Walk in My Shoes: A Black Activist’s Guide to Surviving the Women’s Movement is a collection of inspirational essays to empower young African American women to become involved in the fight for reproductive justice.

“The women’s movement has never been an ‘everywoman’s’ movement. I have always been drawn by its promise of equality, yet continually taken aback by its failure to embrace the very real needs of women of color.” - Marcela Howell

Walk in My Shoes draws on the author’s 30-plus years of experience as a Black woman working in the reproductive rights movement. The essays examine the history of African American women in the women’s rights movement and provide guidance for young African American activists on: avoiding the pitfalls of becoming the black “expert” in white women’s organizations; knowing when and how to assert leadership; building a support base; and setting goals to diversify the movement to meet every woman’s needs.
Walk in My Shoes:

A Black Activist’s Guide
to Surviving the Women’s Movement

Marcela Howell

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“Black women are inherently valuable ... our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s but because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression.”

(A Feminist Statement: The Combahee River Collective)

WHY I STAYED

PREFACE

In 1997, speaking before students at the University of San Diego, President Bill Clinton called for a national dialogue on race. In his remarks, he indicated that his purpose in announcing this dialogue was to get people to air their differences and their misconceptions about race and to start America on a positive vision as we moved into the new century. National leaders from all sides of the political spectrum commented upon the importance of such an initiative. Political pundits weighed the pros and cons of a president promoting such a program. Whether you consider these yearlong discussions worthwhile or not, they were a bold move by a sitting president.

Strangely silent during this discourse were the leaders of the women’s movement. Given a rare opportunity to join the national debate, they failed to fully engage their own organizations in this dialogue. They were silent bystanders.

Their inability or unwillingness to address the issue of race and racism (be it overt or subtle) has been an ongoing failure on the part of women leaders in the movement. Of course, there have always been the obligatory conferences on diversity or the underfunded “colored women’s” projects whenever new women of color are added to their boards of directors or their staff. But few of these projects last. And it never seems to occur to these white women leaders that if they call themselves “women’s” organizations or say they represent the “women’s movement” that their credibility must be called into question when they create special projects for women of color. This should be their first hint that something is amiss, that their women’s movement is fictitious.
From the early days of the women’s movement, black women have never felt that white women, as the saying goes, “had our back.” We were told to conform to the issues that impacted white women and hope that some of the rights won by these women would trickle down to eventually include all women. In 1899, Lottie Wilson Jackson, a black delegate to the National American Woman’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA), asked NAWSA to oppose “segregated seating” on railroad trains by adopting a resolution “that colored women ought not to be compelled to ride in smoking cars, and that suitable accommodations should be provided for them.” Southern white women delegates called the resolution “an insult to the South” and indicated that the “servant girls who traveled with them had no problems.” After a heated debate, the membership defeated the resolution and NAWSA, under the leadership of Susan B. Anthony, went “on record as saying that women suffrage and the Black question were completely separate causes.”

In many ways, their attitude represented an early example of “trickle-down” economic theories that became popular during the 1980s. White feminists reasoned that if they won legal rights to better pay, higher education, contraception and abortion for themselves (middle class white women), then eventually those rights would “trickle down” to poor women and women of color. At every point where issues specifically impacted black women because of race, the white women leaders refused to embrace those issues as part of their women’s movement. Instead, the concerns and needs of black women were simply afterthoughts to the concerns and needs of white women. And the white women they believed they represented.

So, “trickle-down feminism,” like trickle-down economics, is voodoo politics. It presupposes that there is a desire to have all the benefits that come with white privilege granted to another race. It allows the leaders of the women’s movement to make generalized statements about the progress of women while limiting that progress to only a few women. If the movement wins economic, reproductive and educational rights for white women, its leaders, under the

WHY THE ESSAYS

During my 30 years in the women’s movement, I have watched young black women come into women’s and reproductive rights organizations with idealistic hopes of what they could achieve. By the time they leave, usually within a few years, they are disillusioned with these organizations in particular and with the women’s movement in general. In many cases, these young women found themselves in inhospitable and often hostile environments. Many white women activists tend to see this movement as theirs, rarely acknowledging or knowing the roles that black women have played since its inception. Because they are unfamiliar with the history of the women’s movement, many young black women have little ammunition to push back against this misconception.

Because white women leaders have not examined racism within their own organizations, the women’s and reproductive rights movement made up of those organizations has become a breeding ground for subtle racism that fosters distrust and hostility from African American women.
No one can argue that overt racism was at the core of the early suffrage and population control chapters of the women’s and reproductive rights movement. From insisting that African American women march in the back of women’s rights demonstrations or refusing to give them speaking roles at women’s conventions to targeting young black girls for sterilization, the leadership of the early suffrage and birth control efforts made it clear that the concerns and needs of African American women were secondary to the concerns and needs of white women. Unfortunately, despite the efforts of some, that imbalance still exists within the women’s and reproductive rights movement. While black women struggled against these racist policies, white women at the head of the movement allowed the overt racism that was their legacy to become the subtle racism of today’s movement.

Rather than addressing this problem head on and movement-wide, the attempts have been marginal at best, usually in the form of “special” projects targeting women of color. These short-term projects, rather than making the movement more inclusive, simply serve to highlight the movement’s exclusivity. Eliminating racism within the women’s and reproductive rights movement is not the responsibility of women of color. Racism or white privilege exists within our society because white women benefit from it. To truly make progress, white women must own their own racism.

These essays are not an attempt to educate white women about the failings of their movement. That task is for someone else. I will say that, however, the inability of the women’s and reproductive rights movement to effectively deal with race impacts all women. Unless racism is confronted, it cannot be eradicated and, sadly, will continue to fester into future generations. Hopefully, there will continue to be brave souls of all races who will work in solidarity to address the systemic problems of racism within the movement.

The essays in this collection are directed at young African American women who choose to take up the struggle of reproductive and economic justice. We cannot simply retire into our own women of color organizations if we have as our goal a women’s movement that truly reflects all women. It is and will continue to be a tough struggle. Because of our history with the movement, African American women must lead even when others refuse to follow. We have little choice. Because so much of today’s women’s movement is concentrated on the issues of reproductive freedom, much of the focus within these essays is on reproductive justice issues. However, the lessons can and should be used within all aspects of the women’s movement. The essays are my attempt to identify the pitfalls for African American women in this movement and strategies for avoiding or overcoming these pitfalls; potential victories and their long-term impact; and, most of all, to map out some strategies for supporting you while you are there. I hope you find encouragement and a little help to navigate your way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am an African-American woman who has spent more than 30 years in the women’s movement. At various points in my professional career, I have been a political consultant for a number of women candidates in California, a consultant on campaign training for the National Women’s Political Caucus, the elected chair of the Women’s Caucus of the California Democratic Party, the executive director of CARAL-South, the acting political director of NARAL, and director of public affairs for Advocates for Youth. During that time, I have encountered racism, both overt and subtle, within the movement. I am at a loss to decide which is worse. With overt racism, you at least have some sense of accomplishment at confronting it. Perhaps the person you confront recognizes what she did or said and will attempt to correct the behavior. Subtle racism, on the other hand, leaves you pondering. You must first decide whether it is your imagination or not, decide whether and how to confront someone, and then decide how to confront someone about something that may have been your imagination. Of course, with subtle racism, the person you finally confront will always swear that this was not her
As an African American within this movement, I feel qualified to write about the problems and tensions between African-American women and the women’s movement. However, I do not feel qualified or even justified generalizing these thoughts as they relate to all women of color. Where certain issues have a more generalized impact, such as issues dealing with sterilization and population control, I have used the term “women of color,” but in most instances I have limited my discussions to African American women.

Racism within the women’s and reproductive rights movement is not my imagination, nor is it the imagination of the many, many African American women who have come before me or will come after me. Racism within the women’s rights movement has been written about before now and will continue to be written about until, at long last, it is confronted within the movement itself.

WHY I STAYED

As you read about some of my experiences within the women’s movement, you may ask why I bothered to stay. I’ve asked myself that same question. And my answer is “faith.” I became involved in the women’s movement because I heard something different and believed it. I still do. I believe that because women are still primarily responsible for the early development of children, they can change society simply by raising their children differently. Women can change society by choosing to not be involved with men who hate. Women can impact racism by rejecting white privilege both in their professional and personal lives.

I spent the early years of my activism working in the anti-war and the civil rights movements. During my freshman and sophomore years at MacMurray College in Southern Illinois, I was enmeshed in protest activities against America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. I drove men who wanted to avoid the draft to Canada, I marched in anti-war protests in New York, Washington, D.C. and Illinois, and I was one of the brave souls who stormed the Pentagon in our Nation’s Capital in 1967. These early college years of activism had meaning for me until 1968, when the murders of Reverend Martin Luther King and Senator Robert Kennedy put me into a political tailspin and an activist’s morass.

These men were not just political icons. In 1963 and 1964 respectively, I came face to face with these men. On August 28, 1963, just two days after my fifteenth birthday, my oldest brother, Bootsie, took me to participate with more than a quarter of a million people in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. It was his birthday present to me. We caught a bus from New York very early in the morning. Because my brother was helping Bayard Rustin, the March organizer, to get people from New York to Washington, D.C. for the march, we were lucky enough to be positioned right next to the staging area. Just minutes before Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. took the stage to deliver his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, I got to shake his hand. He asked me my name but I was too nervous to reply. My brother told him. Then he asked me what I wanted to be and I said I wanted to be a writer. He said it was important for Negroes to be writers so that the history of our people would be told correctly. And then he was gone. It was a fleeting moment of history, but that moment would become more memorable in the years to come.

A year later, Robert F. Kennedy came to Harlem to campaign for U.S. Senator from New York. My parents were working in the Democratic Party headquarters and, at 16, I was helping out. Kennedy came to Harlem to shoot part of a political ad where he was supposed to stand in the back seat of a convertible and throw a football to some boys who were running behind. Why they thought it made sense for black boys to be running behind a moving car, I’ll never know. My job, however, was to round up about 20 boys so the campaign could choose about eight for the ad. After the not too
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successful football throwing – Kennedy fell in the car several times and no one ever caught the football while the car was moving – the entire entourage came to the headquarters to meet the volunteers. I was introduced to Kennedy as the youth volunteer coordinator. Thus, I got my first campaign title and shook hands with Robert F. Kennedy.

So in the fall of 1968 when I returned to MacMurray College for my junior year, I was in shock. The issues I had worked on during my first two years of college – civil rights, anti-war protest, and the prospect of another Kennedy presidency – were all destroyed in those months by the assassinations of these two men. I needed something to grab onto that would keep my ideals alive. The budding women’s movement became that thing.

Here were women of all races bucking convention. They were black, white and brown women working side by side for something better. Women’s liberation held a certain resonance that signified a massive new beginning. Here was a cause that was my cause. Here was a movement that said to the Catholic Church that had denied me the right to be an altar boy – up yours! Or to the brothers who preached Black liberation, but only meant it for men – up yours! Or to the anti-war groups that only wanted women to cook the food, make the signs and clean up after the meetings – UP YOURS!

Women talked about social justice. We were going to confront all the aspects of diss-respect and condescension that permeated every other movement. We were going to change how politics were done. We were going to demand that women be treated with respect. By changing the plight of women, we would change the world. I believed it then and I believe it now – in spite of what I know. And this is why I stayed.

Notes

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
“There is a tendency among feminists, both contemporary and historical, to suggest that by defending the rights of white middle-class women to bodily integrity and sovereignty, women of color and poor women’s rights will also be defended.”


ALL THE WOMEN WERE WHITE
A Historical Perspective

PREFACE

In June 2003, four of the top women’s organizations – NARAL Pro-Choice America, National Organization for Women, Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the Feminist Majority – announced that they were organizing another women’s march in support of a woman’s right to choose. These organizations, as they had in the past, assumed that all women who supported Roe v. Wade, the 1973 landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, would rally in support of this march. They were very wrong!

Soon after the groups’ announcement, they found themselves embroiled in controversy. Women of color organizations stated quite emphatically that this March for Choice ignored the reality of their lives. They demanded a meeting that would address their concerns. The simple fact was that this controversy was just a repeat of past marches except this time, the women of color organizations were better organized and more powerful. In the end, things changed and the march was a success.

The march was renamed “The March for Women’s Lives” to better reflect a broader agenda than just abortion rights. Reproductive justice, health care access, the right to have a child or terminate a pregnancy, and contraceptive access from both a domestic and global view were added. Other organizations – The Black Women’s Health Imperative, the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health and the American Civil Liberties Union – became cosponsors of the March.
Over a million women, men and children from all walks of life, all ethnicities and all classes, arrived in Washington, D.C. on Sunday, April 25, 2004 for The March for Women’s Lives. For the four mainstream women’s organizations another controversy was settled, another victory was under their belts. But why did it take women of color organizations announcing a boycott of the march to get these women’s organizations to hear their concerns? Because this same scenario had been played out in the past, the question lingers – did mainstream women’s organizations learn anything from this latest controversy? Or were their actions just another quick compromise to avoid a very public embarrassment and to achieve an end goal? If history is our teacher, then the answer on whether the leadership learned anything is a resounding “No.”

At this point in our collective history, activists within the women’s movement should be in agreement that one African American, one Native American, one Latina, one Asian Pacific Islander and a whole lot of Caucasian women in a strategy meeting making decisions about all of our lives neither constitutes diversity nor inclusiveness. Sadly, we are not. White women leaders continue to believe that if they invite a few women of color to a meeting that includes many more white women, they have met their “diversity” obligations. Let’s flip the meeting parameters – women of color call a meeting to discuss strategies for defending women’s access to contraception. Women of color from all ethnic and economic backgrounds and two white women have been invited to participate. The two white women are asked to explain to the group what white women – rich ones, poor women, middle-class women, white women from the Midwest, the west coast, Italian Americans, Irish Americans, stay at home moms, professional women – want. They are put on the spot to represent all white women living in the United States. And white women leaders wonder why women of color get upset.

As I stated in the introduction, my focus throughout these essays will be on the long-standing and often volatile relationship between white and black women in America. The experiences of African American women with the brutality of slavery, the humiliation in domestic servitude, the violence of Jim Crow and desegregation, as well as the numerous battles around family planning and population control, dates our struggles within the women’s movement back to the early abolitionist/suffrage days. Then, overt racism was the norm, rather than the exception, of the women’s movement. This is the foundation that has never been addressed within the movement and it is the foundation that has fostered a legacy of distrust and hostility between white and black women. That legacy persists today, as predominately white women’s organizations set political and policy agendas for women that fail to meet the needs or concerns of African American women.

HISTORY: BLACK WOMEN IN THE WHITE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

The rights of black women have always been relegated to the back burner within the women’s movement. From the early suffrage days to today’s women’s movement, black women have had to fight to have a seat at the table where decisions were made. We could label the historical unwillingness of the women’s movement to address the concerns of black women as racist or as depraved indifference or simply as benign neglect, the impact would be the same – race issues were expediently ignored as white women fought for the goals that would most impact them, often to the detriment of the African American women who fought at their side. Each opportunity white women leaders had to adopt policies that would embrace all women were bartered away to achieve narrow goals that affected only them. By choosing “white” over “right” the leaders of the suffrage/women’s movement solidified the racist foundation that still permeates the policy decisions of today’s women’s movement.
And before white women leaders start issuing press releases about how many women of color are on their boards or their staff to show how non-racist they are, let me clarify. I am not calling the white women leaders of today’s women’s movement racist. I know most of you and do not believe that you are. But there is a difference between personal politics and public policies. While your personal politics may be fine examples of your antiracist attitudes, many of the public policies of your movement, with its expediency and exclusionary politics, are inherently racist. They will remain so until you are willing to acknowledge it and take crucial steps toward changing it.

An example from the past that clearly highlights the discrepancies between personal politics and public policies comes from the life of suffragist Susan B. Anthony. This story was originally told by Ida B. Wells, a black suffragist, in her autobiography and retold by Angela Davis in her book, *Women, Race and Class*. Since it is more easily accessible, I’ve cited Ms. Davis’ book because, for those of you who may want to read more.

In 1894, during the height of the women’s suffrage battle, Ida B. Wells was a guest in the home of her friend Susan B. Anthony, who was then president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). One morning, Ms. Anthony offered to have her secretary assist Ms. Wells in drafting some correspondence. After waiting all afternoon for the secretary to come to her chambers, Ms. Wells decided that the secretary had gotten occupied and drafted her letters in longhand. When Ms. Anthony returned home, she asked Ms. Wells why she had not used the secretary. Ms. Wells indicated that the secretary never came to her room. Ms. Anthony then asked the secretary what had happened and was told, “It’s all right for you to treat Negroes as equals, but I refuse to take dictation from a colored woman.” Ms. Anthony immediately fired the woman because, as she told Ms. Wells, she refused to tolerate racism in her home (personal politics).

However, when Ms. Wells asked her friend how she reconciled her personal distaste for racism with her public stands (she banned black women from starting branches of the NAWSA) and statements (she asked Frederick Douglass not to attend the organization’s meeting in Georgia) that seemingly accepted racism, Ms. Anthony explained that she “did not want anything to get in the way of bringing the southern white women into our suffrage associations” (public policies). The fact that what would “get in the way” was full equality for black women seemed to escape Ms. Anthony’s reasoning. So, the public policy that was the expedient route to achieving her goals of having more white women, even southern segregationists, involved in her movement was to shun the concerns and desires of black women suffragists who were already there.

When you consistently invite white staff members or board members to social events at your home, but exclude the one black staffer or board member because you don’t want her to feel “uncomfortable,” think about the message you are sending to the white staffers. When you create a “women of color” project with no budget and only one staff person, think about the message you are sending your state members and affiliates. Even something as simple as abandoning your integrated neighborhood for an all-white suburb because “the schools are better,” sends a message to future feminists (your daughters) that has racism at its base.

I believe that personal politics dictate public policy. As the mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of the men in power, white women were and are in the unique position to reject racism and instill a more equitable moral fiber within their own families, within their own movement and, ultimately, within America as a whole.
A special note to young black women who may be in a mainstream women’s organization: if you ever hear the words “the expedient course of action,” “incremental steps” or, the best phrase, “it’s just not the right time,” take careful note of the date and time these words were uttered, because that will be the moment when your rights as a woman of color were bargained away.

For decades, the leaders of the women’s movement have shied away from truly examining the racism within their own ranks and have instead used band-aid approaches, such as diversity conferences and women of color projects as their answers to a systemic and pervasive problem. Their failure in the past simply perpetuates racism and economic segregation in the present. Understanding how and why racism became embedded within the moral fabric of the women’s movement is important if real change is to take place. I have not written a detailed history because there is not space. However, at the end of this essay I have included a list of books detailing the relationship between African American women and the women’s movement.

WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

In 1869, the American Equal Rights Association (AERA), an organization started to “bring together abolitionists and feminists to agitate for black and woman suffrage,” reached an impasse. The 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would grant the right to vote to black men, but not to women, was up for state ratification. Frederick Douglass, who, along with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, founded the AERA, spoke in favor of a resolution to endorse the passage of the 15th Amendment that seemed to ignore the plight of black women:

When women, because they are women, are dragged from their homes and hung upon lampposts, when their children are torn from their arms and their brains dashed upon the pavement; when they are objects of insult and outrage at every turn; when they are in danger of having their homes burnt down over their heads; when their children are not allowed to enter schools; then they will have [the same] urgency to obtain the ballot.3

Many women members, including Stanton and Anthony, opposed the resolution, stating that it abandoned women, both white and black. However, Stanton’s arguments, then and later as she campaigned against the fifteenth amendment and in favor of women’s enfranchisement cast her position in both racist and classist terminology that left black abolitionists-feminists with no place to go:

American women of wealth, education, virtue and refinement, if you do not wish the lower orders of Chinese, Africans, Germans and Irish, with their low ideas of womanhood to make laws for you and your daughters. . . to dictate not only the civil, but moral codes by which you shall be governed, awake to the danger of your present position and demand that women too, shall be represented in the government.4

Sojourner Truth, who continued to believe in universal suffrage, also began to raise concerns about “the dangerous racism underlying the feminists’ opposition to black male suffrage.”5 Earlier in 1851, she had delivered her famous “Ain’t I a Woman” speech at a women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio, where she was the only black woman and was made to sit on the steps rather than the stage. Historians note that her speech drowned out many male hecklers who threatened to disrupt the conference and this was true. What most fail to note is that many of the hecklers were white women who did not want her to speak because they were afraid that “every newspaper in the land will have our cause mixed with the abolition of niggers, and we shall be utterly denounced.”6 The president of the...
convention, Francis Dana Gage ignored their concerns and allowed Truth to deliver her speech.” Sojourner Truth’s presence and speech specifically addressed the hypocrisy in the women’s rights movement. This same hypocrisy would arise 18 years later within the American Equal Rights Association.

The battle over the 15th Amendment was too much for the three-year old organization and in 1869, the AERA collapsed. In its place stood two distinct organizations with clearly different goals. Those supporting the 15th Amendment formed the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) and put their efforts into working for the passage of the 15th Amendment. Sexist remarks by male abolitionists over the three-year existence of AERA prompted women supporters of the AWSA to extract a promise that upon passage of the 15th Amendment, all future efforts of the organization would go into campaigns for women’s suffrage. Those women leaders, like Stanton and Anthony, who opposed the 15th Amendment formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and focused their attention on more universal suffrage rights. Although a number of black women, including Sojourner Truth, joined the Stanton/Anthony group, they did so with the hope that their presence would “keep the issue of racism alive in the faces of white feminists.”

But more and more, the statements by the white women leaders in opposition to passage of the 15th Amendment raised the race card and forced black women to rethink their participation. In their quest to win the vote for women, Stanton and Anthony joined forces with avowed racist and segregationist millionaire, George Francis Train, to finance their campaign to defeat the 15th Amendment in Kansas. Both Anthony and Stanton wrote articles using inflammatory and negative terms about the former slaves and argued that giving black men the vote before white women would place white women in serious peril. Anthony later used those public statements on race in the 1890s while working for passage of the 19th Amendment and Stanton used some of the same racist slogans to promote her own campaign for political office.

By the time the NWSA and the AWSA merged into the National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1890, the seeds of racism had already been sown within the women’s movement and American culture. Although the 15th Amendment had passed, black men were denied the right to vote in the South, and lynchings and violence toward black men, women and children were a daily occurrence. Suffrage rallies were either segregated or black women were forced to march in the back, black women were denied the right to organize branches of the NAWSA and black women were denied the right to speak at demonstrations and meetings. Anthony’s expediency ruled the day.

WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

In the early years of the birth control movement, African American women were strong supporters. In 1918, the Women’s Political Association of Harlem demanded that the American Birth Control League (ABCL), Margaret Sanger’s organization, place birth control clinics in the black community. Even W.E.B Dubois, cofounder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and a number of African American religious leaders supported the rights of black women to control their reproduction. A few years later, the ABCL involvement with the eugenics movement soon destroyed the birth control movement’s relationship with the black community. The eugenics movement preached limiting the birth rates of “undesirables” like poor women, immigrant and black women. In short, as Ms. Sanger wrote in the ABCL newsletter, “more children from the fit, less from the unfit.” The politics of the eugenics movement soon spread into more than 26 state legislatures that passed laws allowing the “mass sterilization” of women of color. Under these laws, “a total of more than 70,000 persons were involuntarily sterilized” by the mid 1930s. The majority of these individuals were women of color.
The pre-Roe v. Wade day battles around sterilization abuse simply “increased black distrust of the public health system and has fueled black opposition to family planning up to the present time.” The tensions between white and black women as they defined what reproductive rights meant for different communities deepened the divide. For white women, abortion rights – the right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy – was the cornerstone of their right to control their bodies. For them, “asserting autonomy and subjecthood” was the rationale for starting a women’s movement. Because white women controlled the mainstream women’s movement, that movement became “framed around choice: the choice to determine whether or not to have children, the choice to terminate a pregnancy, and the ability to make informed choices about contraceptive and reproductive technologies.”

For women of color, freedom from forced population control, including forced sterilization, was the cornerstone of our women’s movement. This women’s movement, more complex than just the right to an abortion, encompassed “different women [with] varying reproductive experiences, in part, depending on race and class position.” The efforts to involve the mainstream women’s movement in the anti-sterilization movement, that is, the right to bear children, was met with opposition from white women leaders.

The white women’s movement saw the right to sterilization as an element of “choice” because their physicians routinely rejected the desires of middle-class white women to be sterilized if they were too young or did not have children. Indeed, when the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse (CESA) began in the early 1970s to fight against forced sterilization, including working with public hospitals in New York to regulate sterilization, white women’s reproductive rights organizations refused to participate.

After a number of lawsuits were filed on behalf of young women of color – including by Norma Jean Serena, a young woman of Creek-Shawnee ancestry; Minnie Lee Relf, a 12-year old African American from Alabama; and Guadalupe Acosta, a poor Mexican woman living in California – the federal government (specifically the agency on Health, Education and Welfare [HEW]) was forced to revise its guidelines and regulations regarding sterilization. These revisions included “required waiting periods” and authorization forms printed in “a language understood by the women.”

The anti-sterilization battle was not the only time mainstream women’s and reproductive rights organizations ignored the needs and concerns of women of color. Like the suffrage movement, the white women leaders of the reproductive rights movement also faced numerous opportunities to address racial issues within their movement. And like the suffrage movement, they failed to incorporate the needs of women of color into their agenda.

In 1977, four years after the landmark U.S. Supreme Court Roe v. Wade decision that legalized abortion, Congress passed the Hyde Amendment prohibiting Medicaid funding for abortions for poor women. As with the anti-sterilization battle, leading reproductive rights and women’s organizations failed to confront “the overt white supremacy of the Right’s agenda and its own internal racism” by fighting for an issue that disproportionately impacted women of color. Several years later, as they fought a growing conservative movement to pass a constitutional amendment banning abortion, movement leaders developed messages around government interference that resonated with white, middle-class America, but shied away from “access” rights that resonated with women of color.

After the election of President Clinton in 1992, the reproductive rights organizations mobilized around a bill called the Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA) that would codify the Roe v. Wade decision into law. The bill language simply stated that “a State may not restrict the right of a woman to choose to terminate a pregnancy before fetal viability; or at any time, if such a termination is necessary to protect the life or health of the woman” [H.R. 25, 1993].
written, the bill did nothing to address the inequities for women of color and poor women caused by the federal funding restrictions under the Hyde Amendment. In fact, the Senate version of the bill, S. 25, explicitly stated that nothing in the bill would “prevent a State from declining to pay for the performance of abortions.” When confronted by women of color, welfare and civil rights organizations, the leadership of the women’s movement refused to include funding in FOCA. Instead, they cited FOCA as an “incremental” approach to the issue, adamantly insisting that FOCA remain as written. As consolation, they offered support for the Reproductive Health Equity Act (RHEA) to overturn the funding prohibitions. Of course, all resources went to passing FOCA. Consequently, the black women members of Congress refused to endorse the bill and Senator Carol Mosley-Braun, the only black woman in the Senate, withdrew her support for S. 25. Faced with what was becoming a public embarrassment, the Congressional sponsors of FOCA withdrew the bill. This “incremental” political strategy of protecting the legal right to abortion while ignoring access issues for poor women and women of color has become a staple within the movement. In its wake, this policy “divides feminists, alienates poor women, women of color, more radical white activists, and those from the holistic women’s environment.”

Notes

2 Ibid., p. 111
3 Ibid., p. 82
5 Davis, p. 83
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., p. 150
“Being invisible, for some women in our study, means being relegated to narrow, limiting, unimportant tasks that offer few opportunities for growth and advancement or being assigned to a “racial job” that pushes them into a Black ghetto within the White workplace.”


NO, I DON’T KNOW SHIRLEY JOHNSON OF SHREVEPORT, LOUISIANA!

PREFACE

It was 1995. I was the executive director of CARAL-South, the Southern California affiliate of the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL), now called ProChoice America. I had worked on reproductive health and women’s issues for 25 years, 15 of those years in California. My expertise was in campaign strategy; communications; legislative policy around women’s issues, including reproductive health issues; and grassroots organizing. I was usually the only black woman present at most reproductive rights coalition meetings. I knew the leadership of every women’s organization in the state. Although I ran a predominately white organization, I had, somewhat consciously, accepted the role of the “expert” on black women and reproductive rights issues. At first, I took on the role because there was no one else at the table and I had some expertise. Later, I increased my knowledge using polling data conducted by others, research and articles that I read, materials from black women’s organizations I participated in, discussions with black women legislators, what I learned from talking with women in welfare rights and civil rights organizations, and my own experiences. I had no qualms about including this “expert” role as part of what I brought to the table. That is, until the O.J. Simpson verdict.

After a predominately black jury (eight black women, one black man, two white women and one Hispanic man) rendered a “not guilty” verdict in the 1995 murder trial of O.J. Simpson, I spent
an inordinate amount of time responding to the question “what on earth were they [meaning the black women on the jury] thinking? I got phone calls from coalition partners asking this question. I’d go to coalition meetings and be asked about these black women jurors.

I’d go to political events and be confronted by white women, mostly members of the National Organization for Women (NOW), asking what I thought about the black women jurors. These questions were usually followed by more insulting comments about the intelligence levels or the morality of the black women on the jury. Since I felt they were jurors who heard the evidence and came to a verdict, the questioners were never happy with my responses.

Because I was involved in the women’s movement, there was an assumption that I would vilify these black women jurors for deciding on a verdict they thought was right. Because I was a black woman I was expected to justify the actions of these black women jurors. When I chose not to participate in the debate, these women were furious. Some of the confrontations reminded me of the pictures of white women screaming at young black children as they entered all white schools. I did not understand why these women were so emotionally caught up in this one case that they could not look at it rationally.

Then the Los Angeles chapter of NOW decided to organize boycotts of news stations that interviewed O.J. Simpson and a nightly vigil at the home of Nicole Simpson. That’s when things got really nasty.

CARAL-South was asked to endorse the boycotts and candlelight vigils and to help mobilize people. After my board of directors vetoed the idea (all but one was white), I informed L.A. NOW that CARAL-South’s priority was reproductive rights and we would not be helping with the boycotts. The explanation fell on deaf ears and the phone calls began.

The first calls were early in the morning at work. I was informed that I was a traitor to women’s rights for sticking up for these “stupid” jurors. A few phone callers even called me the N-word. I got calls late at night to my unlisted telephone number (on the reproductive rights coalition roster) at home. After 25 years of work in reproductive rights issues, I was really “just a black [insert the N-word here] woman who thought I was too big for my britches.” All my expertise was just thrown out the window and I had to defend eight black women I had never met. These white women who called wanted me to be responsible for the actions of these black women jurors, even though they did not accept responsibility for the two white women jurors who had also rendered a “not guilty” verdict. Did they think that somehow these eight black women wrestled the two white women and the Hispanic man to the floor and made them render a unanimous “not guilty” verdict against their will?


As an African American woman, I’ve spent the last 25 years, personally and professionally, within the women’s movement. I supported women candidates, worked on women’s issues, marched in support of women’s equality and taught and spoke before women’s studies classes. I believed my long-term involvement within the movement made a difference. Until the phone call on Oct. 12.

The caller described herself as an irate L.A. women’s group activist with a message for the board of directors of the California Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League-South. She said she was “incensed, outraged and deeply, deeply offended” that CARAL was not helping to organize the candlelight vigils.
or the boycotts that resulted from the O.J. Simpson verdict. My explanation that CARAL’s priorities were defending women’s reproductive rights from an anti-choice Congress fell on deaf ears.

Then, in a low conspiratorial voice, the caller said, “I don’t want you to get in trouble, but I’d like to get a message to your board without that black woman who now runs CARAL hearing about it.” She was confident that the priorities of “that black woman” were not in the best interest of the women’s movement. It took me a moment to realize she was talking about me. And that she had no idea she was actually talking to me.

In that moment, 25 years of professional and personal commitment were discounted – dismissed because of the color of my skin. I went home physically ill.

I haven’t been able to shake that feeling. I still go to work each day. I still meet with legislators. I talk with reporters about the threats to women’s reproductive rights. But the nauseous feeling in the pit of my stomach remains.

I realize that the anonymous caller was correct in one regard. Each time I leave my office, my priorities are not the same as the majority of the women’s movement.

I deal with a store clerk who treats me with less courtesy than the white customer standing next to me. I refuse to accompany the hostess at a Santa Monica restaurant to a table by the kitchen past the better seats her white customers enjoy.

I play tailgate harassment with a white Beverly Hills cop as I drive to the Regent Beverly Wilshire. He follows me for several blocks, slowing down when I slow down, turning when I turn, speeding up when I speed up. He’s already run my license plate number and has no legitimate reason to stop me. So he follows patiently, hoping I’ll slide a little beyond the stop sign. Or exceed the speed limit on a residential street. Or fail to signal before I turn. I’ve played this game before. Not getting stopped before I reach my destination becomes my new priority.

If you are black in America, your priorities shift each time you walk into a store or a restaurant or drive down a street.

The brutal murders of Michael James and Jackie Burden in Fayetteville, N.C., on Dec. 7 are evidence of how quickly priorities can shift if you’re an African American. The couple was unaware that three white soldiers from Fort Bragg were on the prowl. Unaware that one carried a 9-millimeter semiautomatic weapon. Unaware that they were targets in a sick game prompted by a neo-Nazi white supremacist group to “hunt and harass black people.” At the end of a night of shifting priorities, James and Burden were dead – six bullets pumped into their heads at close range.

So when the leaders of a women’s movement state that domestic violence provides a “needed break from all that talk of racism,” I wonder whom she is addressing. It can’t be the families of James and Burden. It certainly isn’t me.
Being black in America provides no breaks from racism. You go to school, work hard, raise a family, move up in your profession. You walk a fine line between your world and theirs, holding your breath – waiting. For the moment when someone looks at you with disdain and mutters an ugly racial epithet, silently or out loud. No matter how well educated you are, no matter how wealthy you are, you know that day will come.

For some, that day ends with violent and tragic consequences. For others, it comes as a series of slights every day, every week, every year. For African American feminists, racism is not in competition with domestic violence or any other women’s issue. It’s a package. To suggest otherwise merely demonstrates how far American feminism has to go before it is anything more than a white women’s movement.

Was my experience an isolated occurrence? Could it happen again? Of course it could and it does every day. African American professionals go about our lives thinking that things have changed, then bam – we walk into a department store and a white salesclerk follows us around. We go to a fancy restaurant and are seated in a spot next to the kitchen. A police officer stops us because we’re driving an expensive car or are in an upscale neighborhood. It happens all the time. I just expect more from the women’s movement than from the general public. These women are supposed to be our sisters.

BEING THE BLACK “EXPERT”

I told this story because it represents one of the flaws within most mainstream women’s organizations. Many of the national organizations have so few women of color in top professional positions that the few who are there are forced to become the “experts” on whatever community they are from.

If you are an African American in a predominately white organization, for some reason, the people in the organization assume you know every person in that “one” national black community – you know that “one” black community the media talks about where we all grew up? And, of course, you also know the “one” black leader of the “one” black community. Therefore, you are expected to answer for every action of black people, because, after all, you know each one of them personally. If some teenage gangbanger does a drive-by shooting, you should be able to explain how this kid went wrong. If a black member of Congress votes wrong on a reproductive health issue, you must know why or can ask him/her the next time the “one” black community has dinner together – you know, the one with the fired chicken, collard greens and sweet potato pie, and, don’t forget Tiger’s chitlins.

This would be funny, except that it’s not! Somehow white organizations always want the one or two black staff members they have to be “experts” on the black community. If they want to know what black women think about emergency contraception, instead of paying for a poll to find out, they ask a black woman on staff, regardless of what her job is. If they want a member of the Congressional Black Caucus to support a bill, they ask the black staffer to call the office. In fact, I doubt that there is a single head of any women’s organization that has ever officially met with the Congressional Black Caucus.

Every few years, mainstream women’s organizations decide they will conduct outreach to African American women. Perhaps there have been complaints by Board members about the lack of diversity in the staff or a funder has money for a “women of color” project. Whatever the rationale, the hiring of the black staffer within these organizations seems to follow the same pattern – a young black woman is hired as the coordinators of a “diversity” or “women of color” project. She is given a small office, a miniscule budget (covering her salary, some office supplies and some copying costs) and no staff to assist her. She is then told to work with state
affiliates and members (there may be a little money for a few trips to a couple of states) to increase the active participation of African American women in the organization. At most, this young woman might last two years.

During that time period, because the organization usually has limited contacts with black leaders or organizations, she will find herself serving as the organization’s “expert” on the entire black race – “What does the black community (singular) think about x?” “How will black legislative leaders respond to you?” and, my favorite, “Why do black women feel this way?” She is expected to know all the important black people on the issue or at the very least, know someone who does know them. She is expected to provide insight into the black community whenever the need arises. This is not all bad. After all, having one black voice at the table is better than having none at all.

CHOOSING TO BE THE “BLACK” EXPERT

Holding yourself out as the “expert” on what black communities think about reproductive rights issues at your organization can be a big ego booster. The role started out innocently enough. You’re the only black woman at a staff meeting and you feel you have to add some thoughts about the impact of some issue or legislative policy on young black women, meaning you and your friends. Your boss and other policy staffers extrapolate your statements to mean all black women. That’s not your fault; you were just trying to make them expand their thinking process. At the next meeting, the director of government affairs asks you outright how some policy might impact black women and you answer, again speaking from your own experience.

Soon you are invited to participate in meetings that are well above your pay grade. Then, one afternoon your boss walks down the long corridor to your very small cubbyhole of an office to ask your opinion about how black women will respond to some media strategy. You’re hooked now. Heady stuff being the black “expert.” Here is where it gets sticky. Maybe you have to back up your statements with evidence. Or, worse yet, you have to defend the idiotic remark of some black conservative pundit – “I can’t believe what Armstrong Williams said, what is his problem?” Finger points to you to respond.

Having your organization put you in the position of speaking for the entire black community is illogical, not to mention unfair to you. Don’t let yourself get lost in this movement phenomenon, resist being labeled as the black “expert” for your organization unless you really are and it’s why you were hired. If it is not your professional expertise, then being labeled as the black “expert” is a short-lived proposition. After a while, your opinion will only be sought if the organization wants to know what black people think. If your professional expertise is in public health, grassroots organizing, coalition building, legislative analysis, or any other professional area, these are the skills that are important. If you are not careful, soon your professional skills will be forgotten and your ability to advance based on those skills will be jeopardized.

You always come to your position with the perspective of an African American woman, that’s a given. But it was your professional abilities and expertise that got you the job. If you recently read a poll or did some research on how black women feel or think about issues of reproductive health (PEP, the ProChoice Education Project, recently concluded a poll of African American and Latinas), then, by all means, speak up. But, if you then find yourself unintentionally pushed into the role of the “expert” on the black community simply because you spoke up at a meeting, extricate yourself immediately. Don’t be pigeonholed into the “diversity” box simply because of your color. Pick and choose when you want to present information based on being an African American woman versus a public health expert, a community organizer, a legislative analyst, or whatever your professional expertise might be.
ALL MY SISTAHS
Building Your Own Network

PREFACE

In 1983, I ran for the chair of the Women’s Caucus of the California Democratic Party over the objections of many of the white women leaders of the Party (see “Fair Shake or Shakin’ Things Up” for more details). I had been an active member of various women’s political organizations, including the California chapters of the National Women’s Political Caucus and the National Organization for Women, for more than five years. Because this was a statewide position within the party, I met with the leadership of women’s organizations throughout the state. Somehow I needed to counter the white women’s voting block that was supporting my opponent. To mobilize the votes I needed, I called on my “sistah network.”

Who, you might ask, was the “sistah network?” We were nine women who relied on each other for support and feedback on work and personal issues. I went to college with three of the women, and I met two through a women’s writing group in Saint Louis, one through my college roommate, and two others through work. We all lived in the Los Angeles area and worked in varying professional capacities. One of the women was a human resources person for a business, another was the executive assistant for a corporate vice president, another was a bank manager and two were schoolteachers. Only two of the nine women were politically active. What we had in common was that we were all professional women of color who had certain ideals, positions on political issues and career goals. The
network started as informal gatherings to talk about our lives. We were friends who met for drinks after work, occasionally had brunch on Sundays, sometimes went shopping together and spoke on the phone several times a week. Over the years, the network became more formal in that once a month we met in person over dinner and tried to schedule at least one lunch. Not everyone could meet every time. We served as sounding boards for each other as we all navigated work-related issues. If someone had an urgent work-related issue that could not be discussed over the phone, one or two of us would meet for coffee during work hours to help her resolve it.

So, when I needed help with my campaign, I called them. Each of the women called other friends to help phone delegates to the convention, to set up speaking engagements for me with Democratic Party organizations and to identify delegates who were eligible to vote. By the time the state convention began, the race for caucus chair was a close one between one other candidate and me. The victor would be the person who turned out the most votes. All of the members of my “sistah network” came to the convention in Sacramento and helped to elect me as the first African American woman to head the Women’s Caucus.

The members of your own “sistah network” will likely change as you mature, change jobs or relocate. Over the years, the women who made up my original “sistah network” have remained my friends, but because of geographical proximity, we are no longer part of each other’s “sistah network.” When I moved to Washington, D.C., I built a new “sistah network.” All of the women in this “sistah network” worked for nonprofit organizations in D.C. Two worked on issues of reproductive rights, one on environmental justice, one on HIV/AIDS prevention issues, another on civil rights, and I on adolescent reproductive and sexual health. Unlike the network in California, all of the women in my D.C. “sistah network” were African American.

**Profiles of My “Sistah Networks”**

**California**

As I mentioned, there were nine of us who worked within the “sistah network” for over 12 years. Two of the women moved to other states during the eighth and ninth years.

**Background:** Four of us went to college and/or graduate school together, two were from my women’s writing group, two I met through work, and my college roommate brought the last into the group.

**Racial Composition:** Six of us were African American and three were Latina.

**Professional:** I owned my own political consulting firm and another woman owned her own public relations firm. Of the other seven women, one was a human resources director for a business, one was a public interest attorney, one was an executive assistant for a corporate vice president, one managed a bank, two taught school, and one was a newspaper reporter.

**Marital Status:** Six were either married or got married during the time period of our “sistah network.”

**Political Affiliations:** Eight of us were registered Democrats, one was a registered Independent. All of us were pro-choice and had been actively involved in either anti-Vietnam, civil rights, women’s rights and/or voting rights activities during our college days. Although everyone voted each election, only two of us remained politically active.
Washington, D.C.

There are only six members in my “sistah network” in Washington, D.C. We worked with each other for five years.

Background: I met four of the women through networking either while I worked on Capitol Hill or while working at a nonprofit organization. I knew the fifth woman from college.

Racial Composition: All six of us were African American.

Professional: All of us worked in director levels for advocacy nonprofit organizations. Like me, two were former Hill staffers.

Marital Status: Four were married or in committed relationships; two were single.

Political Affiliations: All members were progressive Democrats. I worked on adolescent reproductive and sexual rights issues, two worked on reproductive rights, one on environmental justice, one on HIV/AIDS prevention issues and another on civil rights. All of us were politically active.

BUILDING YOUR SISTAH NETWORK

Because you will rely on these women to help you navigate your profession, you need to be careful about the women you select for your “sistah network.” They will be privy to your feelings about your job, your plans for your career and your secrets about opportunities. They must serve as a sounding board, helping to keep you sane throughout the challenges that are associated with your career. Choose carefully. Consider the following criteria in selecting members of your “sistah network:”

- **Trustworthy** – you want women who can keep a secret. You will want to discuss business with these women and know that what is said is confidential.

- **Intelligent** – you want women who you believe are smart enough to give good advice and whom you can rely on to help you navigate problems.

- **Understanding** – you want women who will not be judgmental, who will hear you out and help you weigh the pros and cons.

- **Honesty** – you want women who will be straightforward.

- **Availability** – There is a time commitment so you want women who are willing to put in the time. And you want women who are in the same geographical area as you so you can occasionally meet face to face.

I would recommend that the first “sistah network” you form be composed of friends you have made during college and/or graduate school. These are women you know and with whom you already have a trusting relationship. After you’ve been in the work field for a while, you can decide whether expanding the network works for you. The “sistah network” I had in California lasted for 12 years with no additions even after two of the women moved.

I would also caution against having people who work in the same organization as you as members of your “sistah network.” There will be days when you need to turn to the network about your job and you do not want to run the risk of what you say being recycled back to your place of employment. Your work is not your society. Yes, there may be occasional drinks after work, even a dinner or...
two, but being colleagues with the women at the office is not the same as having them be members of your “sistah network.”

Finally, don’t be afraid to be selective. Your “sistah network” should benefit all members. Don’t feel obligated to have someone as a member simply because she is a friend. Although there is some socializing, the network is really designed to assist you in making decisions about your career. Incorporate the forming of your “sistah network” into your long-term planning (see the next essay). And above all, have fun.
“So the relationship between race and sex, one linked by the Black woman, means that her role is of the utmost importance. History suggests that it is only when her convictions are firm in this regard, can a society – one born in the depths of racism and sexism – be transformed.”

(Paula Gidding, When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America, 1984)

Preface

My first job out of college was as a teaching assistant in the English Department at St. Louis University in Missouri where I was also working on my Masters degree. My career goal, a five- to seven-year plan, was to earn a Masters and maybe a PhD at St. Louis University and then teach literature at a small liberal arts college or university and write novels.

While living in St. Louis, I attended a number of Democratic Party meetings in the black community. At a meeting to discuss a vacant seat for city alderman during my first year as a teaching assistant, I met Dr. Robert Williams, a black psychologist who was the head of the Black Studies Department at Washington University. He was also the professor who challenged the racism in the SAT exams and had coined the phrase “ebonics.” By the time I graduated with my Master’s degree, I had a job offer to teach courses in the Black Studies Department at Washington University. I spent the next six years teaching courses on black women writers, African American linguistics and African, African American and Caribbean folklore (my Master’s thesis). And I met my new boss purely by chance at a political meeting.

While teaching at Washington University, I remained active in St. Louis politics. I worked on a number of political campaigns, raised money for candidates and wrote mail pieces and speeches – all as a volunteer. I soon discovered that not only was I good at campaign work, I liked politics better than I liked teaching. By the time I left St. Louis, I had managed the campaign to elect Gwen...
Giles, the first black woman state senator in Missouri, handled the media operations for the campaigns of two city aldermen, wrote the direct mail pieces for two State Assembly candidates and ran the get-out-the-vote operation for the re-election of Congressman William L. Clay. Along the way, I also wrote the policy position papers for another four or five candidates. All of this part-time while I continued to teach at Washington University.

After six years of teaching and doing politics, I made a long-term career change from academia to politics and public policy. I moved to California, started my own political consulting business and worked on a number of campaigns, including a presidential campaign. I never got my PhD, but several years later I received a degree from Pepperdine Law School in California. I had no intention of practicing law, but the public policy field was becoming more complex and legal training was critical. So to enhance my public policy career, I took three years off to attend law school. During the last half of my third year, I managed the campaign for Proposition F – the successful Los Angeles City Charter Amendment introduced following the Rodney King police brutality incident. The Charter Amendment, which passed with more than 60 percent of the vote, changed the way the Chief of Police of Los Angeles is hired.

Today, I have gone back to my first love – writing – and am working on my first novel. However, I still maintain a consulting relationship on policy issues with my last employer, Advocates for Youth.

IN HINDSIGHT

As they say, hindsight is 20/20. If I had known that I would end up where I started – writing – would I have done things differently? Probably! On the other hand, without my political background, I would not have the vast amount of material and experience in politics that I need for my writing. I could spend my time dissecting every decision that I made, every action that I took at any given moment instead of actually living in the moment I am in. For instance, should I have stayed with CBS Television in the early 1980s and transferred from the entertainment division to news? Perhaps! Then I could have written about politics rather than lived it. Hindsight is just that – looking back at your choices and trying to decide if they were the right ones. This is the stuff of memoirs. Your experiences are what makes you who you are today.

So the question is: if life is so fungible, should I set goals? The answer is a resounding “yes.” However, sometimes, as the above story illustrates, opportunity knocks and your goals change. My goal was simple – teach in a liberal arts college. Once I achieved that, I discovered that it wasn’t enough. But without meeting that goal, I never would have known I needed more. Unless you set your short- and long-term goals in the first place, you will never be able to distinguish a “career-changing” opportunity from just a plain job change.

SETTING GOALS

Remember, there are jobs and there are careers. Do not confuse the two. That’s the first step in setting goals. Your goals are about your career. Your jobs are the steps in that career. Goals keep you from jumping from job to job with little assessment on how that movement will impact your career. I continued to teach at Washington University long after I knew I wanted a career in politics and public policy. Why, because the transition had to be a stable one. I forgot to mention that during those years, I got married (planned), had a son (also planned) and divorced (not planned). So, as I contemplated a career change, I also had to consider the fact that I was the mother of a five-year-old son. So, your personal life also must factor into your goals.
Learn to set goals – five years, ten years. And try to make them realistic. I am always surprised when young people who have just graduated from college tell me that in five years they see themselves as the executive director of a nonprofit organization. While there are a few nonprofits that are specifically run for and by young people, most require a lot more years of experience for their senior positions. Remember, it is not just the years of experience, but also the skills that you learn that make those years worthwhile.

It used to be that a person stayed at the same company for her/his entire working life. No more. There is no such thing as a permanent job anymore. This does not mean that you should just jump from job to job. While that may meet some short-term needs, like earning more money, your professionalism will be called into question and your long-term career could be affected. When you leave one organization for better opportunities make sure that you don’t burn any bridges. Never leave projects unfinished or tasks undone. And always give sufficient notice. The people at your old organization may become your employers again in the future. Don’t leave them stranded.

I am always amazed when I read the resumes of people in their late 20s or early 30s and see that they held one job for six months, another for eight, and another for less than five. They will inevitably say that an opportunity presented itself that they felt they could not pass up. But, what a potential employer will see is that they are not very reliable. Unless you are a campaign worker where the election cycle dictates short-term employment, you should try to stay in positions for at least a couple of years. Otherwise, don’t be surprised if your next potential employer is reluctant to trust that you will stay at the job in their organization any longer than you stayed at the last one.

In Summary – *SET SOME GOALS*

- **Short-term** (2 to 5 years) goals relate to the JOBS you accept that will help you acquire the experiences and skills to achieve your long-term career goals. What is your first job and where? What skills do you want to learn? Is this the organization you want to work for as a CAREER? Revisit your short-term goals each year to ensure that they are still helping you move toward the career you want.

- **Long-term** (10, 15, 20 years) goals relate to your CAREER. Who do you want to be in ten years? In twenty years? Where do you want to live? How much do you want to make? Do you plan to be married? Have children? Own a house? Then plot the skills and experiences you need to get there. Re-examine your long-term goals whenever you reach a short-term benchmark.

Goal setting may sound difficult, but writing down your goals will help you to objectively weigh whether a job opportunity is just another job or an actual career opportunity. Remember, it’s your life. If you don’t take care of you, who will?

**FINDING A MENTOR**

Why should you have a mentor? Simply put, for advice and to help you pave the way for your career. The broad definition of a mentor is an experienced person who goes out of her/his way to help you set professional and personal goals and develop the skills to reach them. A mentor is someone you can talk to, who helps you weigh the pros and cons of career decisions, who serves as a sounding board as you struggle at any specific job, who helps you achieve your goals. The mentoring relationship can be informal (a number of people, such as former professors, colleagues at work, etc.) or formal (one person who provides ongoing support and help).
Whether you decide on an informal or a formal mentor relationship, it is up to you to make the mentoring relationship work for both you and the mentor. A mentor’s time is valuable and you should make the most of the time you spend with her/him. Before approaching a mentor, spend some time deciding what you want from the mentoring relationship:

- Identify what you need from a mentor
- Decide how much time you can devote to a mentor-mentee relationship
- Develop realistic expectations about the relationship
- Identify names of potential mentors
- Approach potential mentors for a “get-acquainted” chat

Your initial “get acquainted” chats with potential mentors will allow both you and the potential mentor to discover whether your personalities work together. Once you have found someone who is willing to be your mentor, schedule your first meeting.

While there are a number of resources that cover the relationship between mentors and mentees, most place the mentee in the position of simply following the mentor’s directions. You want to establish a professional relationship with your mentor that involves a professional partnership. You want to agree on when and how often you meet; expectations and objectives for the relationship; confidentiality issues; communications vehicles – in person, phone, email; and time limits for the relationship. Once you have reached those agreements, it is up to you to manage the relationship.

**NETWORKING**

Have you ever gone to a reception where one person seems to know everyone and everyone knows her. Others seem to keep to themselves, speaking to only a few people they already know, waiting until they can escape. You should approach networking as a necessary part of boosting your reputation. Reaching out to colleagues from other organizations, superiors, policy makers, and agency staff can help to advance your career.

If you are an introvert, as I am, then networking is one of the more difficult parts of your professional life. Personally, I prefer the company of a good book, a fire and a glass of cabernet. But the nonprofit world is a small one and networking with people in your field is critical to gaining influence and achieving your professional goals. You should make a list of contacts you consider critical to your career. First, check off those people you already know. Next, you should identify the gaps. These are the people you need to target in your networking activities.

Following are some tips for making your networking activities at an event more productive:

- **Arrive early** – you want to make the most of your opportunity to meet everyone, so you should arrive before the mass of people.

- **Set your goals** – before the gathering, make a plan for what you want to achieve. Make it simple. If there is a specific policy maker, or a foundation project officer, or the executive director of an organization you want to meet, do some research on those people before coming to the reception. If it is a policy maker, know what positions he/she has on your issue. If it is someone from a foundation, know whether the foundation funds your organization and if so, for which programs. If you are looking to move to another organization, make sure you acquaint yourself with the current issues it is working on.

**Exhaling: In Search of Self**

Walk in My Shoes

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- **Bring plenty of business cards** – no matter how engaging your conversations may be, your targets may meet many other people that night, so be sure to give them your business card.

- **Mingle** – this has always been the most difficult part for me, making small talk. However, the entire reason for attending these events is to meet other people. So don’t just talk with your friends.

- **Introduce yourself to strangers** – this is second on my list of the most difficult aspects of networking. However, meeting and talking to strangers is part and parcel with “mingling.”

- **Dress appropriately** – if the event is after work, then business attire is appropriate. If the event is formal, then dress for the occasion. Your appearance will be the first thing that people notice and the thing that will make a lasting impression. If you want to be treated like a professional, then dress like one. Networking events are not the place for bare midriffs or skirts so short and tight that you can barely move. Also pay attention to details like a run in your stocking or any food stains on your blouse. If necessary, change before going to the event.

- **Remember names** – most networking events will have name tags. Wear yours and glance at the name tag of anyone you’ve already met so that you can place the face with the name for any follow-up. If you get a business card from them, you can discreetly write a description on the back.

- **Lastly, be yourself** – if you are comfortable with your appearance and your knowledge of issues, then you will make a good impression.

- It is extremely important to follow through with any promises you made to people during these networking sessions. If you told a policy maker that you would send her some material, do so immediately. If you mentioned an article to a colleague, remember to email it to her/him. This will maintain your credibility and provide you with another reason to contact the person. If you succeeded in meeting one of your “targets,” then follow up for lunch or coffee.
FAIR SHAKE OR SHAKIN’ THINGS UP

PREFACE

The first statement was said in 1983 by a white feminist who was prominent in the National Women’s Political Caucus in California regarding my decision to run for chair of the Women’s Caucus of the California Democratic Party. No African American woman had ever run for office in the Women’s Caucus.

A white feminist said the second statement 17 years later in 2000 during a conference call after I told her and others that Representative Barbara Lee (D-CA) would be the lead sponsor of the Family Life Education Act, a bill to provide federal funding for comprehensive sex education programs. The speaker stressed that she believed there were more suitable members to approach who had more experience promoting reproductive health issues. All of her alternatives were white members with whom the women’s organizations had relationships. Representative Lee, an African American woman, was not on their list. The speaker also stated that her organization and others would not sign on in support of the bill if I took this approach.

In both cases, despite the underlying racism and potential for defeat, I moved ahead and, in both cases, prevailed.

In California, I mobilized my “sistah” network of African American, Latina, Asian Pacific Islander, and white feminists to counter the white women’s voting block that was supporting my opponent. I won! I was elected chair of the Women’s Caucus of the California Democratic Party. I was reelected two years later with no opposition. During my four-year tenure, the Women’s Caucus
had the highest membership in its history, raised money for women candidates and ran women’s get-out-the-vote campaigns during the 1984 presidential race and the 1986 Congressional and state legislature campaigns. More women were elected to the California legislature than ever before.

On December 12, 2001, Representative Barbara Lee introduced the Family Life Education Act (H.R. 3469) in the House of Representatives. The bill eventually had 89 cosponsors, spawned similar state bills in more than 11 states, including California, Illinois, Maine, New Jersey, New York and Oregon, and had more than 90 organizational endorsements, including the organizations on the conference call. I reached out to the “sistah” network within civil rights, faith-based, environmental, women’s empowerment, legal and medical organizations to garner organizational endorsements that left these other organizations with nowhere else to go. The most recent version of the bill, Responsible Education about Life Act (REAL), was introduced in both the Senate and the House in February 2005. Representative Lee again sponsored the House bill, H.R. 768 and Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) sponsored the Senate bill, S. 368.

Despite the 17 year span between these two incidents, both demonstrate that race continues to play a role in the women’s movement. In both incidents, white women thought that they could dictate what roles I, an African American woman, was allowed to play in “their” movement. In both cases, they underestimated my commitment and the broad-based network of women of color who came to my support. But I chose my battles carefully. In both cases, there were other instances before and after that were less important to my goals where I chose not to engage.

So, the moral of this story – well, there are several. Don’t stand around waiting for a “fair shake” – it may never come. Pick your battles and don’t be afraid to “shake things up” when you think you are right, even when others may be lining up against you! And always, always get your “sistah” network to watch your back.

If I had wanted to keep the status quo while waiting for others to define my “fair shake” within the women’s organizations, I would have run for office in the Black Caucus of the California Democratic Party. But I had paid my dues. I was an active member of a number of women’s organizations, including the National Women’s Political Caucus and the National Organization for Women. I had raised money for women candidates, walked precincts and staffed phone banks for their candidacies. And I believed that I had the skills to do a great job. Part of my goal was to change how Democratic elected officials, feminists and the media viewed the women’s movement in California. After all, California was becoming a more diverse state and the women’s organizations had not even attempted to reflect that diversity in their leadership. The next morning, as chair of the Women’s Caucus, I had one-on-one meetings with the Democratic candidates for president who were attending the California Democratic Party convention – Cranston, Glenn, Hart, Jackson, and Mondale. All, except Reverend Jesse Jackson and Senator Gary Hart, who already knew of my victory, seemed surprised that I was the chair of the Women’s Caucus. After being introduced to me, one of the candidates (who will remain nameless) began our meeting by discussing affirmative action and his support for civil rights. After his aide informed him that I was the chair of the Women’s Caucus, not the Black Caucus, he started talking about pay equity and more women in Congress without missing a beat. His aide at least had the decency to look embarrassed.

In Washington, D.C., I could have had one of the white (and more well known to the reproductive rights community) members of Congress introduce the sex education bill in order to “get along” with my white feminist friends, but my goal was different. I wanted to move the debates around comprehensive sex education away from “anti-abortion” politics that conservatives used and the small pro-choice clique that controlled the issue on our side, to a more diverse circle of organizations, including medical, civil rights and religious organizations. I also wanted to link comprehensive sex education to the issue of education – medically accurate and science-based education.
This meant placing the issue in the hands of a representative who these other groups viewed as credible on larger issues and who would not see comprehensive sex education merely as a bargaining chip between family planning supporters and abstinence-only supporters as it had been in the past. Because of her long-standing support for sound HIV/AIDS education and her support within religious and civil rights organizations, Representative Lee was the ideal candidate. So, by shaking up the issue and the structure that had been built around the issue, we were able to increase media and public visibility of what was being done with federal funding for abstinence-only programs and to develop a proactive strategy for fighting on the issue.

Where the white women representing reproductive rights organizations saw Representative Lee’s leadership as marginalizing the issue of sexuality education (making it a black issue rather than a women’s issue), I saw her leadership as expanding the issue to reach constituencies that had been left out of the process.

However, in full disclosure, there was also a certain level of stubbornness on my part in both of these incidents. I hate being told what I cannot do. I moved forward because I had specific goals in mind and there was an opportunity. I also had others within my network, in California a coalition of women of color and in Washington, D.C. the leadership of my organization, who were willing to back what I thought was the right approach.

SHAKING THINGS UP

Before we move on, I want to address something that drives me crazy – the phrase “not in my job description.” If I hear one more young, African American woman in her 20s say that something they were asked to do at work is “not in my job description,” I will scream. I hear it on the subway as people are on the way to and from work. I hear it in restaurants as young women meet their friends for lunch. I hear it in department stores as women shop. I won’t even discuss the stupidity of having these complaint sessions in public places where anyone can overhear you. Let’s suffice it to say - ENOUGH! The phrase “not in my job description” should be dropped from your lexicon. The entire point of a job description is that it describes the job you are in NOW. If you wish to stay in that one position, collecting the same paycheck with a three percent cost of living increase for the next 20 years, then read no further. Your goal has been reached and I have nothing to tell you.

If, however, you wish to advance within your organization or professional field, then you not only have to do your current job well, you must also seek opportunities to enhance your skills, demonstrate that you can handle things outside that narrow job description, and take some risk. In short, you need to fight for your “fair shake” and be willing, sometimes, to shake things up a little.

None of this means that you should march into your boss’ office and issue daily ultimatums, NOT IF YOU WANT TO KEEP YOUR JOB! Nor does it mean that you should allow someone to take advantage of you. Understanding the fine balance that exists is critical to negotiating your way through any and all pitfalls. That balance is even more precarious within a movement that is dominated by white women who envision themselves as being above racism and paternalism.

LESSONS LEARNED

How does everything I’ve said translate into real life? After all, you want to remain true to your convictions, you want to make sure your voice is heard, and, yes, you don’t take stuff from anybody.

So here’s your hypothetical. **Disclaimer:** Like all hypotheticals, there is some truth to the scenario, but this is “really” a fictitious incident in a fictitious organization.
You are one of four (the only black) regional community organizers in the grassroots organizing department of a nonprofit women’s organization. You have excellent grassroots organizing skills, have worked in coalition with a number of Midwestern state coalitions and were hired to coordinate the organization’s affiliates in the Midwest region. By hiring you, the organization also responded to criticism from some board members about the organization’s field staff being all white.

Your short-term goal is to learn the legislative process at the federal and state levels. You would eventually like to work in the political department of the organization. Your long-term goal is to eventually become the government affairs/political head for a national nonprofit organization. Your organization’s annual conference is being planned and an advocacy day has been added for the day after the conference closes. All four regional organizers have been asked to mobilize at least 25 of their activists to attend the conference and to stay over an extra night for the advocacy day. No problem, you know that 53 activists from your states are attending and you quickly sign up 46 of them to stay for the lobby day. The other organizers are also as successful. Job completed.

A week later, the political department, which is running the advocacy day, asks each organizer to help make calls to set up the visits on the Hill. The two interns who were supposed to make all the calls decided to accept positions at other organizations. The political director and her deputy are frantic. Each regional organizer is given a list of activists and the names and phone numbers of their Congressional representatives to set up appointments.

When you get back to your office, you realize that rather than being given the list of representatives and activists from your states, you (the only black organizer) have been given only the names of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). Not only do you not know many of the staff from these offices (your Midwestern states only have a handful of CBC members), but you also do not know most of the activists on your list, as they are primarily from the eastern and southern regions. You also think it is an insult that you, the only black staff person, were given all the black members of Congress to call. What do you do?

a) Confront the political director about, what you believe, is the subtle racism that determined how she divided the list
b) Take a deep breathe and just make the calls
c) Dial up a few members of your “sistah” network to rant about the blatant racism of the organization, your level of frustration, and some help in deciding what to do
d) Complain about the subtle racism to the other three regional organizers
e) Quit

You could march into the political director’s office and point out the subtle racism in what she has done. Of course, your short-term goal is to work in this department. Plus, she likely won’t get it. Otherwise, she would not have divided the list this way in the first place. This is not the time to pick a fight – not if you can resolve the immediate situation in another way.

You could just suck it up and make the calls. This might be a good choice in the short term. However, when things calm down, I would have that talk. Because you want to work in the political department, you really should express how her actions affected you, but not while you are angry. Again, this is not the time to pick a fight.

Do not vent to other staffers. Even if they have shared frustrations about the organizations with you in the past, it is always unprofessional to say things about a colleague behind her back that you are not willing to say to her face. Plus, your fellow organizers might not see a problem and your gripes may eventually get back to the political director.
Personally, I pick “C” – that’s what the “sistah” network is for. The members’ job is to allow you to vent and then, hopefully, help you to calm down so that you can rationally assess the situation. In this case, the black “expert” assumption was made, either consciously or unconsciously, that you, an African American, would know the staff of the African American Congressional representatives. Regardless of whether the action was conscious or not, it is illogical to give you activists from the eastern and southern areas, regions that you don’t normally work, and ask you to work with them on just this one project.

Fine, venting is over. Now what? What’s the opportunity here? How do you shake things up and still keep your job? WARNING – If you accept this opportunity and move forward, it will mean more work for you.

An opportunity (a chance, an opening, room to grow) always means more work for you, but can also mean advancement. You meet with your fellow field coordinators and suggest that each of you call the representatives from your own states so that you can enhance your work with your own activists. Tell them that you are interested in learning more about the lobbying process and plan to accompany the activists as they conduct their legislative visits. You may find one or two other field coordinators who also want to learn legislative skills but you may also find some that don’t care. The purpose of meeting with them is to get them to buy into your idea as the logical approach to keeping the activists happy. After you have an agreement with your organizing colleagues, you approach (preferably as a group), the political director and suggest rearranging the lists so that each of you call your own states and continue to work with your own activists as they go through this legislative process. There is no direct confrontation with the political director about the subtle racism at a time when she is already in crisis mode, she likely does not care how the list is divided as long as all the appointments are being made, your activists are happy because they do not have to deal with anyone new and you get to learn a little more about the legislative process.

After the conference ends, you arrange to meet with the political director to raise the issue of how she divided the list. She may have a logical reason for giving you the CBC list, she may not. Perhaps she thought you knew these staffers based on your past employment, perhaps it was subtle racism or overt racism, or just plain stupidity on her part. The point is that the crisis is over and you can have a calm discussion with her that may help to correct her misconceptions about who you are and your perceptions about her motives. And, best of all, you’ve established a positive working relationship with your fellow field organizers, you’ve bonded with your activists, and maybe, you come to some understanding with the head of the department where you wish to work (short-term goal) and learned a little more about the legislative/lobbying process (long-term goal).

Plus, you’ve placed yourself in the position for a “fair shake” if a job opens up in the political department, and, at the same time, you “shook things up” in changing how people viewed your role in the organization.

Sometimes, none of this works and you find yourself at the last option – to quit or not to quit. Unless you are ready to leave, this option should only be taken if your “personal dignity” is in jeopardy. By “personal dignity” I mean that the very core of your being is screaming out for a resolution. There is no doubt! There is no other option! Even your “sistah” network is wondering why you haven’t quit yet. These are rare situations. There are usually ways to negotiate solutions or alter the circumstances to make things better. Remember, each time you quit, you run the risk of not being able to use that organization as a reference, you burn bridges in a town where there are few bridges left, and you impede your own professional growth.

I have only had one work situation during my lifetime where there really was no other solution. I worked for a national reproductive rights organization, but was constantly confronted by...
a colleague who had little regard for others’ skills or professionalism. She was a screamer. Now, I have to admit that she was an equal opportunity screamer. She insulted everyone, dismissed their opinions, slammed doors and generally made everyone’s life uncomfortable. By ignoring the various complaints, her superiors enabled this destructive behavior. Although, not all of her rants were directed at me, I became a favorite target because we had some overlapping responsibilities. I finally decided that the environment within the organization was toxic and I simply did not want that much negativity in my life. So, one day I wrote out my letter of resignation, put my office keys and credit card in an envelope and submitted them to my boss.

I took a month off before looking for another job.

P.S. CONFRONTATIONS

Los Angeles, California: Because the first comment concerning running for an office in the women’s Caucus was told to me after the fact, I had to wait until after the Democratic Party convention was over to decide whether to confront the woman (a colleague of mine in Los Angeles City politics) who had made the statement. Once I confronted her, she acknowledged making the statement but attempted to provide various explanations as to why it was taken out of context. In the end, it came down to her unwillingness to acknowledge the underlying racism in her remark. I asked her if she would have made the same statement about a Latina or Asian Pacific woman and surprisingly she said no. Given the growing Latino population in the state, she felt that a Latina would enhance the caucus outreach and credibility. She felt that the women (white) already involved in the caucus would see an Asian American woman as representing no big change. But she believed that a Black woman running the caucus would drive white women activists away. During our discussion, she also stated that she really did not think that black women, as a whole, had paid their dues within the women’s movement and had a long way to go. I provided her with a few books to read starting, of course, with Gerda Lerner’s Black Women in White America. To her credit she read them, and later called me to discuss the materials.

Washington, DC: I also confronted the woman who made the remark during the conference call. First, while we were on the call, I asked her to explain what she meant. Since the people on the conference call were people I was going to have to work with, I wanted to be clear that this was a statement I found troubling and unacceptable. As soon as the conference call concluded, I immediately called her back for an additional conversation before the “isn’t she too sensitive” conversations could take place among the group.

Direct communication is often difficult to do, but I have learned that the rewards can be enormous. I don’t know what this woman said to others after our conversation. I never asked her. However, I do know that we were able to build what I believe was a great working relationship simply because I took the time to talk with her about how I heard her statement and she took the time to hear what I said.
“...in America, white women who are truly feminist - for whom racism is inherently an impossibility, as long as some Black people can also be conceived as women - are largely outnumbered by average American white women for whom racism, inasmuch as it assures white privilege, is an accepted way of life.”

(Gloria Hull, All the Women are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave, 1982)

NEW DAY DAWNING
Building a Reproductive Justice Movement for All Women

PREFACE

Now we come full circle and I have to answer the question I posed in the first essay: can we build a multi-racial, multi-issue, multi-class movement that takes all women’s reproductive health needs into account? The answer is simple – yes. But is there the political will to do so? In many ways, partly because I am tired of the struggle and partly because I think this new movement requires a vision not tainted by past circumstances, I believe that achieving such a new movement belongs to a younger generation.

The women I’ve worked with for so long are too set in their ways. They have internalized subtle racism to the point that they no longer even recognize their participation in it. It is too much a part of the white privilege that encompasses the rest of their lives – where they live, who their friends are, where their kids go to school. And, therein is the Catch-22. They cannot correct a problem they deny exists. They cannot change policies and practices that reinforce their worldview without turning that worldview on its head. And how many people are really willing to do that? Wasn’t that the purpose of the women’s movement in the first place – to revolutionize America’s view of women’s place in society? Liberation for white women was not easily won. A male-dominated structure used all of its political power and legal force to fight against it. I expect that the power structure built around a middle-class white women’s movement will fight as desperately to maintain its hold. The control
that these middle-class white organizations have on the agenda of the women’s movement is consistently reinforced by media coverage and foundation funding of the movement.

Even though the theme of the 2004 March for Women’s Lives was expanded to include more than just abortion rights, national media covering the event only discussed abortion. Issues – such as health disparities, access to health care, the right to bear children – that women of color reproductive rights organizations fought so hard to have included, were virtually ignored by the media. The leaders of women of color reproductive rights organizations were passed over for interviews. Women of color were packed into one area of the March. Young women speakers, most of whom were women of color, were told to truncate their remarks so that celebrities would have more time. In fact, the young women were herded onto the stage together, summarily dismissed during introductions, and then shoved off stage without allowing all of them to speak.

In today’s “me too” media structure, reporters try to outdo each other in reporting the same story rather than actually looking for news. So whoever is quoted on a particular issue within any news cycle defines how the issue is portrayed to the public. All the news stories that follow are simply retelling the same story. So when a reporter interviews the heads of NARAL or Planned Parenthood, organizational sponsors of the March, the story is about abortion and all subsequent stories will have the same slant. How would the story of the March for Women’s Lives been told differently if that first interview had been with the head of the Black Women’s Health Imperative (BWHI), also a main sponsor of the March?

TOWARD AN INCLUSIVE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

Can the next generation of feminists learn from our past mistakes and build an inclusive women’s movement? Is it possible to cut through generations of overt and subtle racism and reach some type of agreement on goals and policies that would not slip back into white privilege? What would it take?

To properly address these questions requires a multi-faceted approach from a number of stakeholders: mainstream women’s organizations, progressive foundations, and young black and white activists. Additionally, there must be a change in organizational culture. Thus, I offer the following advice:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUNG BLACK ACTIVISTS

1) Know your history – Women of color have always been involved in the feminist movement. African American women were there from the early suffrage movement, not just as activists in the abolitionist movement but also as leaders for women’s suffrage. African American and Latina activists led the fight to regulate and stop coerced sterilization, as well as made the feminist movement more conscious of the economic context of reproductive justice. Only by knowing where you enter can you accurately understand your level of influence.

2) Mobilize against “trickle-down” feminism – As long as the politics of the feminist movement allows policy decisions to be made based on how these policies impact middle-class white women, women of color will lose. Discussions about how an issue – abortion access, pay equity, contraceptive access – impacts women that then segregate African American, Hispanic and Asian Pacific women from the norm allows political positioning that more often than not negatively impacts on women of color. This positioning also allows mainstream feminist organizations to use “expediency” as a rationale for placing the concerns and needs of women of color on the backburner of feminism.

3) Make multiracial organizing a foundation – There is strength in numbers. Racism allows those in power to pick off each racial or ethnic group in order to weaken the opposition to
change. Organizing within and outside of your racial group not only provides a stronger base, but also promotes better understanding of each group’s concerns and needs.

4) **Form strategic alliances** – Reproductive justice, economic justice and environmental justice battles have one thing in common – they are all battles for empowerment of communities with the least. By forming alliances with organizations working in these areas, young feminists can stay grounded in the ideals of feminism.

5) **Form strategic alliances with other women of color organizations** – Latina and Asian Pacific young women must be part of your power base. The issues and concerns will not necessarily be the same, but there will always be common threads.

6) **Get media training** – The women’s movement will always be seen as a white movement until the spokespeople for women’s issues and concerns become more diverse. The media will not change this, you will. Knowing how to talk to the media is not a simple task. Take every opportunity to get media training. Know how to write a press release. Even if you never have to actually write your own in whatever job you take, you must know what elements make a good one. Know how to get your message in to a thirty-second sound bite. Practice writing and submitting letters to the editor and op-ed pieces to your local newspaper. There are organizations, including Advocates for Youth, with online media training guides. Use them and practice.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRESSIVE FOUNDATIONS**

1) Stop funding “colored women’s projects” at mainstream white women’s organizations. These short-term, under-funded and barely staffed activities will never integrate these power organizations. They are a waste of your time, money and prestige.

2) Fund organizations that work with young activists of all races, such as Advocates for Youth, Choice USA or Pro-Choice Education Project (PEP), to form strategic partnerships with the mainstream organizations to ensure that young women of color are provided with a solid support base while they try to navigate through the women’s movement. This must be long-term, multi-year support. The one- or two-year “I did my part for diversity, now I’m done” grant won’t cut it. It took many generations to make the women’s movement the exclusive entity that it is and it will take just as long to force it into being inclusive.

3) Fund women of color organizations at the state level. These are the farm clubs of the next generations of national leaders. Again, this must be long-term, multi-year support.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MAINSTREAM WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS**

I stated at the beginning of these essays that I was not addressing the leaders of mainstream organizations. You are set in your ways and may never change. But you are part of the problem and will either be part of the solution or will be moved out of the way for a younger, multi-cultural generation that will eventually make you obsolete. I recommend you try to become part of the solutions:

1) You must change the culture of your organizations from the top to the bottom. It is not enough to pay lip service to diversity when all the political and policy decisions you make are for the benefit of those who look like you. Cultural change in power politics is difficult. While you are retooling your organization to be fully conscious of your exclusivity,
other organizations, not so bent on being progressive, will take advantage of the gap. This may mean you lose a little of your short-term power in the process, but hang in there, it is for the best.

2) Form real, long-term partnerships with women of color organizations. Consult with them on how to become more exclusive, meet with them on a regular basis to check your progress. I don’t mean just one or two of the women of color organizations in D.C.; I mean the grassroots, state and local women of color organizations. If you are really brave, you will start with the ones who refused to come to the March.

3) Include all members of your organization – the staff, the board, the state affiliates and the activists. Cultural change cannot be dictated in a memo, it must be felt. When I first went to work for Advocates for Youth, it was an organization on the verge of making serious cultural change. The leadership was committed to making Advocates a youth activist vehicle in reality rather than just on paper. There were no youth board members and only a handful of youth staff members. Over six years, because of the full buy-in of board members, the officers of the organization and staff members, Advocates has become an organization where young people are in leadership roles, policy and program decisions are made with and by young people, and young people are media spokespeople. And, when I left as the Director of the Public Affairs Division, two young people I had worked with and nurtured took over as the Communications Director and the Policy Director.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUNG, WHITE ACTIVISTS

In many ways, you have the most difficult part. You have to get through decades of overt and subtle racism in the women’s movement to convince young African American activists that you can be trusted. Take heart, it can be done.

1) Read all the history about the women’s movement, not just about white women.

2) Form alliances with young women of color early. Don’t just invite them to your campus feminist organizations when you need turnout. Join the civil rights organizations on campus. Meet with the leadership of the Black Student Union and the Latino Student Union. Find out what role you can have in the issues these groups champion.

3) Continue those relationships after graduation. These young women of color are part of your generation of leadership. Check in with them on policy decisions before they are made.

4) Join youth activist organizations that are diverse.

5) Push the women’s organizations you join and/or work for to be more inclusive.

THE 3 PS - POWER, PRESTIGE AND POLITICS

The battle to make the women’s movement truly inclusive now lies in the hands of young activists. These young women face a daunting task. First, the institutional exclusivity that permeates mainstream women’s organizations must be tackled before any real change can happen.

Most women’s organizations get their power from their role in politics. That power lies in how well they represent and can deliver a voting constituency that politicians want and need. Understanding how the three Ps – power, prestige and politics – work together to support the advancement of some women, but not all is the next critical step. Power can conspire against the advancement of some women while promoting the advancement of others. Understanding
how power works means understanding how it can be used. If a women’s organization puts a black woman out front, it is usually because they’ve gotten complaints from board members, foundations, or the media about the lack of diversity in the organization. Or they are about to launch a major “women of color” initiative and need a non-white face for credibility.

This does not mean you don’t seize the opportunity; it simply means that you seize it with your eyes wide open.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARCELA HOWELL is the Vice President of Communications and Policy for Advocates for Youth, a non-profit organization that supports programs and policies for the sexual and reproductive health of young people. Ms. Howell provides overall direction, supervision, and coordination of Advocates’ media strategy and marketing outreach campaigns. Before becoming the vice president of communications and marketing, Ms. Howell served as Advocates’ director of public affairs where she supervised the public policy and communications activities.

Before joining Advocates for Youth, Ms. Howell was the communications director for the Maryland Democratic Party where she was responsible for developing a strategic media message and plan for the 1996 coordinated campaign. Ms. Howell also served as the communications director for Congresswoman Maxine Waters (D-CA), Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus in 1997. Ms. Howell also served as the executive director of the California Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (CARAL-South).

Ms. Howell has a wealth of expertise in public policy, grassroots organizing, public education, and communications. A long-time activist on reproductive health and rights issues, she has worked in government at the local, state, and federal levels. Her efforts to expand the women’s movement in California led to her serving in a number of leadership positions within the movement, including being elected to two terms as chair of the Women’s Caucus of the California Democratic Party, serving on the board of directors of NARAL, Women’s Campaign Fund, and the California Women’s Vote Project.

As a political consultant in California for over ten years, Ms. Howell specialized in helping women run for elected office. She served as a consultant to the campaigns of former State Senator Diane Watson (now a Member of Congress), former Assemblywoman Gwen Moore, Los Angeles City Councilwoman Ruth Galanter, and a number of other women candidates. Ms. Howell was also a trainer for “women of color” candidates as part of a national campaign by the National Women’s Political Caucus to recruit women candidates.

Ms. Howell taught African American literature and linguistics in the Black Studies Department and a course on Black Women in American Literature for the Women’s Center at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.
Advocates for Youth envisions a society that views sexuality as normal and healthy and treats young people as a valuable resource.

The core values of Rights, Respect, Responsibility® (3Rs) animate this vision—

**RIGHTS:** Youth have rights to accurate and complete sexual health information, confidential reproductive and sexual health services, and a secure stake in the future.

**RESPECT:** Youth deserve respect. Today, young people are largely perceived as part of the problem. Valuing young people means they are part of the solution and are included in developing programs and policies that affect their well-being.

**RESPONSIBILITY:** Society has the responsibility to provide young people with the tools they need to safeguard their sexual health, and young people have the responsibility to protect themselves from too-early childbearing and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV.

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