

Rebuking the ‘Work Twice as Hard for Half as Much’ Mentality among Black Girls and Women

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Throughout the ages, and out of the mouths of many before, passed down from generation to generation like quiet skilful training, lies an introduction to the main rule to follow when playing a biased game; this rule, ingrained and spoken like a mantra, guides many marginalized groups, particularly Black girls and women, in how to survive in an unfair system:

You must work twice as hard for half as much.

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You must. WORK. Twice as hard. For half as much.

Based on my PhD research (Pennant 2020) on the educational journeys and experiences of Black British women graduates, Şadé and Zuri are the fictional, composite mother and daughter characters who explore the inter-generational impact and social aspects of this mentality.

For Şadé, a second-generation English woman of Nigerian heritage, this was the accepted norm by which she was raised, a constant reminder of what she always had to do as the minimum requirement to have any chance of gaining so-called ‘success’. It became interwoven into the very fabric of her DNA. Like the mentality demanded, she worked twice as hard as her white counterparts, and grudgingly expected to receive half as much. She had studied hard, completed an undergraduate and then a master’s degree in law, entered a decent profession as a solicitor, and achieved upward social mobility. However, after years of continuing professional development (CPD), jumping from company to company and incessantly networking,

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she was still underemployed, underpaid, stressed, and dissatisfied. Şadé's experiences are not uncommon. As Dey et al. (2021: 8) highlight in their report, due to structural racism and barriers compounded by sexism, 'women of colour are almost invisible from positions of power across both public and private sectors ... overrepresented in entry-level and junior positions and virtually disappear the higher up we go into management and senior leadership.' Was this really the *real* results of working twice as hard for half as much?

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Zuri was just about to finish her undergraduate law degree. Against the established educational narratives of Black British student underachievement at key stages of the education system (see Tomlin et al. 2014), she was on track to gain a first-class degree – something that Black British women are least likely to achieve compared with women from all other ethnic groups (AdvanceHE 2021: 214). She had always wanted to be educationally 'successful', but struggled to be so within an unfair education system. These struggles are identified in a series of blog posts by the charity UK Youth, in which During (2020a, 2020b) illustrates some of the 'social, economic and identity barriers facing young, Black women every day', including lack of support, adultification and trauma, and how the education system perpetuates discrimination and bias.

Achieving educational 'success' was not only for Zuri, but also for her mother, family, and community, which meant that she carried a huge weight on her shoulders, a weight that constantly reminded her that she could ill afford to fail; no matter what, she had to keep going. Zuri was taught from an early age that educational qualifications could lift some of the weight that she was born to carry. Her education would enable her to soar; her qualifications would stand the test of time and would speak for her when she was denied a voice; they would uplift her from the bottom of society's totem pole. She also felt privileged because, unlike many of her peers, she had a determined mother with the experience she needed to guide her through the education system. It was her mother's access to financial resources that helped her excel and navigate her way through to the very end, and she was nearly there. All she had to do was complete her exams and then she would have the certificate in her hand.

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It was all going well until the beginning of her final year when she became uncontrollably anxious. She started experiencing panic attacks and having restless nights worrying about her upcoming exams. She even started to worry about all the assignments she had already submitted – despite knowing she had passed them with flying colours. Zuri found herself unable to concentrate and in floods of tears whenever she tried to revise as she was unable to remember the course content. She had become a hermit, refusing to go out because she did not want to waste time on anything other than preparing for her exams. She barely ate – only enough to avoid fainting – so that she could continue her attempts to revise. She did not know who to turn to because she had always been the strong one, the one her friends consulted when they needed a pep talk. She had always done well – at school, in the sixth form, and in her earlier years of university – successfully balancing her extra-curricular activities while maintaining good grades. She had a proven-track record of excellence that she could not afford to tarnish, and this put additional pressure on her to perform. However, try as she might, her mind and body were rapidly shutting down due to her crippling fear of failure, and after years of working twice as hard for half as much. She needed the kind of help that Stoll (2021) needed while navigating her way through her own mental difficulties at university, which resulted in the co-creation of Black Students Talk (BST) to support the mental health and wellbeing of other Black university students.

Şadé was only alerted to the severity of the situation when a close friend of Zuri's phoned her. While driving to Zuri's student house, Şadé could not stop wondering what had gone wrong. Perhaps, she thought, it was her fault because she had pushed her too hard, but Şadé had not wanted her only daughter to be denied opportunities. She had thus gone above and beyond to plough most of her finances and support into Zuri's education – both inside and outside the classroom. Şadé felt that her daughter's education was one of the few things she could control, one of the few things that would ensure Zuri would get all the opportunities she deserved.

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Şadé kneeled beside her only daughter, Zuri, who was on the floor in tears. Şadé, cradling Zuri in her arms, pleaded with her, trying desperately to remotivate her, to ensure that she continued to follow the mantra that had been so clearly laid out for her.

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‘Darling, I am going to need you to get it together, you can have your cry now, but you must get it together.’

‘But why?’ Zuri responded between tears, ‘I am TIRED!’

‘I know you are, but you can’t be tired! You can’t stop! Keep going! This is just the way it is. As Black women, we must work twice as hard for half as much as our white counterparts!’ Şadé replied.

‘But how?’ her daughter asked, ‘How can I keep going when I do not have anything else to give. I have given my all to my education to make sure I succeed.’

‘I know you have, and I am so proud of you, but you must continue or everything you have done up until now will be pointless.’

Şadé’s daughter, Zuri, continued to weep loudly, releasing all the pent-up frustration, pain, and exhaustion of the injustice of a society that required her to be superhuman to succeed. All Şadé could do was to hold her closer, supplementing the mantra with a silent prayer, requesting additional strength, hope and a breakthrough from the Most High.

But what do you do when you feel powerless and unable to change systemic, intersectional barriers that mean you must raise your young Black daughter to give her all, for ‘success’ that is never guaranteed? How do you ease the pressure and pain of your only daughter when you too are still experiencing and fighting it in the workplace? How do you continue to support your daughter to work twice as hard for half as much as her white counterparts, when she has clearly reached her breaking point? What if working twice as hard for half as much is no longer a viable option?

Şadé decided to pack up Zuri’s belongings and take her home. They contacted her tutor, accessed her university’s support services and it was decided that Zuri would defer her studies for a year.

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As Zuri closed the question booklet of her last exam, she smiled confidently. She was so pleased that, with the support of her mother and her university, she was able to take some time out. She had spent the year in therapy, working through her mental health problems, the internalized

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pressure and her heightened fear of failure, and had learned many different strategies to help her cope. Her university's support services had provided her with extra exam time, alongside other aids to assist her in completing her studies. She had even had time to reconnect with and understand her mother more.

'You know, your breakdown taught me so much,' Şadé opened up to Zuri one day, 'You taught me that we should always move at our own pace and be unafraid to rest and recover as many times as necessary! I wish I learnt that when I was younger!'

'Yessssssss!' Zuri agreed as she hugged Şadé.

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Zuri jumped for joy while wiping away happy tears as Şadé beamed with pride. Zuri had received her results and was graduating with first-class honours, excited for further study. Zuri adopted a new mentality and a new mantra that could replace the one passed on over generations, and that she would pass on to others, too:

Always move at your own pace and be unafraid to rest and recover as many times as necessary.

Always move at your own pace and be unafraid to rest and recover as many times as necessary.

Always. Move at your own pace. And be unafraid. To REST and RECOVER as many times as necessary.

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