

How Black Women Can Navigate Pay-Gap Gaslighting

by Lola Bakare

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Summary. This year, Black Women's Equal Pay Day is almost a full two months later than it was just last year thanks to an ever-widening wage gap. While the burden of achieving equal pay remains on leaders, policymakers, and people in power, the author recommends... [more](#)

Here's the uncomfortable truth Black women reading this already know: Being offered less than we deserve started way before any of us first earned a paycheck. Consider one of my earliest memories. While enjoying an idyllic afternoon on the playground

at recess, my best friend looked at me lovingly and said, “Lola, I don’t like Black people, but I like you.” I said “Thank you,” and a pattern of accepting what was offered began. I was five.

Black Women’s Equal Pay Day symbolizes “how far into the year [Black] women must work to be paid what white men were paid the previous year,” per The American Association of University Women (AAUW). As the average Black woman makes 58 cents for every dollar earned by the average white male per the latest U.S. Census data, this year’s Black Women’s Equal Pay Day is September 21st — almost a full two months later than it was just last year thanks to an ever-widening wage gap.

While the systems governing our economy must be held accountable first and foremost, the cost of this inequity continues to compound exponentially in real time, costing the average Black woman employee upwards of \$900,000 over the span of a 40-year career, something we simply cannot continue to afford. Alongside advocating for systemic change and placing responsibility on leaders and people in power, these simple strategies, alongside practical advice from my conversations with Black women leaders and women leaders of color, can help Black women, people who are not men, and pay equity allies combat the gaslighting that keeps us from earning what we’re worth.

Call It By Its Name

Like I learned that day on the playground, expressions of goodwill aren’t always what they seem. Mita Mallick, head of inclusion, equity and impact at Carta and cohost of *Brown Table Talk*, told me that in her time coaching women of color and Black women in particular, she has “heard the responses they face when they ask to be paid fairly and equitably. ‘Why are you asking for more money? Don’t we pay you enough? Do you know you are one of the higher-paid team members?’”

The very definition of gaslighting at its most insidious, these responses are designed to deflect and distract, reducing the person making an obviously reasonable request for a wage commensurate to the value of their work to a state of questioning their own reality. By learning to recognize and name gaslighting when it happens, we become better equipped to stop internalizing its effect — what Mallick describes as being “filled with self-doubt, wondering if we should have said anything in the first place.”

Embrace the Discomfort

Grounded in the systemic racism that has made upward mobility hostile to Black communities for generations, being gaslit into gratitude is a tough cycle to break, especially when negative attitudes toward our ambition come directly from the people we deeply trust and who want to see us succeed the most.

Niani Tolbert, founder and CEO of HIREBLACKNOW, expounded on the ways Black women are impacted by a cultural more of toxic gratitude. “Since Black women are so underrepresented in leadership roles, we may even be encouraged by our own family members, friends, and even ourselves that we should be ‘grateful’ for what we are offered, rather than that we deserve every penny that we ask for.”

Reframe your interpretation of this discomfort. Remind yourself that adopting a growth mindset means experiencing growing pains, and that you’re doing so in service of something bigger than yourself. Embrace the discomfort as a signal that you’re on the right track and your courage makes you a catalyst for change. As Tolbert advises, “Keep in mind, when you are advocating for yourself, you are also advocating for your family and for the people who come behind you.”

It’s not your job to dismantle the systems that give you less than you deserve, but you can resist them by affirming your own worth. Affirming your worthiness out loud can be a powerful tool

for silencing negative self-talk and building up courage and resilience, defying the external negativity. Write your own with this simple prompt:

“What would my younger self need to hear to believe in the abundance of her worth?” Here are a few of my favorites to get you started:

- Abundance is my birthright.
- I am worth more than the world’s first offer.
- A bigger vision is mine to choose.

Karima Sharif, head of inclusive investments & partnerships lead at Publicis Health Media and global chair for HBA’s Women of Color affinity group, says: “We have been conditioned to keep things to ourselves and power through our problems. We have to be comfortable in amplifying our collective voices.”

Map What You’re Making Up For

We know the data at a macro level, but how many of us have quantified the personal cost of pay inequity? To quickly arrive at an estimate unique to your professional history, try this formula I created based on the \$.58 per-dollar wage gap:

1. Sum up your annual net income from full-time, part-time, or contract work for each year of your professional history. This is your *actual* earnings from that time period.
2. Multiply that number by 100.
3. Divide the new number by 58. This was your total *potential* earnings during that time period.
4. Subtract your *actual* earnings from your *potential* earnings to reveal your lifetime earnings deficit.

By calculating your personal lifetime earnings deficit (let's call this your LIED number — pun intended), what you're making up for is that much more tangible. Within a system fueled by gaslighting, every LIED number represents a figure that doesn't lie.

For pay equity allies and wage decision makers, conducting this exercise at the team, department, or company level has the same effect on a larger scale. This creates a sense of urgency and bias for immediate action with immediate effect instead of perpetuating ongoing discussions about “long-term solutions” that only exacerbate pay inequity by buying leaders time to keep sitting on the fence.

Fight Fire with Facts

“One of the most powerful things we can do when self-advocating for our worth at work is back it up with data,” shares Black Girl PR founder Nantale Muwonge. “Whether that's your team KPIs and measurable impact in your role or what you should be paid based on market research, numbers are difficult to dismiss, so put yourself in a strong position from the beginning by arming yourself.”

And while resources like Glassdoor, h1bdata.info, LinkedIn, and Payscale go a long way as pay transparency policies become more commonplace, our networks and peer relationships can add useful context to the picture of our work's worth — if we're willing to initiate conversations about what our peers are being paid.

Leah Murphy, founder of Career Gems for the Journey, stresses the importance of “going past internet searches to benchmark compensation with your peers inside and outside of the company.” Why not ask your white male colleague what he's being paid? Chances are, the answer will surprise you.

For allies who may feel uncomfortable sharing, know that this is one of the most powerful things you can do to spark change. You have the power to put your money where your mouth is without spending a dime. Ask yourself, “What is my silence costing those without my privilege?”

Let Them Tell You

While the importance of a deep understanding of your work’s market rate can’t be stressed enough, don’t let it define your upper limits. Instead, focus on making your negotiation process a conversation that focuses on your current or prospective employer’s (or client’s) highest willingness to pay, not just what they’re willing to pay *you*.

In *Ask For More: 10 Questions To Negotiate Anything*, Alex Carter shares two words that make this surprisingly simple by ensuring you’re asking open questions that can’t be shut down with a quick no: “Tell me.” Here are a few sample questions that harness the power of these magic words:

- “Tell me what compensation looked like for the last person who over-delivered in this role?”
- “Tell me what I can expect to earn if placed on the upper end of the salary band for this role?”
- “Tell me how the company ensures employees are compensated for the value of their contributions and not based on what they happened to earn in their prior role?”

If you’re pressed to share a number, April Little, vice president of human resources at Bond Security, advises sharing a range instead. “Presenting a range versus a solid number will give Black women more runway during negotiations as we know hiring leaders tend to exhaust negotiations with Black women sooner than our counterparts.”

When identifying your range, DEI executive Desiree Coleman-Fry suggests adding 20% to the higher end of your range. “Don’t be afraid to ask for that big, hairy, audacious salary, because you know you likely aren’t currently commanding your worth,” she encourages.

When it comes time to ask for more, remember your LIED number and all that’s at stake. Know what your work is worth, but let them tell you what more might be possible. As protections evolve to better serve us, Minda Harts, author of *The Memo*, underscores why our work at the individual level must continue. “Even though we didn’t create the wage gap,” Harts shares, “if we don’t continue to advocate and ask for what we want now, future generations of Black women entering the workforce will inherit the same systemic gap. We must never stop advocating for what we want; our ask is no longer just for us.”

Give Yourself Grace

Choosing abundance is always harder than accepting scarcity, and the intersectional inequity Black women face makes this choice an even more challenging one.

“Even when we are armed with facts, we must also be mentally prepared for all possible outcomes, even the ones we aren’t hoping for,” says Future of SEL founder and CEO, Future Cain. In those moments, Cain advises her Black women clients to “sit with themselves and focus on self-care.”

Critically, we must also acknowledge the majority of Black women in the workforce whose roles don’t come with access to opportunities for self-advocacy and organize for them, too. From low hourly wages and jobs without upward mobility to inflexible schedules and rising child and elder care costs, these women shoulder the burden of systemic scarcity.

For Black women whose roles do present these opportunities, remember that knowing what to do still doesn't mean it's all on you. While we stand up for ourselves in service of a better future for all of us, we deserve the support of a system that supports and protects us the same way it supports and protects cisgender white men. Even without such a system, we persist, because as Harper Stern, the Black woman protagonist of HBO's *Industry* (who is no stranger to workplace gaslighting) so poignantly says, "This is a play for the end."

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