

# **The Impenetrable Ceiling: Professional Advancement for Minorities and Women in the Library Profession**

**By Katy Shaw**

*“It’s in the self-interest of the profession to redress the barriers and to shift to a workforce diverse in all levels of positions from the line to the senior management levels. A multicultural workforce, diverse at all levels, can only enhance our productivity and creativity.”* —Rhonda Rios Kravitz, 2000

The last few decades have witnessed an increased focus on racial diversity (or the lack thereof) in America’s libraries. In an ongoing effort to diversify the workforce of America’s libraries, many organizations within the profession have instituted programs designed to encourage multiculturalism. The programs are gradually beginning to work. Although people of color are still woefully underrepresented in the field of librarianship, the numbers for minorities in the library profession are slowly on the rise.

Once in the profession, though, many librarians of color are finding it difficult to attain more prestigious and higher paying jobs. They are discovering what women in the profession have known for years—that a disproportionate number of top managerial positions in the library profession are held by white men. Clearly, more work needs to be done to remove the barriers to professional advancement for minorities and women. In an effort to explore the professional difficulties encountered by librarians of color, this paper will first examine the struggle of women to break through the “glass ceiling” to top managerial positions. Second, I will look at the perceptions of librarians of color about racism in the workplace. If minorities and women are ever to going to experience true equality in the library profession, people need to be aware of the extra challenges faced by these historically disadvantaged groups.

The library profession has historically been predominated by women—and it has not escaped the notice of those women that the few men in the profession tend to be in top managerial positions. In the last few decades, more research has focused on the professional advancement of women within the profession—especially in academic libraries. In their 1991 article “Gender-Based Factors Contributing to the Selection of University Administrators,” Kathleen M. Heim and Anna Perrault found that “nine out of ten times, the individual chosen for a top administrative position in higher education is a male” (p. 377). More recent statistics are more encouraging. In 2002, Pat Gannon-Leary and Sandra Parker published the results from a study commissioned by the 66<sup>th</sup> IFLA conference in an article entitled “The Round Table on Women’s Issues Snapshot Project: The Status of Women in Libraries, Internationally.” They found that “there is now the highest number of women in top administrative positions than there has been before: 54 women out of a total 111 directorships” (p. 17). Despite the gains, the numbers are still not representative of the profession as a whole since “overall, men represent only 35 percent of the workforce among professional librarians” (Gannon-Leary & Parker, p. 17).

Discrimination against women has also taken the form of lower salaries. Gannon-Leary and Parker report that although “during the 19 years that statistics have been gathered women have been gradually closing the earnings gap,” the unfortunate fact remains that “the overall salary for women in research and academic libraries in the USA was still only 94 percent that of men” (p. 17). To make matters worse, salaries within the library profession tend to be lower than professions that are generally male-dominated. In her book *Librarianship: The Erosion of a Woman’s Profession*, Roma Harris attributes this to the fact that the profession is “female-intensive” and points out that the same

problems occur in other female-dominated professions such as nursing and social work. Roma claims that “with the exception of the highest status positions, that is, those that are often filled by men, there is little value assigned to most of the jobs undertaken in the female-intensive fields. One of the major reasons for this is that it is widely assumed that women’s work can be done by anyone because it requires little in the way of special skills” (1992, p. 28).

The literature on ethnic minorities within librarianship, on the other hand, has largely focused on simply recruiting more people of color into the profession. In her article “Library Schools and Diversity: Who Makes the Grade,” Kathleen de la Pena McCook and Kate Lippincott argue that “despite an intense commitment, the library and information science profession has failed to truly diversify its ranks” (1997, p. 30).

Although the number of minority graduates from programs accredited by the ALA has grown from 178 (6.7% total graduates) in 1985 to 434 (10.01%) in 1995, “still all minorities but Asian/Pacific Islanders remain significantly underrepresented among 1995 graduates relative to their population at large,” (p. 30).

Now that the number of librarians of color is on the rise, people are starting to take note that few minorities occupy upper management positions. Dr. E. J. Josey, the founder of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association and a former president of the ALA, has been a longtime advocate for librarians of color. In an article co-authored with Ismail Abdullahi entitled “Why Diversity in American Libraries,” Josey asserts that “...while many libraries have begun to employ minorities and women in places where before there were none, we find that the minorities by and large are at the entry-level positions” (2002, p. 13). Cynthia Preston echoes this sentiment in her article

“Perceptions of Discriminatory Attitudes: A Survey of African American Librarians.”

She points out that “...many blacks in the library profession today are disillusioned with the path their careers are taking. Some find themselves reaching mid-level management positions only to find that the ‘climb up the ladder of success’ stops at the middle rung” (1998, p. 435).

Librarians of color face unique challenges that their white colleagues often are not aware of. In his article “Yassuh! I’s the Reference Librarian!” Patrick Hall discusses the frustration he felt when patrons repeatedly sought out white librarians to confirm answers that he had already given them. Hall concludes the article with the statement that “from a practical standpoint, I and most other black librarians enjoy our work, but the library establishments for which we work must be cognizant for the special situations minority librarians face in performing our duties—situations that are not faced by our white colleagues” (1988, p. 901).

In order to ascertain professional difficulties faced by minority librarians, two different surveys have been conducted in the past five years to determine how librarians of color perceive racism in the workplace. The results of the first survey, published by Rhonda Rios Kravitz in the article “Battling the Adobe Ceiling: Barriers to Professional Advancement for Academic Librarians of Color,” reports the results of a 1995 survey of academic librarians. The purpose of the survey was to “identify the perceived barriers that have blocked the advancement of minorities into decision-making positions in the profession,” (p. 28). Her findings reinforce what librarians of color have been saying for years—that these barriers do exist for people of color. Significantly, “one of three librarians of color in this survey perceived racism as a very significant barrier” (p. 36).

The second study, conducted in 1998 by Cynthia Preston, surveyed over 200 African American librarians with the purpose of finding if “racism and discrimination play a stronger role in job satisfaction of African American librarians” (p. 435). Preston’s survey recalls the findings reported by Kravitz—almost a quarter of the respondents cited “racism and discrimination” as an important issue facing African American librarians. Although most black librarians reported that they were generally satisfied with their jobs and agreed that they had positive relationships with their coworkers and supervisors, over two-thirds of the respondents reported the presence of racial discrimination in their work environments. These results, combined with other data from the survey, lead Preston to conclude that overt discriminatory practices are not the problem. Rather, “the observed discrimination might be in the climate, support, and interpersonal relationships experienced in the workplace rather than in overt acts or practices” (p. 442).

Now that libraries are beginning to employ a more diverse workforce, it is time to ensure that minorities truly have the same opportunities for professional advancement within library institutions. Racism is not just a problem for America’s libraries—it is societal problem. Libraries should be taking the lead to not only educate society about the pervasiveness of racism, but to counter racism in their own institutions.

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