

Listening to Black Women and Girls:

Lived Experiences
of Adultification Bias

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ABOUT OUR ORGANIZATION

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The Center's Initiative on Gender Justice and Opportunity trains a spotlight on low-income girls and girls of color, seeking to improve public systems' approaches to marginalized girls by effectively addressing girls' trauma, recognizing their strengths, improving girls' education access and outcomes, and ending girls' inappropriate involvement in the juvenile justice system. In sum, the Initiative seeks to promote girls' health and wellness and support them to thrive free of intersectional discrimination. For more information, go to www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-inequality-center/gender-justice-and-opportunity. To become a member of our Trauma Informed Schools Learning Network for Girls of Color, an online platform for school communities co-led by the National Black Women's Justice Institute, go to www.schools4girlsofcolor.org.

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Introduction

In June 2017, the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality released *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*, a report that presented the findings from our quantitative analysis of a form of gendered racial bias against Black girls: **adultification**.¹ This bias is a stereotype in which adults view Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers, devoid of any individualized context. In other words, **adultification bias is not an evaluation of maturity based on observation of an individual girl's behavior, but instead is a presumption — a typology applied generally to Black girls.**²

The study asked adults fundamental questions about their views of either Black girls or white girls across four age categories: 0-4, 5-9, 10-14, and 15-19 years old. The questions were intended to measure perceptions of innocence and included questions such as: “Do Black girls [or white girls] need comforting?” and “Do Black girls [or white girls] need to be protected?”

The results of our study were shocking: they revealed that adults perceive Black girls as less innocent than white girls as young as 5-9 years old. The most significant differences in participants' perceptions of Black girls' innocence appeared in the 10-14 year age group, with significant differences also apparent in age groups 5-9 and 15-19.

This report presents the results of our next stage of research. To supplement and enrich the quantitative data collected in our previous study, we conducted focus groups with Black women and girls across the country. The focus groups took place in towns and cities of various sizes and in different geographic regions. **Participants ranged from 12 to more than 60 years old, and they were grouped with similarly aged peers.**³

Our goal was to measure participants' responses to our adultification findings by asking them about their real-world observations and seeking their insights about solutions to overcome this bias, as well as directions for future research. To that end, we asked participants whether the results of the original study align with their lived experiences and whether they believe the findings presented in our *Girlhood Interrupted* report would contribute to meaningful change. We also examined what new research questions we should ask to deepen our understanding of the adultification bias faced by Black girls, and what is most needed to address that bias.

In response, participants supported our finding that Black girls experience adultification bias. Further, they suggested several related factors that contribute to that bias, including the role played by negative stereotypes of Black women, as well as racism, sexism, and poverty. We are grateful to them for sharing their stories and their analysis. In the sections that follow, we highlight our key findings.

1 REBECCA EPSTEIN ET AL., *GIRLHOOD INTERRUPTED: THE ERASURE OF BLACK GIRLS' CHILDHOOD* 5 (2017).

2 Jamilia J. Blake et al., *The Role of Colorism in Explaining African American Females' Suspension Risk*, 32 Sch. Psychol. Q. 118 (2017).

3 Age ranges provided for the quotes cited in this report vary based on the self-reported ages of girls and women participating in the focus group.



Focus Group Findings

Finding

Black Girls Routinely Experience Adultification Bias.

Participants reinforced our original study's finding that adults often view Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like, describing adultification bias as consistent with their life experiences.⁴

"[T]here's, like, this **non-acceptance of being a child.**" (Age group 30-39)

To participants, in fact, the concept of adultification bias was far from novel. To them, the questions our research team posed about our quantitative findings were going over well-trodden ground.

"[Y]eah, we all know ... [I]t feels a little bit like [you're saying], 'Uh, yeah, so we just discovered the sky is blue, and how do you guys feel about the sky being blue?'" (Age group 30-39)

Finding

Adultification is Linked to Harsher Treatment and Higher Standards for Black Girls in School.

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that adultification bias is associated with punitive treatment. Many told personal stories, describing the harmful consequences of adults' misperceiving their age. One participant, for example, described a traffic stop in which a police officer did not believe her when she told him she was 15 years old, and handcuffed and fingerprinted her because he insisted that she was too old not to carry identification.

"[T]he officer that came and ... fingerprinted me — he was like: 'Well, child, you know, don't lie to us. And **if you tell us the real — your real age and real name, we wouldn't have to be going through none of this'**" (Age group 13-17)

⁴ Almost no participants stated that adultification did not align with their life experience.

Subtler harms resulting from adultification bias were also discussed. For example, participants described authority figures who held them to **more adult-like standards** of behavior than their white peers. They noted, in particular, that the message “you know better” can serve as coded language for higher expectations of Black girls.

“[T]hey’re like, ‘Oh, you should have known better; you should have known this and that.’ So **they’re not even acting like we’re children**, you know what I mean — acknowledging that.” (Age group 18-29)

“It’s like, well, like **I’m still a kid. Like I still mess up**. But it just seem like you hit like a specific age like 13-years-old, and, anytime you do anything wrong, it’s, ‘Oh, you know better.’ So you’re gonna get like **the worst punishment** possible.” (Age group 13-17)

One example that participants frequently cited to demonstrate higher standards and harsher consequences for Black girls was the **disproportionate rates of school discipline** they experienced. According to the US Department of Education, in the school year 2015-2016, Black girls represented 8 percent of student enrollment, but 14 percent of students who received an out-of-school suspension, whereas white girls represented 24 percent of enrollment, and 8 percent of students who received out-of-school suspensions.⁵ Consistent with our original study’s finding that application of the adultification bias begins **early in Black girls’ lives**, participants recounted having these experiences at young ages.

“I remember even in elementary school I had to transfer to different schools, and the other school didn’t want to take me because **I had assault and battery on my record**, and the reason I had assault and battery was because ... **during a, um, a game [at recess], one of the balls, like, hit the girl in the face**. Like, I had — I wasn’t [even] taken to the principal’s office But they just threw that on my record” (Age group 20-29)

“Like, most times when you try to like defend yourself, they see how you’re talking back. And then, they’ll be like, ‘There’s consequences.’ And they’ll be like ‘Oh, so they **get a detention; get a suspension.**’ **They always feel like you’re talking back, but you’re really not.** You’re just trying to defend, like get your side across.” (Age group 17-23)

5 OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS, U.S. DEP’T OF EDUC., 2015-16 CIVIL RIGHTS DATA COLLECTION: SCHOOL CLIMATE AND SAFETY: DATA HIGHLIGHTS ON SCHOOL CLIMATE AND SAFETY IN OUR NATION’S PUBLIC SCHOOL (2018).



Finding

Negative Stereotypes of Black Women are Mapped onto Black Girls, Which Can Lay the Foundation for Adultification Bias.

In our original adultification-bias report, we hypothesized that stereotypes of Black women can serve as a contributing factor to adultification bias when they are projected onto Black girls.⁶ In particular, we described two dominant paradigms of Black femininity in white culture that reach far back in our country's history and that emerged as relevant to our focus groups' discussions of adultification bias: the stereotype of the angry, aggressive Black woman ("Sapphire" caricature) and the hypersexualized Black woman ("Jezebel" caricature). By interpreting Black girls' behavior as consistent with stereotypes of Black women, adults effectively erase the distinction between adulthood and childhood.⁷ Our focus groups supported this theory.

6 EPSTEIN., *supra* note 1, at 5. For a general discussion of the three stereotypes of Black women discussed in *Girlhood Interrupted*, see Carolyn M. West, *Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel: Historical Images of Black Women and Their Implications for Psychotherapy*, 32 J. PSYCHOTHERAPY 458, 459–63 (1995).

7 See Philip Atiba Goff et al., *The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children*, 106 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 526, 530 (2014). See also Jamilia J. Blake et al., *Unmasking the Inequitable Discipline Experiences of Urban Black Girls: Implications for Urban Educational Stakeholders*, 43 URBAN REV. 90, 93 (2011) ("teachers may subconsciously use stereotypical images of Black females (e.g., the Sapphire and Jezebel) to interpret Black girls' behaviors and respond more harshly to Black girls who display behaviors that do not align with traditional standards of femininity in which girls are expected to be docile, diffident, and selfless. Traditional standards of femininity as defined by White middle class culture imply that girls and women must be silent, passive, and to place harmony in relationships over their own interests, desires, and feelings." (citations omitted)).

Stereotype: The "Angry Black Woman"

As we discussed in our original report, the "Sapphire" caricature has played a prominent role in white cultural assumptions of Black women's "bad attitude."⁸ This stereotype portrays Black women as loud, aggressive, and angry.⁹ Consistent with that caricature of Black women, a prevailing theme emerged from our focus groups of adults' tendency to ascribe a similar bad attitude to Black girls, interpreting their actions as threatening and disrespectful. Participants reported that when Black girls express strong or contrary views, adults view them as challenging authority or, more fundamentally, simply assume a girl's character is just plain "bad."

"[F]or Black people, specifically Black girls, it's, like, 'Oh, **she has an attitude problem**;' 'Oh, this is insubordination.'" (Age group 20-29)

"[E]ven when you see just in general **the word 'attitude'** being applied ... **it's usually not applied to white girls. It's applied to Black girls.**" (Age group 20-29)

8 EPSTEIN ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 5 (citing Blake et al., "Unmasking the Inequitable Discipline Experiences of Urban Black Girls," *supra* note 7, at 93).

9 Blake et al., "Unmasking the Inequitable Discipline Experiences of Urban Black Girls," *supra* note 7, at 93.

Again, consistent with our initial research findings that reflect the existence of adultification bias affecting girls aged 5-9 years old, focus group participants described experiences in their earliest days in school.

“At the preschool point is where teachers are starting to feel like ... ‘Black girls are a **little too sassy.**” (Age group 18-29)

Many participants believed that educators’ reliance on this stereotype bias leads to over-disciplining Black girls. In fact, the “angry” caricature traditionally has been associated with lack of sympathy and an assumption that punishment is warranted.¹⁰

“[A] Black girl, if she’s right, and she wants to argue about something, **she’s always labelled as, like, angry.** And especially when it came to teachers and stuff. I would see people like debating with teachers and they would **always automatically get into trouble. Because like she has ‘attitude.’** [But] ... she’s just like trying to prove that she’s right. And ... you can just tell that [to teachers,] automatically, she’s, like, in the wrong, just because.” (Age group 17-23)

“[There’s] this idea that, like, **punishment is the best way to respond ... when Black girls ... make a mistake.**” (Age group 30-39)

Participants observed that teachers escalate the effects of this stereotype by engaging in exaggerated responses to Black girls, inappropriately perceiving them as a threat to their authority or even physically intimidating.

“[T]he teacher would say she felt threatened, you know, by me expressing myself in a classroom; like, I was, like, overpowering her when a — a outspoken white person would be [viewed as], ‘Oh, they’re intelligent,’ you know?” (Age group 20-29)

“[I]f a Black girl ... raised a different perspective — like ... I remember saying, ‘I’m not sure that I agree with that,’ or, ‘That doesn’t make sense to me because ...’ — then it’s like, **because it’s a Black girl raising the idea, now it’s perceived with a tinge of just challenging authority.**” (Age group 17-23)

“[I] had [a] teacher come and run into my classroom. **She was afraid that the [Black] girls were getting ready to get in a fight. They were just screwing with each other, but** ... I’ve seen ... adults send kids out of the classroom on disciplinary matters for real simple things that could have very easily [been resolved]” (Age group 60+)

“[T]he minute that the teacher think[s] that you’re ... you’re sassing them — the minute that they think that you’re just being ... rude, they just send you out the classroom. And **they’ll send the security guards** to deal with you. Or they walk out the classroom with you to go talk to you.” (Age group 13-18)

10 EPSTEIN ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 5–6 (citing Edward W. Morris, “Ladies” or “Loudies”? Perceptions and Experiences of Black Girls in Classrooms, 38 YOUTH & SOC’Y 490 (2007)).

Stereotype: Hypersexualized Black Woman

The caricature of the “**Jezebel**,” which portrays Black women as promiscuous,¹¹ may serve as another contributing factor to adultification bias. This theme arose in our focus groups, where participants overwhelmingly confirmed that adults hypersexualize Black girls. They described incidents in which adults assumed that Black girls are sexually active at an early age and that they are generally less innocent than their white peers.

“Most of my friends were abstinent, didn’t drink ... but even still, there was, like, **this assumption that we did**; you know?” (Age group 20-29)

Several participants related stories of being hypersexualized by school employees, in particular.

“In ... **sixth grade, ... the school nurse, like, ask[ed] my aunt if I was sexually active** And I was, like, at the time, like, what? Like, what? Nobody has sex. Like, I didn’t know anyone that had sex. And it was so crazy to me. And then just thinking, like, she would never think to ask my [white] friend that.” (Age group 20-29)

“**[Teachers assume that] the reason I’m wearing like short shorts ... is because like I wanna ... like ... get all the guys.**” (Age group 13-17)

“[T]here was ... like, this assumption, like, ‘Oh, you probably be cutting up at school. **You probably be cussing people out, you been drinking, you had sex yet?**’ ... [But, since I’d never thought about that before, they were basically] introducing me to these topics right [then]!” (Age group 20-29)

Participants traced the roots of hypersexualization to the United States’ legacy of slavery and racism and the role that Black women and girls were expected to play as slaves, which they felt is echoed in today’s environment.

“We got to put this in, like, historical context **The slave trade [demanded] that Black girls be adults and hold the sexual fantasies of the master**, hold the sexual fantasies of the other Black men ... on the slave plantation. We had to cook, we had to clean, we had to pick the cotton **This was about commodification ... of Black girls’ bodies and the way that we need to be used to make money for this country**” (Age group 30-39)

“I sense it’s a slavery perception when it comes to [Black girls] Back in the day ... young women were sold because of their bodies or what they had, and I think with the culture and certain people and—and political rants have been bringing back these—these notorious ideas, um, **it’s just bringing slavery back with a different face.**” (Age group 60+)

11 *Id.* at 5 (citing Blake et al., *supra* note 7, at 93).



Finding

Adults Attempt to Enforce Traditional White Norms of Femininity on Black Girls.

Participants identified a unique consequence of projecting stereotypes of Black women as angry or hypersexualized onto Black girls: adults attempt to change Black girls' behavior to be more passive. Such attempts to ensure that Black girls conform with traditional white norms of "ladylike" behavior send Black girls the message that they should be **less visible, toned down**, and take up less space. These norms are enforced through school discipline as well as within communities.

"When you're a Black girl, they want you to just be there and—and they barely want you to be there, but **they just want you [not] to . . . stand out**, whereas white girls get that privilege where they [do]" (Age group 20-29)

"I've experienced people across, like, schools, church, everywhere, like telling me to be quiet; right? That the appropriate thing for me to do is **be softer and quieter**, um, in an attempt, I think, to keep me from — **they were trying to help ... me [from] being, like, associated with a angry Black woman.**" (Age group 30-39)

"They just wanna shut us off. They just want us to be—be quiet ... whenever we start to talk, nothing's happening." (Age group 13-18)

These messages are sent early.

"[I]n so many ways **we're told to be smaller, quieter, lighter, prettier** You see that play out in middle school a lot." (Age group 30-39)

Finding

Adultification Bias Can Lead Educators to Treat Black Girls in Developmentally Inappropriate Ways.

Participants with experience as educators observed that their colleagues often engage in **developmentally inappropriate** approaches to Black girls in school settings.

"I'm brand new at my job [as a teacher], so I'm still meeting kids and trying to feel out the teachers and how they interact with the students, **and a lot of what I've been getting about certain girls is like, 'Oh, that one has attitude' or 'This one is really tough,' and it's, like, actually, she's 12 and she's working through life.**" (Age group 30-39)

"[I]t's like this ... labeling of ... being the—the problem kid or just, like, having attitude and being so rough and having a wall up [when it] **is actually, like, she's a child reacting like a child would** to someone pushing on her" (Age group 30-39)

Many participants expressed concern about this result and advocated for educators and law enforcement — groups that wield significant authority over Black girls' lives — to instead respond to Black girls as the children they are.

"I think that ... adults in general need to ... be reminded that **Black young girls are still kids.**" (Age group 13-17)

"[T]hose professionals, whether they're in education, whether they're probation officers, you know, they need to **make sure that they know the capabilities of the age level** that they're dealing with." (Age group 30+)

Finding

Adults Have Less Empathy for Black Girls than their White Peers, who are Viewed as More Innocent and in Need of Protection and Comforting.

Participants contrasted perceptions of Black girls as angry and threatening to the treatment of white girls. In the eyes of many participants, white girls are seen as more innocent and vulnerable and elicit a more protective response.

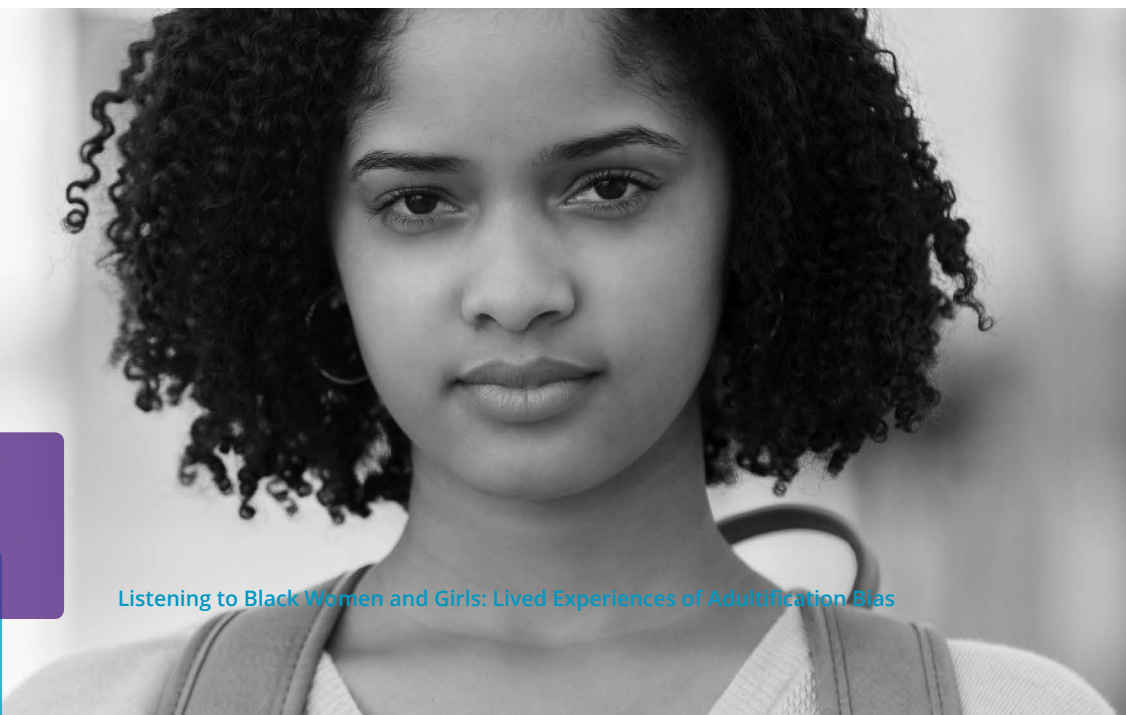
"If you see, like, a little white girl that's crying, people will be more sympathetic than if you see a little Black girl that's crying. You don't have that same level of empathy for them because it's just like, okay; like, I feel bad for this little ... white person **because her tears carry more value than this Black girl's.**" (Age group 20-29)

"I feel like white girls — like younger white girls — **I think a lot of people associate them with innocence a lot. And then Black girls don't get the innocence that we deserve We're still innocent.**" (Age group 17-23)

"But to society, **we're not innocent. And white girls are always innocent.**" (Age group 17-23)

"And I think that since the society we live in is predominately white ... Black girls ... are ... outside of that like majority community We don't have **the benefit also of having the empathy.**" (Age group 17-23)

"[W]hen you age them [Black girls], you're in a sense **taking away their innocence**, and you're not giving them, like, the youthfulness that you associate with, like, a nine-year-old who's white; you know?" (Age group 20-29)



Finding

Socialized Adultification Contributes to Adultification Bias.

The topic of socialized adultification arose frequently in our focus groups. This phenomenon is distinct from the stereotyping that was central to our adultification-bias inquiry. Socialized adultification has been studied extensively by researchers who have found that when youth — particularly youth in low-income families — assume adult-like roles of responsibility to meet family needs, such as caregivers or wage-earners, these children may prematurely acquire adult knowledge, behave more maturely, and display greater resilience than their peers. In other words, they effectively learn to behave in ways that can be perceived as more adult-like than their actual developmental stage.¹²

Many of our focus group participants reinforced this notion, describing the adult-like roles that they were expected to play in their own families that had a maturing effect on them, as well as the need to behave more independently as a result of socioeconomic pressures.

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- 12 Linda M. Burton et al., *Childhood Adultification and the Paradox of Parenting: Perspectives on African American Boys in Economically Disadvantaged Families*, in *FAMILY PROBLEMS: STRESS, RISK, AND RESILIENCE* 167–82 (Joyce A. Arditti ed., 2014) (discussing adultification as a parenting “paradox” that poses a developmental conflict between children’s need for adult nurturing and care, and the need for children — specifically black boys — to be mature providers at an early age); Linda Burton, *Childhood Adultification in Economically Disadvantaged Families: A Conceptual Model*, in *56 FAMILY RELATIONS* 329–45 (2007) (presenting conceptual model of childhood adultification that involves contextual, social, and development processes in which children are prematurely exposed to adult knowledge and assume adult roles and responsibilities in their family and home life, leading to less child-appropriate care and nurturing).

“Black girls in poor families do have to grow up. It’s about socioeconomics, too. It’s not just about ... being Black.” (Age group 20-29)

“[T]he girls that I work with, like, a lot of them are left at home to take care of, like, five other brothers and sisters ...” (Age group 30-39)

“[I]f Black girls are in] foster care — they have to take care of themselves They have to. Like, they have no choice. For them, it seems like they’re being independent.” (Age group 17-23)

Some participants discussed the positive effects of resilience and other assets that result from being socialized to take on more adult roles. Others believed that it sacrificed some aspects of their childhood. Some, for example, remembered restraining their conduct to conform to the expectation that Black girls should not behave in the lighthearted way that is expected of other children, for fear that doing so could lead to punitive consequences.

“I did have to grow up quicker, but that — that wasn’t necessarily, like, fair to me.” (Age group 20-29)

"So there's this honor with it So, like, no, we don't have time to cry. Like, you get your night to ... cry, and then you have to get up the next day and you have to just keep it moving because **that's what Black women are supposed to do.**" (Age group 30-39)

"[Someone told me,] 'I couldn't come to school today because **I was watching the kids.**' I'm like, **'[But] you're one of them; like, you're a kid.'**" (Age group 30-39)

"[W]hat some people don't understand is that sometimes ... **it's a natural instinct to let that mature side out of us, instead of allowing them to always see us in our goofy, happy side because that's not always a good thing ...**" (Age group 18-29)

"I guess **we're taught to work hard. And so maybe they see that as being grown.** Because ... **we shouldn't be doing that at our age. But ... we have to work for it ... more.**" (Age group 13-17)

"The way Black girls are raised is to be independent. And be like go-getters to get what you want for yourself. **But it's like ... white girls, they [have] things handed down to them. They get it the easy way. So, it's like — they don't have to struggle the way that Black people are struggling.**" (Age group 17-23)

"My mom told me, like, if you get pregnant, it's a wrap for you, like, as early as nine. I didn't even know what sex was. But the stakes were just that high **because of poverty and because of racism and because of sexism.**" (Age group 30-39)

Participants also observed that families and communities intentionally instill maturity, strength, and independence in Black girls as tools to help them counteract the structural and intersectional racism they will face. Participants noted that Black women, in particular, pass down to their daughters the expectation that that they will experience adultification bias and teach their girls to behave more like adults in response, as a proactive and protective means of helping Black girls thrive despite societal and structural inequities.

"[O]ur parents ... are trying to fit into a context where we can **survive under a system of incredible bias; right?**" (Age group 30-39)

"[I] wonder if this is ... a **cyclical** way of it playing out. Like, if you are a Black woman or child and you have experienced the impact of making a mistake or, like, how you're perceived by the external world and you don't feel that you could make a mistake, then you're going to feel **you're passing wisdom and strength onto your daughter ... to have them be able to endure the same things.** So ... to me, it seems like ... it plays out in a child. [I]n parenting, like, it's passing on love for me to tell you, like, 'Pretty much you're going to be perceived this way.'" (Age group 30-39)



Participants observed that Black girls are expected to be strong and withstand any form of adversity. They cited those expectations as factors that contribute to adultification bias. And while they acknowledged that an expectation of strength and resilience can have a positive effect on children, they also emphasized that when unequally applied to Black girls, it can be used to justify inappropriate treatment and unfairly imposed burdens.

"Yeah, Black girls, we're supposed to be strong, **we're supposed to take on everything.**" (Age group 20-29)

"[I]t's literally explicit in terms of, like, **'[B]e strong'** ... Those messages, like, around adulthood are, I think, really clearly communicated [to Black girls] versus boys" (Age group 30-39)

Participants also observed another powerful cycle: when Black girls do behave maturely, adults may be more likely to mistakenly view such behavior as evidence that the girls do not need protection or nurturing. Mature behavior, in other words, can effectively mask girls' actual developmental stage and lead to inappropriate responses to Black girls that do not align with their age.

"I feel like part of it was about me being Black and like how we carry ourself. Like, in the hallways, we might feel like, 'Oh, I don't need nobody to tell me what to do.' Because like I have my — like I'm my own person and I don't need nobody to tell me what to do. **But like the teachers may think, 'Oh, yeah. She thinks that she knows everything. So we feel like we don't need to protect her.'**" (Age group 13-17)

"I think it's unfair. Because like maybe some people at our schools look at it like, 'Oh, yeah; she's fast. **Then I'm gonna treat her how she acts.**' But, really, we don't know. **We're still kids trying to still grow up and learn from our mistakes.** And they're ... like they're accusing girls ... they're accusing us. And **so I think that we still have a lot of learning to do, and we shouldn't be like treated as adults.**" (Age group 13-17)

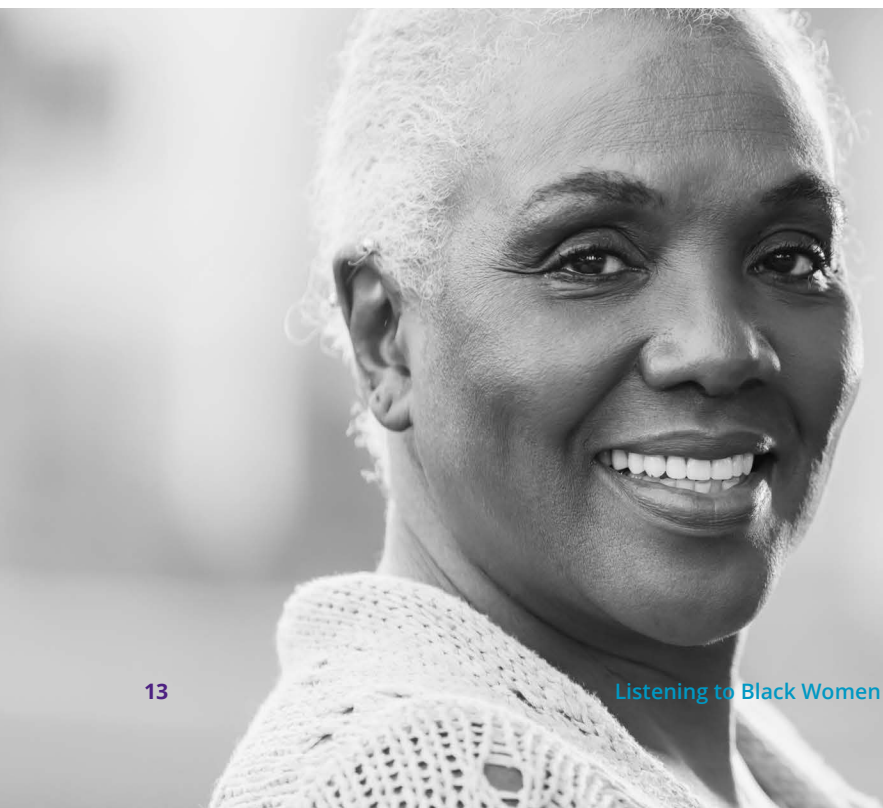
Some participants, including those who were educators, confirmed this effect, noting that they and their colleagues treat Black girls who behave maturely as older than they are.

"I've watched, you know, teachers, and counselors, and these people get into these power struggles with these girls, because ... it's like, **'I forget that she's 10,** because when I asked her to do so and so ... **she responded like an adult. And so how do — how do I treat this child like a child?'**" (Age group 30+)

Others expressed concern about treating Black girls as older than they are:

"[J]ust because they may look older ... just because they're slightly more mature, you can't expect more out of this seven-year-old African-American Black girl as you can [out of] this Caucasian seven-year-old. **They're both seven. They both have the same brain development** One might have seen more things than the other... I think that's what gets lost" (Age group 13-17)

"[As a teacher, y]ou want to challenge them, if you know they are smart, but by the same token, **you've got to remember: 'Oh, okay, this is a child** that I'm dealing with, no matter, you know, what she may have seen, or what she's been able to deal with, um, you know, **she's still a child.**" (Age group 30+)





Solutions

We asked focus group participants for their suggestions to help overcome adultification bias against Black girls.

Their input was wide-ranging, but one main theme was that awareness of adultification bias alone will be insufficient to overcome its effects. Instead, participants felt that change can only emerge through meaningful reforms such as training in cultural competency, developmentally appropriate approaches, and improved communication skills, which will lead to deeper understanding and empathy.

Finding: Solution 1

Participants Predominantly Felt that Meaningful Change Requires Action in Addition to Awareness.

Several participants voiced hope that our research and its resulting awareness of adultification bias can help overcome bias and inspire adults to reconsider their actions that are rooted in bias.

"[Y]eah, maybe it might encourage someone [Even] if it does something even very small like convince the teacher, 'Oh, **maybe I ... see this person being attitudinal 'cause I have a bias.** Maybe I won't call the superintendent.'" (Age group 17-23)

"[I]t's an important, like, first step to have this report — as a part of the narrative I think ... making the narrative public ... is, like, **step one.**" (Age group 30-39)

However, the majority of participants remained skeptical that awareness of adultification is insufficient in itself to overcome that bias. Those who voiced this opinion felt that bias and racism are forces that are simply too strong to be conquered only by reading research results—in part because, by definition, those who harbor intersectional racism do not care about or listen to Black girls. Instead, people must recognize their own biases and take action to create change in response to research.



"It's probably not going to change in a classroom **because they're not getting the proper training** or they don't really know how to deal with inner city kids or even ones in their neighborhoods because they're not exposed [inaudible]; **they're still going to have their preconceived notions"** (Age group 20-29)

"I don't really think it's going to change ... the outside people because ... they don't really care. **They don't care** that they do this to Black girls." (Age group 20-29)

"[I]t all starts, like, with ... how they see the world and how they see things. So **some people, they don't take that information and really think — sit back and think, hey, how do I actually, you know, do I actually do this? Let me think about how I interact with these students.** Some people don't see it that way. They just see it as, hmm, okay, they're telling me this information, but **that probably applies to somebody else** because I don't do that." (Age group 20-29)

"You can't stop somebody from being racist with data. What this will do is help me win the argument ... [but that] is different than getting them to do something about the problem." (Age group 30-39)

Finding: Solution 2

Improved Cultural Competency and Gender-Responsiveness Can Help Educators and Other Authorities Better Understand Black Girls and Address Bias or Lack of Cross-Cultural Experience.

A central theme in identifying solutions for change was the need for trainings on gender-responsiveness, in which the realities of girls' lives are understood and addressed effectively,¹³ and cultural competency, in which varying cultural and community norms of students and their families are learned and built on.¹⁴

"[S]ome of the teachers that are teaching in the public schools grew up in areas where they **never experienced a Black person** until they got to college. And, so, they ... really didn't know how to interact. And ... there would be times when a teacher would be really intimidated by a middle school Black child, especially females." (Age group 60+)

"Simple things ... somehow become **perceived to be weaponized** by people who — well, I guess, **people who just don't understand Black girls.**" (Age group 17-23)

"I'm not aware of my prejudices, and ... other people are not either, so something has to happen that will **identify what our prejudices are**, especially when it comes to teachers teaching 15-year-old girls, that, uh, will make them be able to, uh, discover what it is about this 15-year-old girl that they feel is aggressive, and very expressive, and why it intimidates me for them to be that way." (Age group 60+)



13 Stephanie S. Covington, *Helping Women Recover: Creating Gender-Responsive Treatment*, in *The Handbook of Addiction Treatment for Women* 52 (Shulamith Lala Ashenberg Straussner & Stephanie Brown eds., 2002).

14 *Why Cultural Competence?*, Nat'l Educ. Ass'n, <http://www.nea.org/home/39783.htm> (last visited May 1, 2019).

Finding: Solution 3

Training on Communication with Black Girls Can De-escalate Incidents and Reduce Over-Discipline.

Participants discussed the importance of communication as a means of improving interactions between authorities and Black girls. Specifically, they believed that better communication would lead to more accurate interpretations and understanding between teachers and students, which could help avoid inappropriate disciplinary responses.

"[W]hen I was, uh, counselor/dean, I got a lot of kids that were sent up. They would be sent down to my office on a pink slip, a disciplinary slip; **it really wasn't a disciplinary situation. It was a communication thing.**" (Age group 60+)

Finding: Solution 4

Educators and Other Authorities Should be Trained to Interact with Black Girls with Empathy and Respect and to Use Developmentally Appropriate Approaches.

Another key solution that participants identified to overcome adultification bias was to help authorities utilize developmentally appropriate responses and, more generally, to increase their understanding of and respect for Black girls.

"Make [teachers] think about their kids being in our situation, and maybe they'll really see how we really feel, and **not just seeing ... us — as being angry.** Cause I'm sure that they wouldn't like their kid being treated this way, so I feel as though you have to treat people the way you want to be treated. So if you want to be respected, you have to respect us and our morals, too." (Age group 18-29)

"She's a child. That's why she's crying. She's a child. You know, ... she might be a very smart child, but still her brain has only developed so much. So, you do have to kind of sit back and think, **give them the benefit of their age.**" (Age group 30+)



Conclusion

We are grateful to the women and girls who gave their time and thought to engaging in rich dialogue and sharing their experiences of adultification bias. The focus groups provided key validation of our initial research findings, rooting our survey of adultification bias in the context of lived experience.

Most importantly, these Black women and girls lent a rich sense of urgency to the work of overcoming stereotypes and, in particular, adultification bias. Their message rings true: data alone cannot change history. It is our collective responsibility to take action when research reveals unacceptable truths.

We must develop and provide culturally competent, gender-responsive, and developmentally appropriate systems of support for Black girls to ensure that we provide what all children deserve and need: the freedom to make mistakes, the safety of support and understanding, and a nurturing environment. The Center on Poverty is committed to remaining an active participant in this work.

In the words of one young participant:

*"As teenagers, we still need to be protected. Because we go to school and they're supposed to like watch over us and also teach us. And like teach us from rights and wrongs. So I feel like, **as teenagers, we still should be cared for and taught wrong or right.** And it doesn't matter if we're ... Black." (Age group 13-17)*



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www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-inequality-center/gender-justice-and-opportunity