement. During her speech at the Women’s March in Los Angeles, Davis says that women of color are too often overlooked in mainstream feminist movements. She highlighted that “black women who have spoken out against sexual harassment did so at a price” (Finley, 2018, p. 3). Because her childhood was one of poverty and one of being assaulted, it is important for Davis and for everyone else to listen to the women that sit in silence. Despite the fact that the #MeToo movement was created by a black woman and that “women of color are more vulnerable to sexual harassment than white women and are less likely to be believed when they report harassment, assault, and rape” (Onwuachi, 2018, p. 2), there is a continuing marginalization and exclusion of women of color within the movement.

Viola Davis is one of the most famous actresses in Hollywood today and has persisted through both poverty and discrimination as a woman of color. The unequal representation and inclusion of African Americans is an institutional and systematic problem that has deeply imbedded barriers throughout the entertainment industry. Many Americans want to believe in progress but are not willing to put forth action to change the problem. Although she is presented as an award-winning actress, Viola Davis has had to overcome unthinkable obstacles in her path to the success she has now and uses her platform both as an actress and a director to improve the lives of others.

