

Black women say they have Harris' back

They expect VP to be the target of racism, sexism

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Vice President Kamala Harris' rise to a near-lock as the Democratic Party's presidential nominee has been swift and certain during the past week, with the passion and enthusiasm behind her drawing parallels to the campaign of Barack Obama in 2008.

But attendant to Harris' ascent is the concern among Black Americans that, as with Obama, racist criticisms and caricatures – some subtle and some not so subtle – are sure to follow. And for Black women, the concern is heightened, carrying with it the chagrined certainty that Harris will endure doubts and dismissal both as a woman and as a Black woman – a double-barred reality many Black women know all too well from their own lives.

That may explain why, on the day President Joe Biden abandoned his reelection bid and endorsed Harris, some 44,000 mostly Black women across the country got on a call to pledge solidarity with Harris. It was the kind of organic, grassroots call that speaks to genuine enthusiasm and support, and it was followed the next day by another mass call of support from Black men.

It is Black women, however, who most acutely feel a sense of solidarity with the vice president, and it is Black women who have promised to have her back.

Black women interviewed for this story, who hail from various parts of Florida, all said they plan to support Harris. They said they don't simply share her policy aims; they expressed a deep-seated understanding of what it's like to be a successful Black woman and to have everything about you scrutinized and demeaned.

Rachel Cohen, a 35-year-old, stay-at-home mother of three in Port St. Lucie, said she remembers what she heard after learning she got an early acceptance from the University of Florida.

"I got it because I'm a good writer and a good test-taker," Cohen said, adding



Tanya Burke of West Palm Beach, Fla., with Kamala Harris in Chicago in September 2019. Both women graduated from Howard University and were members of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. PROVIDED BY TANYA BURKE

that not everyone viewed her acceptance as a product of her talents and accomplishments. "But it couldn't be because of that. I was another check box for a quota. The only reason I got in is because of my race."

Harris, 59, has been mocked and memed by white, often male, political opponents because of her laugh.

U.S. Sen. JD Vance, the Ohio Republican tapped by former President Donald Trump to serve as his running mate, has criticized Harris and other Democratic women as "a bunch of childless cat ladies who are miserable."

Harris gained two stepchildren when she married attorney Doug Emhoff in 2014. The vice president, like an increasing number of women in the United States, married later in life and has no biological children.

In endorsing Harris, actress Jennifer Aniston mentioned Vance's "childless cat ladies" dig, posting on a social media account that she "truly can't believe this is coming from a potential VP of The United States."

Vance lobbed another attack at Harris in a recent campaign speech, questioning if she is sufficiently "grateful" to be a citizen of the United States. Critics saw the comment as an attempt to racially "otherize" the California-born

fort and permissibility to not only openly question Vice President Harris' qualifications a la 'DEI hire' but also to flirt with the ugliest of tropes about Black female sexuality and professional accomplishment," said Shalonda Warren, a 54-year-old West Palm Beach City Commission member. "The silent calculus that accepts this is a threat to the rights of all women."

Black women say they've heard varying versions of this criticism in their own lives, and seeing Harris endure those barbs publicly binds them to her.

"It's like our humanity and our worth is being challenged," said Robin Reshard, a 58-year-old local historian in Pensacola, noting with incredulity the box where the vice president's critics want her to remain. "How dare she rise? You should stay in this lane that we have assigned for you."

Reshard said she's glad that, so far, Harris has kept to her campaign script and has not responded to the racist and sexist pokes. "I appreciate that this sister isn't doing tit-for-tat," Reshard said. "Ain't nobody got time for that. If you do that, you're taking your eyes off the proverbial prize."

Victoria Jones, a 39-year-old Cocoa resident who is founder, president and chief executive officer of the Space Coast Black Chamber of Commerce, said she's not worried about Harris' ability to take the heat.

"To worry is like inviting trouble to a party," Jones said. "Women, especially Black women, have carried this country for hundreds of years. We're the true hidden figures behind many great things but do not receive credit for it. We've often had to deal with sexism along with racism. As a Black woman involved in politics and economic development, I've experienced my share of both."

Jones, a registered Republican who has run for office as a Democrat, said sexist fliers were mailed out during her run for office.

She said she remembers seeing a picture of Harris seated next to Biden. The caption used a slang term for prostitute in referring to Harris.

"I know how it feels to have those sorts of things hurled at you and to keep walking with grace," she said.

Harris, whose father is from Jamaica and whose mother was from India.

Other Harris critics leaned more heavily on race in knocking her, including Wisconsin GOP Rep. Glenn Grothman, who said Democrats would feel compelled to turn to Harris as the party's presidential nominee because of her "ethnic background."

Some of Grothman's Republican colleagues in the House have called Harris a "DEI" candidate, insinuating that the vice president's successes are all tied to an embrace of diversity, equity and inclusion, which they criticize as a pathway to reverse discrimination against white people.

Harris is making a strong play for the votes of women, leaning into criticism of the former president as the person who appointed three of the Supreme Court justices who struck down Roe v. Wade, scuttling abortion rights for millions of women. The vice president is also talking up child care, education and health care policies she hopes will resonate with women.

As national polls show her drawing even with or slightly past Trump, Harris has come under increasing attack not only on the political front but in personal, sexist and racist ways.

"There seems to be a growing com-