

**THE EMOTIONAL, FINANCIAL  
AND HEALTH TOLL OF BEING  
THE FIRST AND ONLY**

**Jennifer R. Farmer**

The past few years have been epic in terms of Black women being recognized for their work, brilliance and contributions to society.

We've seen several firsts. Former Sen. Kamala Harris is the first Indian and Black American woman to serve as vice president. Clarice Phelps is a nuclear chemist at Oak Ridge National Laboratory and is the first Black woman to help in the discovery of a periodic element, Tennessee. [Jessica Watkins](#) is the first Black woman to live on the International Space Station.

Marilyn Mosby, Kim Foxx, Kim Gardner, Aramis Ayala—they each broke barriers to become the first Black women elected as state's attorney in their regions. [Yet, all have experienced harassment, retaliation and verbal abuse associated with those positions.](#)

And then there is Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson who became the first Black woman to be nominated and confirmed to the United States Supreme Court. She is a sight to behold. With experience that is unrivaled, Brown Jackson is among the most accomplished jurists on the bench. She represents everything beautiful about Black women—complexity that is difficult to fully understand, determination honed through the struggle and intellectual capacity that is as rare as a diamond. She represents the rich legacy of a group that has long been dehumanized.

And yet, I wonder what it takes to be her.

Throughout the confirmation hearings, Black women across the country were exhilarated at the prospect of having someone intimately familiar with their experience be considered for a seat on the high court. As Brown Jackson dealt with microaggressions and verbal lashings from white conservative legislators, many of us were triggered, calling to memory the times we've experienced slights, hostility and outright abuse for nothing more than our gender and race. We were reminded, once again, that it can be difficult to live in a Black, female body in a world that is often hostile to both.

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While the women I have mentioned have garnered national attention and acclaim, Black women continue to make history in ways large and small. Most will never enjoy public applause. But that doesn't dim their light or diminish their commitment to personal and professional excellence. We do the best that we can, often committing ourselves to bloom where we are planted. We recognize the genius in each other and often spring into action to celebrate sisters who are breaking barriers and surpassing our ancestors' greatest hopes and dreams.

## THE UNDERBELLY OF BEING FIRST

Our community tends to celebrate when one of our own breaks through. But there is an underbelly associated with being the first. Brown Jackson was indeed confirmed and is currently serving on the court, but at what cost? Have we even counted the costs? They include academic, emotional, health and physical costs. I wonder what her blood pressure was before and during the confirmation hearings. I imagine it soared during that process and other high-stress processes throughout her life. I wonder the emotional toll of carrying the expectations of others; I imagine she was likely the “strong one” or the one who could “handle it.” I wonder how the experience will sit in her children’s psyche and in their physical bodies. Will they work duly hard to ensure they are above reproach? Will they hold themselves to impossible standards, seeing how hard their mother worked only to be treated with such disrespect? We see the end product—Brown Jackson was confirmed—but we have yet to appreciate what it takes to be her, what it takes to be us.

Consider Harris. She has been criticized for everything from buying a pot to the type of treatment she chose to manage a COVID-19 diagnosis. [She has also faced a torrent of online abuse.](#) Her office has been under scrutiny for months, with Politico and other publications routinely writing about the inner workings of her office. [She has been called merely “Kamala,” even though she holds the second most powerful position in the nation.](#) How many times was former Vice President Mike Pence referred to in a major publication as “Mike”?

But set the vice president and the newest Supreme Court justice aside for a moment. How many Black women do you know who have been promoted only to be debased?

[As I wrote for NewsOne](#), “The frustrating thing is that Black women at all levels never get to a point where we do not face disrespect. One can never outachieve racism. If you are Black, it is with you from the day you are born until the day you die.”

Unfortunately, Black women who excel quickly learn that success is not inoculation from racism. We still live with the effects of systemic racism where we are penalized for being Black, female and, in some cases, queer. We are punished if we thrive—“who does she think she is?”—and denigrated if we vocalize a need for assistance. As I wrote in my book, [First and Only: What Black Women Say About Thriving at Work and in Life](#), society does not appreciate Black women asking for and needing help. Many Black women are judged harshly for needing help, with consequences ranging from snide remarks and jeers to child protective services breaking up Black families by removing Black children from their homes. We live in perpetual fear that one wrong move, [one suspicious doctor](#), [one judge](#) could mean the dismantling of our families.

[Parents.com noted](#), “Research shows that Black parents are often held to different standards. According to a [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America’s 2021 study](#), ‘Risks of having a CPS investigation were highest for Black children (43.2 to 72.0 percent)...’ The study concluded that Black families across the United States have a higher likelihood of being investigated for neglect, especially if they come from economically marginalized communities.”

When Malcolm X said that [“Black women were the most disrespected person in America and the most unprotected person in America,”](#) he was saying there is a cost to being Black and female. And we should explore the ancillary toll for being the first and the only, which include emotional, financial and health costs.

## EMOTIONAL TOLL OF BEING THE FIRST AND ONLY

When a person is the first and only, they pay an emotional toll. That toll includes not always feeling welcomed in their friend and family circles but also in various educational or professional settings. The first is a trendsetter and trailblazer. They go where the path has yet to be cleared and push the branches, leaves and thorns out of the way. They endure hostility and make life easier for those who come after them. In doing so, they must tap into deep recesses within themselves to assure themselves that they are doing it right, that they are right to focus on educational attainment or professional success, and that they are good enough to be in whichever spaces they enter. A Black woman who is the first or only may experience being misunderstood. She may be mocked for much of her life, only to have acclaim upon or after death if she is lucky.

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## FINANCIAL TOLL OF BEING THE FIRST AND ONLY

When an individual is the first and only and they are Black, they are likely educated or highly educated with advanced degrees. In fact, of the people in my life who have doctorates, they are often Black women. Dr. Angela Andrews, Dr. Melany Silas, Dr. Theresa Todd—all Black women who are firsts of sorts. Andrews taught at a Big Ten university. Silas has written several books and is a tenured professor at a community college in upstate New York. Todd works in the health care field.

Further, many Black women have taken out student loans to obtain an education and hopefully position themselves for success. Consequently, Black women are uniquely burdened by student loan debt. [“Nearly two-thirds of the \\$1.7 trillion in student debt in America is held by women](#), and Black borrowers are more negatively affected due to systemic racism, according to a report [Brittney] Williams coauthored, [‘How Black Women Experience Student Debt.’”](#)

We pursue higher education to attain upward mobility but often struggle to find jobs that pay us fairly due to racism and sexism. That can cause havoc as we attempt to repay student loans, which can balloon with one missed payment or deferred payments.

At the same time, we tend to head more households and carry significant responsibility for ourselves and our families. In 1990, 52% of Black women headed households. [In 2019, 60% of Black women headed households, a share higher than any other race](#). When a Black woman struggles to be paid a fair wage or obtain a job that offers a legitimate shot at upward mobility, she suffers, and her children do as well. If Black women are saddled by student loan debt, their entire households are burdened by the debt.

What is more, because many of us are often the first in our families to go to college, even when we graduate, we tend to have financial responsibility for ourselves and others in our family. Personally, I have been contributing to my household since I was 14 and have had some degree of financial responsibility from that time until the present (I am in my mid-40s). That has meant I have always had significant financial responsibility and pressure that is difficult to name.

Additionally, part of being the first and the only is learning to manage money but also learning to establish boundaries with money. We can feel guilty for thriving and believe we have an obligation to help everyone who asks. When we feel guilty about having resources, we can overextend ourselves in a futile attempt to make ourselves feel better. It's not that people are bloodthirsty for their relatives' resources; it's that so many Black people are underpaid that many live in a perpetual state of lack. That is difficult for them as well as the one or two family members who aren't struggling financially.

Being the first and only can mean that we risk financial ruin to help others thrive. It can also mean living with sadness because so many people around us are struggling financially.

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## HEALTH TOLL OF BEING THE FIRST AND ONLY

I was a young woman when former Congresswoman Stephanie Tubbs Jones died. She was the first African American woman elected to Congress in Ohio. At 58, she was found on the side of the road having suffered a brain aneurysm on Aug. 20, 2008. I have never forgotten the feeling of being robbed upon learning of her death. I had only met her once, but I was a young woman working in politics, and Tubbs Jones was a bright light. I struggled to fathom the type of stress she must have been under to have died so young and to have died from a brain bleed.

Black women live with immense stress. Whether we are in Congress or merely tending to our families, our lives are not without harshness and stress. In addition to the stress of everyday life, racism adversely impacts our health. The Southern Poverty Law Center found that Black women “have higher death rates for nearly all cancers than white women and are twice as likely to experience infertility problems. These health disparities manifest most severely, however, in maternal death rates—the rates at which women die during pregnancy or up to after a year after childbirth.” The organization went on to state that [“even when all other factors are equal—economic status, educational background, and access to health care—maternal death rates for Black women are still higher compared to white women.”](#) We cannot discount the impact of racism and sexism on Black women’s overall mental and physical health. But for Black women who break barriers, I imagine they must face a unique form of stress, and for that, they need patience, community, support and love.

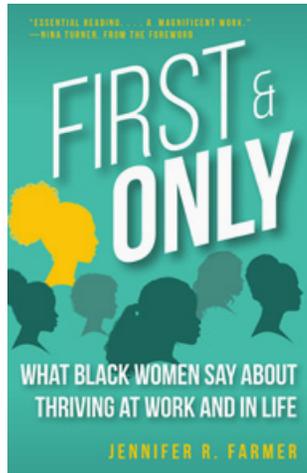
To be clear, becoming the first and only is not always about ability. Certainly there are extraordinary Black women who defy the odds and break barriers. I also believe that many of us are brilliant and if we were given the opportunities we deserve, we too could break barriers. For instance, in the opinion essay I wrote for NewsOne, I noted that “Being locked out of these highly impactful and visible roles has nothing to do with ability. It is not that there has never been a Black woman who was qualified to sit on the high court; it’s that racism refuses to see anyone outside of the privileged mainstream. Black women are among one of the most educated demographics in the country. Black Demographics noted that [‘In 2018, about 59% of Black women 25 and older attended college.’](#) And nearly one-quarter of Black women hold a bachelor’s degree or higher.”

## ULTIMATELY THERE IS A COST

Black women work exceptionally hard, understanding that our liberation creates opportunities for those who come alongside us and those who will rise long after we’ve faded from the scenes. **And yet, I must publicly name that there is a cost for our existence—indeed a toll for greatness.** 📌



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer R. Farmer is the author of *First and Only: What Black Women Say About Thriving at Work and in Life* and *Extraordinary PR, Ordinary Budget: A Strategy Guide*.

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