

How racialized women can tackle backlash when advocating for change

July 21 2024, by Karine Coen-Sanchez



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Racialized women are often at the forefront in the struggle for social justice. Yet that advocacy often comes with significant backlash and threats. In the United States, [congresswomen like Cori Bush, Ilhan Omar](#) and [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) have faced severe backlash for their outspoken stances on racial justice, police reform and foreign policy. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib [was censured](#) by the House of Representatives for speaking on Palestine.

Similarly, in Canada, [Ontario MLA Sarah Jama](#) also faced backlash for her stance in support of Palestine. Jama was censured by the legislature, kicked out of the Ontario New Democratic Party caucus, and was even made to leave the legislative assembly multiple times.

In sport, tennis star [Naomi Osaka received significant criticism](#) for her activism and mental health advocacy, as seen when she withdrew from the French Open to prioritize her well-being.

These examples are not isolated, and they highlight the persistent challenges faced by racialized women when they speak out. They underscore the urgent need for systemic change and robust support for advocates in today's socio-political climate.

As a [Black Ph.D. candidate](#) who has experienced the challenges faced by racialized communities, I consider my research on [diversity and inclusion](#) as not just academic, but deeply personal.

I advocate for implementing change at the institutional level, including workplaces, schools, and other organizations, by promoting policies that protect and support [social justice](#) and equality, such as anti-retaliation

policies and mental health resources.

Advocacy: A double-edged sword

Advocacy can be a double-edged sword. On one side, it challenges capitalist-colonial relations foundational to many institutions, and promotes equitable access to employment, education and [health care](#).

However, advocacy also encounters competitive and individualistic practices within these spaces. Many advocating for change must often do so within systems and institutions prioritizing profit or power over equality.

Efforts to challenge the status quo often provoke strong reactions from those benefiting from existing power structures. This backlash creates a ripple effect, deterring others from speaking out and perpetuating a cycle of silence, gaslighting and compliance.

Especially in a society where racism and social inequality have become ingrained in the culture, the societal structures often reinforce racial hierarchies and prejudices.

Racialized women who speak out against social injustice often find themselves isolated within their communities and professional circles. Speaking out can lead to alienation as peers distance themselves to avoid association with controversial topics.

For example, activist [Tarana Burke](#), founder of the #MeToo movement, faced significant backlash and isolation despite her critical work in highlighting sexual violence.

Retaliation can be overt or covert, ranging from verbal attacks to institutional discrimination.

Journalist [Jemele Hill](#) faced severe backlash, including threats and suspension, for her outspoken views on racial injustice.

Scholars like [Patricia Hill Collins](#) have described how the fear of retaliation silences potential advocates and creates a false sense of identity.

These women are frequently subjected to negative stereotypes and stigmatization. They are labeled as angry, difficult or troublemakers, which further marginalizes them and undermines their advocacy efforts. Labels like these are often used to undermine racialized people by perpetuating harmful biases and reinforcing societal power imbalances.

The double bind: Gender and race

Racialized women face unique challenges due to the intersectionality of their identities and the [matrix of domination](#). This refers to the interlocking systems of oppression structured around race, class, gender, sexuality and nationality; these categories do not operate independently but are interconnected and reinforce one another.

They are often subjected to discrimination because of their race as well as their gender. Recognizing this is crucial for fostering empathy and a deeper understanding of the challenges these women face.

They often encounter heightened scrutiny and skepticism from both their communities and society at large. The [compounded effects](#) of racial and gender biases intensify these challenges, forcing them to navigate a more difficult landscape.

Their motives and methods are frequently questioned, leading to a persistent need to justify their actions. Recognizing and addressing these intersectional challenges is essential for fostering a more inclusive and

equitable society.

This double bind creates an environment where their advocacy efforts meet heightened resistance and scrutiny. The cost of their advocacy manifests in various forms, including social, professional and personal repercussions.

Personal and professional costs

Stepping outside established bounds and speaking up on controversial topics often comes with the risk of retaliation, demotions, being passed over for promotions or even job loss.

Employers may view activism as a liability, leading to professional stagnation or regression. For instance, Professor [Anita Hill](#) faced professional and personal attacks after her testimony against Clarence Thomas during his Supreme Court confirmation hearings.

Reduced income and limited career advancement opportunities have long-term financial implications, making it difficult to sustain advocacy work. A report by the [Institute for Women's Policy Research highlights](#) the wage gap and economic challenges faced by Black women in the workforce

Racialized women frequently experience burnout, anxiety and depression as a result of their relentless fight for equality. [Psychology scholar Thema Bryant-Davis](#) has written about how the intersectional pressures faced by racialized women significantly contribute to their mental health struggles."

Activist and writer [Audre Lorde](#) has also discussed the emotional toll of her advocacy, highlighting the need for self-care.

The stress associated with advocacy can also manifest in physical health problems. Chronic stress can lead to a range of health issues, including hypertension, cardiovascular diseases and weakened immune systems.

Research by the [American Psychological Association](#) shows the significant health disparities and stress-related health problems faced by racialized women. For example, discrimination and racism profoundly impact the mental health of racialized women. Experiences of racism are directly linked to higher levels of psychological distress and mental health disorders.

Strategies for support

Racialized women who want to speak out should bear in mind the following suggestions:

1. Empower yourself with knowledge: Familiarize yourself with existing policies and [legal rights](#) that are available to you as an advocate.
2. Document experiences: Keeping detailed records of incidents and communications isn't just a task—it's a powerful tool. It can be vital if any issues arise, giving you a sense of preparedness and control.
3. Mental health resources: Access to [mental health resources](#) isn't a luxury; it's a necessity. These resources help you cope with emotional and psychological stress, making you feel supported and cared for.
4. Build a support network: Connect with allies and support groups both within and outside your institution. These connections can amplify your voice and provide mutual support.
5. Seek training: Participate in training programs that focus on advocacy, leadership, and navigating institutional structures. This can enhance your skills and effectiveness.

6. Stay informed: Keep yourself updated on the latest developments and best practices related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This knowledge will help you stay relevant and effective in your advocacy efforts.

At its core, building support networks is a powerful tool for safeguarding mental, physical and spiritual health.

We must also uphold institutional responsibility and accountability to ensure workplace protections through safe reporting mechanisms and fair employee treatment. Acknowledging the [structural nature of racism](#) is crucial to tackling it. A commitment to fairness means that all employees feel secure and valued in their workplace, and in their ability to speak out without retaliation.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: How racialized women can tackle backlash when advocating for change (2024, July 21) retrieved 21 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-07-racialized-women-tackle-backlash-advocating.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.