

A Reflection: The Leadership of Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement

Black women journalists, organizers and activists who were critical to Black freedom movements are often erased from history.

Poor Black women in the welfare rights movement were justice crusaders who, in their campaigns, speeches and demands, reflected an understanding of the confluence of different systems of oppression.

Established during the Great Depression, the welfare system catered to “worthy” white widows with provisions aimed at denying assistance to “undeserving” Black mothers, forcing them to remain in the labor force rather than be full-time caregivers for their own children. The legislation excluded the farm and domestic sectors that were dependent on Black women’s underpaid labor. In a 1939 report, a welfare field supervisor in the South wrote that welfare officials see no “reason why the employable Negro mother should not continue her usually sketchy seasonal labor or indefinite domestic service rather than receive a public assistance grant.”

Even as civil rights activists worked to dismantle discriminatory welfare provisions in the 1960s — enabling more Black women to gain access to benefits — new regulations required that recipients take paid employment outside the home.

African American and other poor women of color contested this injustice in the 1960s and 1970s. Following in the radical tradition of Sojourner Truth, they asserted their womanhood and claimed the same treatment afforded white women. The changes they demanded spanned from improved welfare benefits and participation in decision-making to access to abortion and the end of coerced sterilization.

The most far-reaching demand of the welfare rights movement was for a guaranteed annual income that would bring all poor people — regardless of race, gender, family status, legal status, employment status — up to a minimum standard of living well above the poverty line. Welfare rights activists sought to dismantle the economic status quo predicated on Black women’s low-wage work, which maintained joblessness and a reserve army of labor for capital. Instead, they envisioned substantive access to freedom, autonomy and self-determination for poor Black mothers.

Professor Robyn C. Spencer noted how Black women acted as leaders and the organizing backbone of the Black liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Like the welfare rights movement — itself a form of Black liberation — their political work reflected an ethos of radical

care that included mutual support around bodily autonomy and childcare, as well as a commitment to eradicating poverty and racism. Other focal points were concern for male draftees and political critiques of U.S. empire and state violence.

The Black Panthers, the most well-known of the 1960s Black Power organizations, elevated the profiles of many Black men fighting the white supremacist system, but quietly relied on Black women's organizing work. From food distribution to health clinics around the country, Black women played an instrumental role in supporting the Panthers' community programs to fill desperate needs and gain support for their political vision. Black women were concerned with political theory around Black liberation while being attendant to immediate human needs.

Women also faced persistent sexism from many of their fellow Black Power organizers. The unique perspective Black women brought to Black liberation, along with the frustration at their treatment within the movement, would grow in the 1970s into new forms of Black feminist organizing and thought — such as the Combahee River Collective statement. It acknowledges that their experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men.

Learning from these movements of our past, Black Lives Matter has adopted group-centered leadership in the tradition of Ella Baker, calling itself “leader-full.” In contrast to the hierarchical Panther leadership structure dominated by cis men, the community of BLM's many leaders is filled with women and trans, non-binary and intersex folks.

Black women today are leading our movements to intentionally lift up the intersections we must weave, both within and outside our struggles. On July 12, 2016, Nigerian American activist Opal Tometi, co-founder of Black Lives Matter, delivered a [powerful speech before the United Nations General Assembly](#) on the heels of the police killings of two Black men, [Alton Sterling](#) and [Philando Castile](#). An invited speaker, Tometi echoed Pearl Sherrod, working-class Black woman in 1930s Detroit who was a journalist-activist in the tradition of anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells. Both emphasized three challenges to the advancement of human rights for all: global capitalism, white supremacy and the suppression of democracy.

All three grow from the “root causes of inequality,” shaped by a history of “colonialism, indigenous genocide and the enslavement of people of African descent.” That Tometi's message so closely resembles the words of another Black woman activist from 1937, underscores the

persistence of the structural problems we face and the tenacity of Black women in rooting them out and fighting for transformation.

For more on this history, [please see this interview](#) about Black women in history.