




## RESEARCH ARTICLES

# The Lived Experiences of Women of Color Leaders in Human Services: Professional Challenges and Implications for the Field

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The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of women of color leaders in the field of human services. This study used phenomenology as a methodological approach to understand women of color leaders' lived experiences. Sixteen women of color participated in semi-structured interviews about professional challenges that they experienced as leaders in human services agencies and organizations. Most of the study participants identified as Black or African American. Six themes emerged from the data including being treated with disrespect because of race, being one of a few, constantly policing oneself, feelings of isolation, intersectionality, and not being privy to networks. Implications for human service professionals and organizations are discussed.

### Introduction

Human services organizations and professionals have a professional obligation to create organizations that are inclusive, diverse, and safe for all people and to also recognize and address issues of social injustice (NOHS, 2015). The National Organization for Human Services (NOHS, 2015) standards assert, "The fundamental values of the human services profession include respecting the dignity and welfare of all people; promoting self-determination; honoring cultural diversity; advocating for social justice; and acting with integrity, honesty, genuineness and objectivity." When organizations have diverse climates, they are better equipped to provide more opportunities for innovation and creativity to meet the needs of clients and communities (Li et al., 2022). Organizational policies and practices often affect the ability to recruit and retain effective leaders. Women of color, particularly Black women, in leadership positions experience a *glass ceiling* as they attempt to establish themselves as leaders in various fields (McKinsey & Company, 2020, 2021; Valerio, 2022). Despite existing opportunities and instances where women of color have prevailed in the field of human services, there are often limited options for advancement in leadership positions within agencies and organizations (Dyson, 2013; Hunter et al., 2020). For women of color, their gendered identities as women, coupled with their racial positionality, exponentially minoritizes them in ways that create additional institutional

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barriers (Crenshaw, 1989). Such trends raise concerns for how women of color experience their leadership roles within the human services field. This study addresses this issue by qualitatively investigating the experiences of women of color leaders within human services.

### **Leadership in Human Services**

Leadership has been identified as the force that holds together and aligns all the managerial functions of an organization, thus creating a coordinated whole (Lewis et al., 2012). Leadership requires creativity, flexibility, the ability to inspire others to action, and being attuned to the needs of followers (DePree, 2008). Within the field of human services, emerging research has highlighted servant leadership as a leadership approach effective in human service settings (Garman et al., 2003; Hyde, 2004; Regan, 2016). Although servant leadership has been cited as an ideal leadership style within the human services field, women of color who engage in servant leadership continue to face significant barriers in their leadership roles such as gendered-racial microaggression, prioritization of traditional or mainstream leadership styles, increased service load, reduced supervisory support, lower wages, and other equity gaps (Hunter et al., 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2021; Valerio, 2022). These barriers may affect their mental and physical well-being, as well as their career trajectories.

### **Women of Color Leaders**

Limited research has empirically explored women of color leaders in the Human Services field (Dyson, 2013; Hunter et al., 2020). Such dearth of research is problematic because the lived experiences of women of color often differ in meaningful ways that challenge the field's alignment with existing NOHS standards. Examination of such trends are critical for identifying important implications and valuable lessons for the field of human services that espouses standards to honor diversity and social justice (Dyson, 2013; National Organization of Human Services, 2015). Women of color in leadership positions often seek out these roles because they possess both a desire to solve long-standing social problems and unique perspectives to create effective solutions based on their first-hand experiences with those social problems (Dyson, 2013). Research on the experience of women of color in related fields suggest that women of color face significant and ongoing challenges in gaining leadership roles and at times being effective once in leadership roles due to multifaceted barriers such as having increased workloads, a lack of support, and intersecting issues of structural racism and sexism (Blessett, 2018; Hunter et al., 2020; Rideau, 2019; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Thomas, 2019).

*Intersectionality.* The concept of intersectionality, as defined by Crenshaw (1989), asserts that the experiences of Black women must be understood through the lens of compounding oppressions emerging from various identities such as race and gender. Such understanding unveils how Black women experience oppression across systems because of structural, political, and representational inequities (Crenshaw, 1991, 1993; Few-Demo, 2014). The simultaneous minoritization of gender and race creates heightened levels

of oppression for Black women, despite leadership positions they may occupy. Consequently, women of color leaders face challenges that must be examined from the lens of intersectionality of their race, gender, and other aspects of their identities (Crenshaw, 1991, 1993). Amidst these challenges, investigating the experiences of women of color leaders provides an opportunity to translate an understanding of their adverse experiences into effective solutions to problems within the field of human services (Thomas, 2019). This study is designed to address the existing gap in literature that focuses on women of color leaders in the field and offers implications from their experiences that support the field's adherence to the NOHS standards of honoring diversity and advancing social justice.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of women of color leaders in the human services field. This investigation highlights the professional challenges for women of color leaders to provide insight for how human service organizations can create inclusive spaces. The primary questions used to guide this investigation were:

1. What are the lived experiences of women of color leaders in human services?
2. What challenges do women of color face as leaders in the field of human services?

### **Method**

This qualitative study used phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) as a methodology to explore the lived experiences of women of color leaders in human services. Phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of participants, as well as the contexts through which they are experienced (Creswell, 2007). After permission was granted through a university Institutional Review Board (IRB), potential participants were recruited through human services organizations, as well as through social media. Purposeful sampling and snowballing were used to recruit potential participants in various ways during a human services conference. Recruitment techniques included an email with a study flyer distributed through a human services organization's listserv and via Facebook. Study criteria included 1) being at least 18 years of age 2) identifying as a woman of color and 3) holding a leadership role in an agency or organization providing human services (nonprofit or profit). Verification that the participant met the study criteria was confirmed through a scheduled phone and/or online interview. Each participant completed an informed consent form, demographic questionnaire, and participated in an individual audiotaped semi-structured interview. Participants received a \$10 gift card for participating in the study.

Interview questions included: 1.) In as much detail as possible, how would you describe your experiences as a woman of color who is in a leadership role in the field of human services? 2.) How would you describe the process

of how you became a leader in the field? 3.) What have been some of your greatest challenges as a woman of color leader? 4.) What factors do you believe have been barriers to your role as a leader? The interviews conducted ranged from 36 to 98 minutes with a mean time of 57.25 minutes. Each interview was transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. The first three interviews were conducted between October and November of 2019 and remaining interviews were conducted between May of 2020 and November of 2020. After sending an email through a human services organization in October of 2020, we received an overwhelming response within one week from interested participants, the majority of which identified as Black and/or African American females. Such responses appeared to coincide with emergence of national and global societal issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affected Black and Latinx communities, and the Black Lives Matters Movement responses to the brutal killings of numerous unarmed Black people by law enforcement officers.

### **Participants**

Sixteen women of color leaders in the field of human services participated in the research study. Participants identified as Black (n=4), African American (n=5), Black/African American (n=2), Black American (n=1), Black/African American and Native American (n=1), Black/Caribbean American (n=1), Multiethnic (n=1) and Hispanic-Puerto Rican (n=1). Participants represented five NOHS regions including the Mid-Atlantic (n=5), Southern (n=7), West/Northwest (n=2), Midwest (n=1), and New England (n=1). At the time their interviews, participants ranged in age from age 34-59 with an average age of 47.56. Participants reported that they had been in the field of human services from 8-35 years with an average of 20 years in the field of human services and in leadership positions from .5 to 28 years with an average of 12 years of leadership in the field of human services. Participants were given a pseudonym so that they are not identifiable.

### **Research Team**

The research team consisted of the first author, second author, and a professional transcriptionist who all identified as African American females. The first author acknowledges that she typically uses an ecological systems framework in conceptualizing people within the context of their environments. The authors recognized that their experiences as human services professionals are not disconnected from their experiences with this investigation. As each woman of color in this study was interviewed the first and second author were able to gain a richer understanding of what it is like to be a women of color leader in a human services profession. Each participant was seen as a co-researcher in the research process, and the authors wanted to ensure that meaning was constructed collaboratively. As participants were interviewed, some questions were revised to better capture what was shared as the authors felt this was essential so that participants' voices were heard, respected, and acknowledged throughout the research process.

## Data Analysis

This study utilized Creswell's (2007) data analysis approach to phenomenology, which was primarily derived from Moustakas (1994) steps as a guide to data analysis. The first author kept a reflexive journal, which was analyzed throughout the research process. The reflexive journal was used as a means of *suspending understanding* (Creswell, 2007, p. 62) to be better enabled to capture the lived experiences of participants. The first author and transcriptionist discussed any concerns before and after each interview was transcribed. The first author read through initial transcripts several times to gain an understanding of participants' experiences. The first and second authors analyzed each participant's transcript for *significant statements* that provided insight on participants' lived experiences and the context of these experiences. Next, these significant statements were used to identify the formulated meaning of the experiences, which were then used to identify themes. The themes and statements were used to write a structural and textural description of participants' experiences. This information was used to provide an understanding of the *essence* of the lived experience of women of color leaders in the field of human services.

## Trustworthiness and Credibility

Creswell (2007) recommends that a minimum of two procedures be used in establishing the trustworthiness of research data. Reflexive journaling (discussed previously in this article), member checks, and an external audit were used to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the research study. During interviews, the first author checked for understanding throughout the process, so participants felt heard, and to assure that participants' experiences were accurately represented. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. The second author served as a peer debriefer. Peer debriefing sessions were held to address potential biases and consensus was built on all emerging themes. Member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Motulsky, 2021) were used to enhance the validity of the research study. In August and September of 2022, participants were contacted electronically and by phone, depending on what was most convenient for the participant for member checks and each participant had an opportunity to provide feedback on the potential findings of the study in order to gain a greater understanding of the findings of the research study. Twelve of the sixteen participants confirmed the findings of the study. Four of the twelve participants who responded provided additional information, which is included in the discussion section of this article. An external auditor who was not involved in the research process conducted an audit trail of the research design, data collection, and data analysis in the research study. The external auditor determined that the research process was credible and the findings of the study were supported by the data. The external auditor suggested that it was important that the member checks were time stamped when reporting the results of the study.

## Results

Data analysis of this study revealed six themes including (1) being treated with disrespect because of race, (2) being one of a few, (3) constantly policing oneself, (4) feelings of isolation, (5) intersectionality, and (6) not being privy to networks. Participants described their experiences as leaders in the field of human services as rewarding, challenging, frustrating, isolating, and humbling. What many participants described as most rewarding was the ability to make a difference in the lives of clients and communities. Janice explained, “That is the greatest joy for me and to look at the growth that occurs during the time that I worked with them, it is a joy.” In addition to the rewards of being a leader in human services, participants shared many of the challenges and frustrations of being a woman of color who is a leader in the field of human services. Participants shared how their environments affected their leadership experiences and that as leaders they had to learn to balance the additional responsibilities of being a leader.

All sixteen participants discussed professional challenges they face as women of color who are in leadership roles in the field of human services. These challenges were described as different layers they must deal with as women of color leaders, and often unique to their roles in human services.

### **Being treated with disrespect because of your race**

Sixteen participants described situations in which they were treated with disrespect because of their race. Such instances included not being validated, racial stereotyping, being treated as if you are invisible/being overlooked, being disregarded, dancing around exhausting circles of questioning and proving oneself, racial microaggressions, being discriminated against, and having their directives undermined. Marley asserted, “especially as an African American woman you are kind of slighted... because of your race; so that has been my experiences as a leader.” Frankie also shared, “I’ve experienced that a number of times where I’ve been disregarded or overlooked ...and then when someone else says the same thing who’s not a person of color...I have to turn around and say, I know I just said that two seconds ago. I always have to re-explain myself.”

Similarly, Darlene expressed,

being invisible ...I think that’s probably the biggest challenge is having to prove my worth and my presence and my validity all the time where it is just assumed with other[s]...like with White folks, it’s just assumed, it’s not questioned ...that part is exhausting ...At the end of the day, it’s like it’s interesting because my colleagues will say... I’m so glad you were here, like I’m so glad that you brought that point up but it’s like I brought it up at the beginning of the meeting and then... it’s interesting kind of [an] exhausting circle that has to happen, they have to question, question, question and then they’re like “oh yeah, this person would know this because this is their specialty or this is their expertise,” like oh yeah, why didn’t we do that sooner.

## Being one of a few

Thirteen participants reported that they were one of a few women of color leaders in a human service field primarily represented by White males and females. Frankie described, “this field it is dominated by 80% White females... So, I’m usually either the only one or [one of] a few in the field.” Irene elaborated by sharing her experience having a colleague state in a meeting that she did not think that Irene was “that smart,”

I did not address her comment, but I just continued reporting out; but that hurt me deeply, it wounded me ... I was the only African American in my organization and I knew at that moment that I had no support, I had no one that I could go and talk to, I had no mentorship.

She also recalled that no one else in the room responded during this experience. Similarly, Barbara described the pressure of being one of a few leaders by stating, “it reinforces this reality... that it’s not that many of us and...you just know people are watching you... like oh gosh, here we go, you know like tell me about your hair.”

Kelsey reported that although she was in an environment that was predominately Black, as a female she was still one of a few as a leader because most of the leadership roles were dominated by males. Some participants discussed a hierarchy in leadership where White men are at the top and Black females often at the bottom. Other participants shared that being one of a few often resulted in an increased workload because of their ability to connect with their clients or students of diverse backgrounds, especially in environments where their colleagues had limited exposure to people of different backgrounds.

## Constantly policing oneself

Ten of the sixteen participants discussed situations in which they had to police themselves constantly. “*Policing oneself*” was described by participants as constantly worrying about how one will be perceived, being forced to conform to a different set of standards or rules, and hypervigilance experienced by women of color leaders. Participants discussed how they typically had to go by the book when dealing with situations and that they often could not get away with the same behaviors that other colleagues can. Darlene described policing herself as follows:

another thing that I’ve seen is I have to police myself a lot at work, I mean I police myself a lot and I see people next to me that throw actual tantrums, their hands and arms go up in the air and they’re yelling and they turn red and they’re flaming and I just...know...I can’t do that, I don’t have that luxury to do that.

Anna explained that policing oneself requires Black women to be hypervigilant,

Black women have to always continue to prove themselves, we need to be very hypervigilant...as to how we think, our clothes, our volume, our positioning, our gesturing, our physical appearance, our hair, complexion... all of those things people use to judge you before you even speak...those things are real.

Seven participants shared that policing oneself forced them to conform to White cultural standards. For example, Eliza explained how she must change and monitor her personality when communicating depending on the audience.

Being passionate about something [and] having to really watch how I communicate passion so that passion isn't taken as me being aggressive and intimidating to...someone else. My passion is there but are you intimidated by it because I may be speaking loud or because I may be gesturing or I may be standing up...so having to monitor that and edit my personality to suit the audience.

### **Feelings of isolation**

Nine of the sixteen participants discussed feelings of isolation as women of color leaders

in the field of human services. Some discussed not interacting with colleagues because they did not trust them. Cindy shared,

as a woman of color, it can be hard, my mentor and director, she was Black and she was a woman of color and she guided me, she said "getting to a point to where you're going to get...it's lonely at the top" and she would always tell me that, she said "it's lonely at the top" and I always wondered like what does she mean when she says it's lonely at the top because you're in that position by yourself, you're the only minority, you're the only one looking at everything from almost at a different perspective because other people's ideas may not be the same idea or perspective that you have and when you voice that and when you say it, it's a shift because people are like...not as receptive of it...

Some participants felt a need to want to develop networking opportunities for other women of color leaders because of the isolation that they experienced.

### **Intersectionality**

Nine of the sixteen participants discussed intersectionality as a part of their lived experiences. These women discussed the compounding challenges of negotiating their simultaneous gendered and racial identities. For example, Marley expressed,

Being a woman, I would have to say there still is to me a glass ceiling, meaning that a lot of times you have to speak up and sometimes you still have to... around your male counterparts, ...really speak up in a way to where you're almost coming off as too aggressive but you have to kind of still have this feminine identity; and being a Black woman, I think you stand at the intersection of race and sexism; so you're always still having to negotiate those identities, but even between the two, I will always say being Black is really is more salient in regards to being a woman because you still ... have those oppressive experiences to where you may be seen as inferior, your leadership may not be recognized or...some people may not recognize your leadership identity...

Gina emphasized the dilemma of intersectionality,

...how do you negotiate not being invisible because some people just want to make you invisible in the room and at the same time, push against that but balance between all of these stereotypes that you show up with just because of your duality and people are like ok, there she is with her Blackness and her womanness and how do we manage this particularly in predominantly White spaces, they don't know necessarily what to do and then you have to negotiate all of that as their learning.

Lorraine also expressed challenges that she faced in dealing with the intersection of race and gender when interacting with colleagues, “deferring to somebody else instead of you because she’s a woman and she’s Black and she don’t know what she’s talking about.”

### **Not being privy to networks**

Seven participants discussed not being privy to networks. This theme referred to women of color not having access to resources and networks, as well as not having the initial guidance to figure out how bureaucracies work. Many participants recognized that being in leadership is often who you know and that not being privy to networks often puts them behind the curve. Paulene stated, “I want to say the biggest challenge is...not having any guidance...whether it’s like it’s just the resources that’s just at your fingertips like at your hand [or] not knowing people.” Similarly, Hannah reported, “challenges...not understanding how bureaucracies work.” Additionally, Darlene expressed,

I don’t have that generational wealth that a lot of people just come in to a workplace with, where I work and in other places I’ve worked in leadership, there’s this network of good ole boys ...so I have to really, I’ve got to figure it out, I feel like I’m always behind the curve on that...

Although most of the participants who discussed the concern of not being privy to different networks were in predominately White environments, three participants who shared this concern were not in predominately White settings.

### Discussion

This qualitative study sought to explore the lived experiences of women of color leaders in the field of human services and highlighted their professional challenges. The findings of this study are consistent with other studies that examined challenges experienced by women of color in leadership positions. Past studies suggest that women of color leaders experience barriers such as lack of representation, experiences of racial microaggressions and other types of disrespectful behaviors because of their race, intersectionality, isolation, hypervigilance, and not having the same access to resources and support as White colleagues (Holder et al., 2015; Hunter et al., 2020; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). The current study provides a link between documented experiences of women of color leaders in other sectors and the human services field.

Participants shared that one of the biggest challenges that they faced as women of color who held leadership positions in human services organizations was *being treated with disrespect because of race*. Many participants shared very personal and emotional stories of situations in which they had to deal with racial microaggressions, negative racial stereotypes, and shared that their ideas were frequently dismissed. Some participants shared that these experiences have had a toll on their health and/or career trajectory. Most of the women in this study identified as Black or African American. Holder et al. (2015) found that Black women in corporate leadership positions often encounter racial indignities that have the underlying presumption of intellectual inferiority and that these experiences can affect the well-being of Black women. The findings of this study align with the findings of Holder et al. (2015) and suggest that although human services is a field in which professional standards acknowledge the need for cultural diversity and the respect and dignity of all people (NOHS, 2015), implicit bias and preconceived notions about race remain an issue.

The participants in this study discussed *being one of a few* as women of color leaders in their human services settings. Although there is research on the lack of representation of women in leadership (Holder et al., 2015; McKinsey & Company, 2020) there is a gap in research studies that provide insight into the lack of representation of women of color leaders in human services settings. The women of color in this study shared that as leaders in human services agencies and organizations, their presence as one of a few creates contextual lack of representation in leadership positions in ways that adversely influence their work environments. Although many human services organizations may have staff that represent various cultural backgrounds, as with many other sectors, leadership positions often are dominated by White males and White females, thus maintaining a lack of representation among women of color. Like past studies (Hunter et al., 2020; Rideau, 2019), this study suggests that the

lack of representation adversely increases workloads and creates hostile work environments for women of color leaders, especially when other personnel do not have the knowledge and skills to work with diverse populations. A critical finding in this study unveils that even when women of color may be in an environment that consists predominately of people of color they may still experience oppression by virtue of the intersectionality of their identities, in particular their race and gender, which continue to relegate Black women to the bottom of existing hierarchies.

Collectively, most of the participants reported they *constantly had to police themselves* in their work settings. Such policing required them to be hypervigilant, to worry about how they would be perceived, and to conform to White cultural standards. These findings align with existing literature revealing that daily experiences with racial microaggressions and stereotypes can result in people of color becoming hypervigilant in their work environments (Holder et al., 2015; McKinsey & Company, 2020). Thus, the experiences that the women of color leaders face create a burden to be perfect because of stereotyping and racial microaggressions that they experience (Holder et al., 2015). Consequently, human services professionals should be aware of how women of color leaders experience contextual influences within the field.

Some women of color leaders in this study shared how lack of representation, experiences with being treated differently because of race, and a multitude of other issues that they face often result in *feelings of isolation* in their work environments. They described their experiences as women of color leaders as often being a *lonely* experience. The experiences of isolation and loneliness are congruent with the previous literature on women of color leaders in various fields (Holder et al., 2015; McKinsey & Company, 2020).

Women of color often deal with the complexities of the intersections of race, gender and often other facets of their identities that can affect their roles as leaders (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Like past studies that explored women of color leaders' experiences in the field (Hunter et al., 2020), participants shared that they have faced challenges navigating the intricacies of race and gender. Participants shared that dealing with the *intersectionality* of racism and sexism often meant having to decide when and how to speak up in environments in which there is a push for women of color to be invisible or silent. This study supports the literature that suggests that stereotypes due to the intersectionality of race and gender often affect the advancement of women of color (Hunter et al., 2020; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Such experiences of intersectionality simultaneously contribute to and exacerbate structural, political, and representational inequities (Crenshaw, 1991, 1993; Few-Demo, 2014).

Additionally, the women of color leaders in this study shared that *not being privy to networks* was a challenge that often made it difficult to secure and retain leadership positions. Many participants were in environments where they did not have the needed support or access to resources so that they could be successful. Past studies have suggested that opportunities for networking

and support are essential for women of color to advance, yet many women of color do not receive necessary support. This study is congruent with the findings of previous studies on the lack of support received by women of color leaders.

Despite the barriers many of the participants faced in their careers, they were able to work their way up to emerge as leaders by leveraging opportunities, having a strong work ethic, continuing their education, and through gaining experience. The authors were able to learn from each of the women of color in this study. Their lived experiences were inspiring and at times challenged what we knew and understood about leadership. The women in this study were resilient, compassionate, strong, empathetic, and authentic. They had unique strengths that helped them to meet the needs of the clients and communities that they work with and often found this work rewarding. They were able to use their strengths, leverage opportunities, and work their way up in the field of human services, but often faced challenges that affected their experiences as leaders and, for some, this took a toll on their health and career trajectories.

Many of the participants shared that they were very appreciative for the opportunity to share their experiences in the study and that it was helpful to talk about their experiences. This suggests that the ability to share one's experience and have this information heard through qualitative research processes, such as interviews and member checks, may be beneficial for personal and professional growth. Future research studies could provide further insight into the role of qualitative research on personal and professional growth. The first author appreciated that participants provided clarification if the understanding of what was stated was incorrect. For instance, Frankie suggested that using terms like microaggressions minimize what it is and stated that she experienced the behaviors as "disrespect." During member checks, Eliza shared that she saw her experiences with what was referred to as being treated with disrespect as discrimination. Future research studies could explore how terminology that reflects experiences based on race and gender is experienced by women of color.

From the authors' perspectives, participants' experiences related to the theme of challenges faced by women of color in leadership positions in the human services sector are congruent with much of the authors' experiences as women of color in positions of academic authority in the human services academy. The authors have been one of a few (or the only) women of color in their departments, schools, and universities. Feelings of isolation and not being privy to networks are perhaps even more pronounced in the academic setting. Similarly, each of the authors has multiple accounts of being treated with disrespect by students as well as colleagues and having the distinct impression the treatment differential was related to our race and gender. The authors also have experienced ongoing struggles against constantly policing themselves, acknowledging that their work has been conducted in a setting where written

and verbal presentations of authority are subject to intentional peer review, and the preponderance of peers who are not women of color who may be unlikely to have broad and deep experiences with women of color.

### **Study Limitations**

One limitation of this study was the human services settings in which participants worked were not identified. There may be differences in settings such as academic setting or nonprofit agencies. This information could be helpful in understanding women of color leaders' experiences, as well as useful in future research. The authors also acknowledge that potential participants may have chosen not to participate in the study because the first author, who conducted the interviews, was not a woman of color who represented their racial/ethnic background. As such, the authors were not able to focus in detail on many of the unique challenges of different populations of women of color. Some participants shared that it may have been more useful to focus only on one group of women of color versus attempting to include all groups of women of color in one study. Future research could focus on being intentional about recruiting specific populations of women of color leaders.

### **Implications**

This study highlighted the significance of human services professions and organizations in working to create inclusive environments for women of color leaders. The findings of the study suggest more efforts are needed to provide support and opportunities to recruit and retain women of color in the field. Human service organizations must be intentional about working to be inclusive of different racial/ethnic groups of women of color leaders. Participants suggested that this is also important in organizations that are majority minority. Mentoring and networking opportunities are essential for women of color leaders, especially given the challenges they often face in their attempts to establish themselves in the field. Human services organizations can work to create opportunities for networking, mentoring and support for women of color leaders. Additionally, it is essential that human service organizations and leaders work to ensure workloads are balanced for all leaders. The women of color in this study shared they often had higher workloads because of their abilities to relate to their clients, staff, and communities. Although the ability to connect to clients, staff, and communities was rewarding, it also was described as an additional stressor. As such, it is essential that human service organizations and human services programs work to ensure employees/students are culturally competent to work with diverse populations.

The findings also suggest professional development is needed for human services professionals to learn ways to create environments that are safe, healthy, and inclusive. Women of color leaders in this study indicated the environment they were in often played a role in their experiences and their experiences often took a toll on their health and affected their career trajectories. When women of color leaders are in healthier work environments, they are more likely to

receive the support needed to be effective. As such, it is essential organizations review their policies, procedures, and practices to ensure the organizational culture is one that is healthy and safe for all employees and provide professional development opportunities for human service professionals. Professional development is also needed on learning how to recognize and address racial and gendered discrimination, biases, and stereotypes. Participants shared numerous examples of being treated with disrespect because of their race. When human service professionals are given the tools to address such situations, they can serve as allies. Women of color leaders need allies who acknowledge their worth and who can recognize and respond to inequities and disrespectful behaviors.

### Conclusion

Women of color leaders have unique strengths that can be beneficial in human services agencies and organizations. This study focused on exploring the lived experiences of women of color in the field of human services. The participants in this study shared their experiences with professional challenges. Women of color often face significant barriers in their attempts as leaders (Hunter et al., 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2021; Valerio, 2022). These barriers may affect their mental and physical well-being, as well as their career trajectories. The findings of this study indicate women of color leaders need opportunities for networking, mentoring, and support. Future research on the strengths and resources of women of color leaders, as well as the effect of barriers on their well-being could be useful in gaining a better understanding of necessary support. The findings also suggest there is a need for human services professionals and organizations to be more intentional about creating a culture of inclusivity. Future research is needed in understanding the lived experiences of women of color leaders in human services so that human services organizations are better equipped to recruit and retain them.

### Author Note

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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