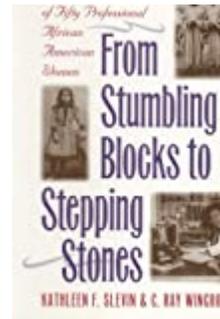


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kathleen F. Slevin, C. Ray Wingrove. *From Stumbling Blocks to Stepping Stones: The Life Experiences of Fifty Professional African American Women.* New York: New York University Press, 1998. 187 pp. \$17.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-8100-5.



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Growing up black and female in a segregated and racist United States does not necessarily translate into working in white women's kitchens, being on welfare, or finding oneself entrapped in poverty, though many African American women did indeed fall into these categories. Their stories have been well documented in scholarly literature and the media. The average citizen is more likely to hear of welfare queens bilking the government of taxpayers' hard earned money than of the African American women who succeeded in spite of the odds against them. In *From Stumbling Blocks to Stepping Stones: The Life Experiences of Fifty Professional African American Women*, sociologists Kathleen F. Slevin and C. Ray Wingrove introduce and discuss the lives of African American women who refused to accept the roles assigned to them because of their color.

Slevin and Wingrove, two white sociologists, studied the lives of fifty African American women whom they interviewed in 1993 and 1994. All of the women were retired professionals ranging in age from fifty-three to eighty-seven. With one exception all were college educated. Twenty-four earned masters' degrees and another nine obtained their doctorates. They worked in a variety of positions—educators, public servants, medicine, and self-employment. All lived in Virginia and all were intimately familiar with segregation. The authors attempt

to explain the professional and financial success of these women by investigating their backgrounds and collective experiences.

The authors examine the lessons these women learned during their formative years from their families and communities – lessons that empowered them not only to resist racism but to survive it. Examples abound as to how parents and other adults enabled them to grow into strong and independent women. Parents advised their daughters to “avoid hurtful whites,” to “be the best,” and to “pick your battles.” In addition, parents told them that they were “as good as anybody else,” and to “always be economically independent” (pp. 25-26). The black community at large re-enforced the lessons learned at home and prepared the young women for life in a world that could be cold, threatening, and uncaring. “Their identities as African American women were forged within a milieu that stressed the common good, that accentuated the importance of ‘giving back’ to one’s community, that showed them that women had a special place in and responsibility for sustaining the community” (p. 48).

The black church was also important in shaping the women's lives. One woman claimed “the community came through the door into the church and the church went out the door into the community” (p. 51). The

church provided more than religious education. It was the one institution completely controlled by blacks and it was where black youth received opportunities not given anywhere else. They found mentors, role models, and a supportive environment where they could gain leadership skills and hone their speaking and writing abilities. The church also served as an important social outlet for black youth. Education was almost as important as the church. Although not as independent as the black church, the school was a major institution in the black community and teachers were highly respected. In fact, several of the women in this study were teachers. Slevin and Wingrove relate the tremendous sacrifices both parents and students made to ensure a good education.

The authors devote the first four chapters to the black family, community, church and school and describe how these institutions all worked in conjunction by teaching and re-enforcing the same morals, values, and survival skills. All four shaped and prepared the young women included in the volume for the success they found in a society that discriminated against blacks and women.

In a chapter entitled “The World of Work: Making it the Hard Way,” the authors describe the environment in which their subjects worked and how race, class and gender limited their choices and opportunities. Forty-seven of the fifty women began their career before the modern civil rights and women’s liberation movements. Those working in an all black environment found a degree of protection from the glaring racism, but it usually meant inadequate facilities and supplies, and unequal salaries. Unfortunately, while working separately from whites provided a cushion against the racism, it did nothing to diminish sexism. They suffered in the same manner as white women working in a white patriarchal environment. The black women noted that they received less pay for doing more work and were denied advancement opportunities because of their gender. The other three women began their professional careers in the 1960s and did not encounter the same degree of racism and sexism. They benefitted from changes resulting from the women’s rights and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Slevin and Wingrove state that these women “faced fewer structural constraints, because the most blatant forms of economic oppression of minorities had been reduced” (p. 116), yet they conclude that racial and gender discriminations were real concerns in the work environment of both groups of women. The difference was in the “extent or degree of discrimination” (p. 118). In the post 1960s Africans Americans and women were more likely to openly challenge racism and sexism.

Much of the information gleaned from the first five chapters of this book is familiar to scholars of African American women’s and African American history. There is no doubt that being black and female shaped the life and work experiences of the women involved. However, several of the authors’ conclusions about the lessons these women learned during their formative years can be applied to black men, white women, and to any number of minorities.

Slevin and Wingrove make an important contribution in Chapter Six, “Free at Last: Surviving and Thriving in Retirement.” They challenge sociologist Jacquelyne Jackson’s contention that “older Black American women are resistant to retirement because it is only in paid work that they can find status and meaning in their lives” (p. 6). Collectively, the fifty women included in this work conclude that “life in retirement is good” (p. 123). Early financial planning allowed them freedom, financial security, and a comfortable lifestyle. Nevertheless, retirement did not necessarily mean a life of frivolous leisure. They traveled, took continuing education courses, remained involved in civic, professional and community organizations, and generally remained active. More important, they continued to give back to the African American community. The freedom and flexibility that came with retirement allowed these women to contribute their knowledge and skills to others. As volunteers they read to young children, worked with teenagers, and served as mentors.

Although the women studied were happily retired and considered themselves privileged, “the long arm of gender and racial victimization,” Slevin and Wingrove contended, still reached “from their past lives into the present. It is true that they are privileged, but not as much as they might have been had they been White and male. Given their educational achievements and their years in the labor force, they should be even more financially comfortable and secure than they are” (p. 148).

Slevin and Wingrove are obviously, and rightfully, enamored with the women they interviewed. They argue that their subjects are pioneers and should serve as role models for both present and future generations. It is important to remember, however, that the fifty women highlighted in *From Stumbling Blocks to Stepping Stones* represent literally thousands of women who have similar stories to tell, women who endured and survived sexism from their own men, and racism and sexism in the larger community, and women who worked in white households and were subject to sexual abuse. They survived

because the communities in which they were reared gave them the tools to do so. What is it about these women's life stories that make them so different from thousands of other African American women? How do they differ from Osceola McCarty, the washer woman, who saved and contributed more than \$100,000 to the University of Southern Mississippi for the education of black women? The authors, hint at, but never actually tell us.

Kate Slevin and C. Ray Wingrove seem almost apologetic for being whites who examine the intimate and personal lives of African American women. Their attempt, in the appendix, personally to identify with the racism

and sexism experienced by their subjects diminishes their work. Yet, Slevin and Wingrove have put together a very readable account of the life and work experiences of fifty successful African American women. They carefully examine the factors that led to their success and the often seemingly insurmountable barriers of race, class and gender that they had to overcome. They seemed more surprised with their findings than did this reviewer.

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