Kamala the First? Breaking barriers — it’s complicated

It’s not enough to bring in a first leader of color and throw a party. What are you doing to support them?

President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris stood with their spouses, Dr. Jill Biden and Douglas Emhoff, after addressing the nation from the Chase Center Saturday in Wilmington, Delaware, following their win in the 2020 presidential election. POOL/GETTY

Her mother gave her a guiding principle: “You may be the first to do many things, but make sure you’re not the last.”
Now, Kamala Harris is the first Black woman to be vice president-elect of the United States. The first woman of South Asian descent. The first woman of Jamaican descent. The first Madam Vice President, period.

We’re partying now, but will we show her the kind of love that means active support later?

We talk a lot about listening, but this country does very little to support Black women and women of color.

What will we do on a local level to provide her support on the Hill? What will President Joe Biden do, what will the staff around Harris do to support her as the racists continue to come for her, as the scrutiny hits harder than it would for a white man?

When it comes to being a person of color in leadership, be it political or corporate, there is a celebration. Even when it’s not a first, representation is so rare it’s hard to not be excited by even painfully slow progress.

According to the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, in 2018, Black professionals held just over 3 percent of the executive and senior leadership roles in corporate America. Congress, the most diverse it has ever been, is still about 80 percent white.

The ceiling is a cinderblock. So with every crack and crumble, we rightfully rally.

“These trailblazers should be celebrated. You can’t imagine you belong there if you don’t see faces like yours,” says Diana Hwang, political and organizing director of She the People, a national network of women of color working to transform our democracy.
“But it’s a lot to carry. There is an assumption that is put on you no matter what, because when we see someone who looks like us in a place where we usually don’t, it’s like, ‘Oh my God, I feel seen.’”

Diana Hwang, founder of Asian American Women’s Political Initiative and political and organizing director with She the People. HANDOUT

But we’re so busy thinking about what their job means to us, we don’t think about what comes after the party. Be it Kamala Harris or the everyday woman of color leading in her profession, they are often in mostly white spaces.
Where you’re making cultural change, hate often follows.

Black women and women of color regularly experience workplace racism. According to Leanin.org’s 2018 Women in the Workplace report, 42 percent of Black women are made to prove their competence more than others.

In systems that weren’t built for people of color, Hwang says we have to make a shift.

“To ensure a culture that values social justice and diversity, it has to go beyond one hire. It’s a systemic thing. In order to really make systemic change, it requires white people give up a little power,” Hwang said.

Hwang’s first job was at the State House. She was the only Asian American in the building. In 2006, she founded Asian American Women’s Political Initiative (AAWPI) to build entry points to government leadership through opportunity, mentorship, and building bridges across communities of color.

For her, seeing state Senator Sonia Chang-Díaz was a game changer. Cultivating a coalition of support for women in leadership makes a difference.

Another show of support: Stop exalting the few who rise to power, says Natanja Craig-Oquendo, executive director of the Boston Women’s Fund. It creates a myth about those who don’t.
“There are so many talented and creative women who could be sitting in this seat moving this organization forward,” she said. “I know I will work hard for us but I don’t think I’m unique. I think the problem is we look at these hires as unique when there are 20,000 of us in this city alone who could do the job.”

Looking at the less than 1 percent of Black Fortune 500 CEOs and the small pool of corporate leaders of color as lone talent gives companies a gold star for lazy inclusion.
“My hope is that I make some systemic and transformational change for my community,” Craig-Oquendo said. “I don’t think I am going to put on my cape and do this by myself. We talk a lot about moving the needle, but that takes amplifying the voices that are not being heard.”

With her hope, there’s fear — one she’s faced in her 20-year career as a nonprofit leader.

First comes celebration, followed often by delegitimization.

“When you are a proud, Black woman, that can be misconstrued for being anti-something. We can be proud in our identity without being anti. I can be pro-Black without being anti-white. I think there is a misunderstanding and some conscious thinking that needs to be done in that space.”

Corporate culture has to understand advocating for underserved communities is not a threat to them. It’s work they should take part in.
Rosa Rodriguez-Williams is the MFA's new senior director of belonging and inclusion. COURTESY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

When the Museum of Fine Arts hired its first senior director of belonging and inclusion, Rosa Rodriguez-Williams, she knew her role was one part of creating change, not a fix-all. In her years of doing inclusion work, she’s seen the limited perceptions of it.
“When positions like this are created, it has to be part of the intentional work,” she said. “I think when dominant culture, when white folks look at me, there’s this feeling like there are answers and I have all of them. And I may or may not. But I think a lot of the time, it takes pushing back a little bit on that and saying, ‘You are also part of what is happening here.’”

We have to stop normalizing that pressure of do-it-all for the job and the community.

Resting on the first and the few to fix it all will burn them out. Not only does it create a tunnel of tokenism, it leads to punitive racist stereotypes. It allows biased bosses to believe if one person of color did more for less, or did a bad job, others will, too. That doesn’t happen to mediocre white men.

A lot of these pressures — alongside a lack of diversity — feed impostor syndrome. Rodriguez-Williams said it requires a lot of courage to get over the stigma that chips away at one’s confidence.

“Sometimes you are brought in as leadership and it can come off as a quota or as your voice is not included,” says Rodriguez-Williams. “When you look around the room, look at who is being heard, not just seen. Providing support and space for growth is important for leaders of color.”

Shyamala Gopalan taught her daughter, our Madam Vice President-elect, to hold the door open for everyone behind her. I believe Harris will, like so many leaders of color do, lift as she climbs.

But we can’t keep expecting people of color in power to solve racism.
We shouldn't have to count on someone opening a door to ensure Kamala the First won't be Madam Vice President the Last. Inclusion has to be the norm, not a magic unicorn.


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