

THE RIGHT TO BE: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR
HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE UNITED STATES

by Diana L. Hayes*

INTRODUCTION

Women in the United States are often seen as having the best of all possible worlds. Most are educated, well-employed and thus able to afford decent housing and care for themselves and their children. Too often ignored, however, is another, more sordid reality. That is the presence of a virtual Third or Undeveloped World in the heart of the United States, consisting predominantly of persons of color, the overwhelming majority of whom are women. Increasingly, women have become the heads of households, abandoned by husbands and fathers of their children who are incarcerated, addicted to drugs, or simply not around for a variety of reasons. Many are under- or unemployed, poorly or uneducated with skills that relegate them to the lowest levels of the working classes. Opportunities for the adults to gain meaningful education are being systematically un- or under-funded while the schools their children attend have become merely warehouses offering meaningless tests and vocational programs in derelict and unsafe environments. Most are unlikely to be able to earn enough on their own to keep themselves and their children out of poverty, and are themselves infected by HIV/AIDS or incarcerated with their children relegated to foster homes.

Three-and-a-half million Black families were maintained by women in 1992, a number representing nearly half (47%) of all Black families in the United States. Their median income was \$11,414, a sum woefully out of sync with regard to the larger population or even to white female-headed families whose median income was \$19,547. The poverty rate for Black female-headed households continues to rise steadily. Today, more than 1/3 of Black children are born in poverty and live much of their youth in harsh and often hostile conditions. The infant mortality rate for Black infants is 17.5 per 1000 live births as compared to 7.3 for white infants. If one adds to this more recent statistics on HIV/AIDS that reveal almost two-thirds or 64% of new cases among women are Black women, 1 in 160 Black women are infected with HIV, then the situation of Black women in the U.S. can be seen to be rapidly approaching crisis proportions.

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FORUM ON PUBLIC POLICY

Yet, equally chilling is the fact that nearly two-thirds of the women confined in U.S. prisons are minorities, Black and Latina. A Black woman is 7 times more likely to be incarcerated than a white woman and to receive a much harsher sentence for a non-violent crime. The statistics go on and on hammering out a message of inequality that is chillingly persistent into the 21st century. These statistics are not a result of race but of the racism, abetted by sexism and classism, that persists in the U.S. creating destructive rather than nurturing environments due to lack of educational and employment opportunity, lack of access to health care and health insurance and numerous other factors that play an increasingly important role in the slide of Black and other women of color into a despond of despair and frustration.

It is women of color in the United States who still toil in the non-unionized factories of the South and garment sweatshops of the West preparing the gourmet foods and designer clothing, which other women wear without recognizing their exploitation of their sisters. Many are not allowed toilet breaks longer than a few minutes, reasonable lunch breaks, or offered access to basic health coverage for themselves or their children or any other basic rights that many of us assume as a given. The work of often mindless drudgery that many women are condemned to as factory and piece workers, or who serve as domestics and nannies on subsistence wages (known as the minimum wage) or who work as maids in our luxury hotels, as waitresses in restaurants or as day care aides do is not acknowledged or rewarded for its critical significance in maintaining the even running of our increasingly complex society. But this is not new. In many ways, they are simply seen as doing what women have always done –women’s work – and that work is not seen as of any importance or worth a decent living wage.

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY

There is a long, sordid, and sad history in the United States of abuses against Black women. Brought here in chains, used as breeders, belly-warmers, and field workers with tasks as harsh as any Black man’s, the humanity of Black women has constantly been compromised by the refusal of the dominant society to see them in the fullness of their personhood.

Historically, Black women have been relegated to stereotypes that emphasize and reinforce their dehumanization. Typified as mammies, Aunt Jemimas, Sapphires and Jezebels, they have been rendered, in the minds of all in the United States regardless of race, ethnicity or gender, as abnormal and dysfunctional without any natural feelings of love and concern for their own children while allegedly pouring forth an abundance of love for the children of their masters and employers. They are seen as women lacking in any sexual desirability due to their overemphasized obesity and darkness of skin or else driven by insatiable sexual drives which reveal their complete and total lack of morality. At the same time, they are seen, ironically, as emasculators of the Black man, thereby somehow revealing his own alleged corruption and lack of integrity. A Southern white woman publicly stated in the early 1900’s her views of Black women’s morality seeing it

FORUM ON PUBLIC POLICY

as impossible for a Black man to have morals or Christian values when he is surrounded by women of low repute. She goes on to say: "I cannot imagine such a creation as a virtuous black woman" (Higginbotham, 1993).

These images not only persist to the present day, maintained by the print media, television (especially in situation comedies) and the corporate world but they are being resurrected with the assistance of younger Black men and women who saturate the TV screen with salacious images of women seeking only the "Benjamin's" (money). These images have become part of the self-image of Black women themselves, young and old, who are confronted constantly with them by dominant society and within the Black community itself, especially in Black music and Black films. Ironically, of the small number of Blacks who are college educated, it is Black women who are in the majority. They then face the "Sapphire" stereotype of being overly aggressive, emasculating women who don't know and won't stay in their male-appointed place!

Historically, the role of the Black woman in creating, developing, sustaining, and maintaining the Black community is still little recognized. During slavery, we learned of the rebellions led by men not women. The Abolitionist Movement was seen largely as a male-dominated one, despite the active and vocal presence of Black women such as Sojourner Truth. Even the aftermath of the Civil War is relayed to us through the stories and experiences of Black men. But what about the women? A full and unbiased history of Blacks in the U.S. has never been told because more than half of the Black community was rendered voiceless and invisible because of their gender. It is only through the recovery efforts of contemporary Black women that another voice has arisen. It completes the story of the Black experience in the U.S. As Darlene Clark Hine relates:

...some slave women challenged the master's efforts to control their reproductive capacities by abortion, sexual abstinence, or infanticide. The majority, however, occupied a middle ground of passive resistance, including feigning illness, ignorance, or ineptness. Others occasionally engaged in more active tactics such as arson, poisoning, mutilations of farm animals, destruction of property, and even running away. Less obvious, but perhaps even more effective resistance focused on creating a sense of community, preserving and transmitting to their children African-based cultural practices and beliefs (1998, p.12).

Even after slavery, when Black men but not women were granted full citizenship and the vote by the 14th and 15th amendments, Black women did not give up but rather "encouraged (their) men to support those politicians who would protect them and help them gain economic autonomy" (Hine, 1998, p.13).

All women in the U.S. found themselves relegated to marginal roles outside the household with little input on daily affairs but Black women found themselves not just marginalized but dehumanized, unable to speak because they, their men and children were seen, both legally for over 300 years, and socially as less than human, simply articles of personal property.

FORUM ON PUBLIC POLICY

Sojourner Truth, the former slave who simply walked away from her master when he refused to free her as legally required, asked a question that was not rhetorical and still awaits an answer when she cried out, "Ain't I a Woman?" as she told of the indignities and injustice through which her life was daily endured.

A RETURN TO THE PRESENT DAY

Sojourner's question is one that sadly can still be raised today. Are we, as descendants of Africa, not also women? For too long a time, the answer has been no, by white men and white women, and sadly by many of our own Black men as well. Yet if, undeniably, we are women, what does that mean for us in today's world; one marked by increasing globalization and accompanied by a growing gap, of approximately 600%, between rich and poor?

Paradoxically, we, as Black women, have often had greater access to employment, education and other opportunities *because* we are women and are, therefore, seen as less threatening to the dominant culture than our Black men. This has resulted in an increase in the apparent inequality existing between Black women and Black men and has served to further divide rather than unite us, as already noted. However, until the mid-1980's, most of these jobs were blue (pink) collar (manual labor) jobs with little opportunity for advancement, requiring few skills and little education. It is only with the emergence of Affirmative Action programs that we see a phenomenal rise in the Black middle class in the United States, one that accounted for an impressive rise in the number of Black women in career oriented managerial or professional positions. Yet they were not the ones who benefited the most. Black men benefited from these programs by 67%, the Black female only 5%. But what a difference that 5% made as from 1980 to 1996, the number of Black women doctors increased from 13% to 23% and the number of Black women lawyers increased from 14% to 31%. Today, Black women in higher education outnumber Black men 3 to 1, a statistic that is creating a number of new problems for Black women.

Black women in the United States today are fighting several battles at once. We are fighting for the right, which should have been ours at birth, not to be discriminated against because of our race, our class, or our gender. Ours is not and never has been a struggle simply against sexism but one waged against the multiplicative oppressions of sex, class, and race united in one single body. That discrimination can be seen as both positive and negative, as I've stated; positive, in that it allows one group to have access to opportunities or privileges denied to others (such as employment) and yet negative because the type of employment and salary levels are too often restricted or reduced because we are both women and persons of color.

Our experience has been one vastly different from that of women of the dominant society in the United States. As Joyce Ladner notes:

...much of the current focus on being liberated from the constraints and protectiveness of the society which is proposed by Women's Liberation groups has never applied to Black women, and in this sense, we have

FORUM ON PUBLIC POLICY

always been "free", and able to develop as individuals even under the most harsh circumstances. This freedom, as well as the tremendous hardships from which Black women suffered, allowed for the development of a female personality that is rarely described in scholarly journals for its obstinate strength and ability to survive. Neither is its peculiar, humanistic character and quiet courage viewed as the epitome of what the American model of femininity should be (1971, 1995).

As Sojourner acknowledged, the Black woman was not "sheltered or protected" from harsh labor or degrading work rather they were required to "work as much...as a man" and "bear the lash as well"(1852).

[She could not] remain oblivious to the desperate struggle for existence unfolding outside the "home"! She was also there in the fields, alongside the man, toiling under the lash... This was one of the supreme ironies of slavery: In order to approach its strategic goals, to extract the greatest possible surplus from the labor of slaves, the black woman had to be released from the chains of the myth of femininity... The black woman shared the deformed equality of equal oppression with the black man... (Malson, 1990, p.72).

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AS HUMAN RIGHTS

The question "Ain't I a woman?" must be raised anew today by African American women but it must be coupled with an even more challenging question as yet not fully answered. As women of African descent, from a long line of men and women required for centuries to forfeit their right to freedom and life itself, the question must also be raised: "Am I not a human being?? Am I not to have the rights and privileges and dignity common to all of humanity? The answer to this question brings me into my discussion of women's rights as human rights.

Cecilia Medina establishes a stance that I am in agreement with, stating:

My starting point is that human rights are those rights that each and every human being has on the sole merit of being human; thus, it does not seem possible to use an expression (women's rights) that suggests the idea that some human beings, women, have different rights from those of other human beings, men. A first consequence of this position is that I find in the existence of human rights the moral justification to fight for women.... My approach is that the struggle for women forms part of the general struggle to develop respect for the dignity of all human beings, and it is from the latter that it obtains the necessary force and legitimacy that will ultimately ensure its success (Cook, ed., 1994).

The problem in the United States historically is that Black women have not qualified for the protection of human rights as many believed, taught, and even preached that they, their men and their children were, somehow, less than human. The question is, has this perspective changed in the 21st century? Medina continues:

A second consequence ... is that, in order to justify enjoyment by women of their rights, I do not find it necessary to point out that the same characteristics inherent in women are better than those of men for an adequate functioning of society, or to argue that women have a higher morality or a higher intellect than men and that their serving in leading positions in society will result in an improved form of community life. In my view, women do not need to “earn” human rights; they should be encouraged, not just to achieve leading positions in society, and have their fair share of power, education, financial resources, and so forth, only because they are human beings, and discrimination on any basis is not tolerated by international law. This notwithstanding, in the struggle to improve the situation of any sector of society that has been postponed in terms of human rights, it is legitimate and useful to create new formulations for existing human rights and/or establish actions one wishes to combat as specific violations of human rights, even though they might be subsumed within the general norms. (All this to achieve non-discrimination in the employment of human rights.) ... There is a need for stronger international human rights law especially for women and there is a need for women to make this happen (Cook, ed., 1994).

To be blunt, Black women cannot depend on the kindness of strangers, of others, male or female, in order to achieve what is justly ours by reason of our birth. We must fight for our rights ourselves, both together as women of all races and apart when necessary as women of color with particular issues and concerns that our white sisters may not always understand or even empathize with.

Women in the United States have historically been marginalized and victimized, treated as legal incompetents and the property of men. None more so than Black women, who could be bought and sold, bartered and gambled away, given as gifts and dowries, assigned tasks and labors with a total disregard for their humanity or their womanhood.

Today, in company with women throughout the globe, they continue to be victims, denied the basic rights accorded all because of their humanity. The UN Declaration on Human Rights guarantees rights and freedoms to all people regardless of sex, among other things, yet, as we know, is rarely enforced. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women, promulgated in 1979, to specifically address the human rights of women is still awaiting approval by many countries including the United States.

Black women’s unequal status is a result of gender discrimination exacerbated by economic and racial discrimination. Yet, despite a growing record of deaths and

FORUM ON PUBLIC POLICY

demonstrative abuses, the denial of legal rights and the degradation and violation of their humanity, Black women's rights are rarely seen as part of the struggle for human rights. There are many reasons but let me cite four:

1. Sexual discrimination, especially against Black women In the United States, is too often seen as trivial or less important than other more serious survival issues by men across racial and ethnic lines and, sadly, often by other women. It is too often seen as normative.
2. Abuse of Black women, while seen as regrettable, is also seen simply as a cultural, private, or individual issue rather than a political one. It is part of our "dysfunctional" upbringing or necessary to keep "uppity" Black women in line by their Black men or simply a result of our own allegedly "promiscuous" behavior. We must all deal with the catastrophic force of rape as an instrument of masculine power over against women. Black women, however, are also being doubly afflicted by becoming infected, unknowingly by their husbands and lovers, with HIV/AIDS at an alarming rate and passing what is still for the poor a death sentence on to their children. Again, stereotypes centuries old, don't simply persist but are being reborn in new and numbingly diverse ways, in music, videos, movies, and even works of fiction and the news media.
3. In and of themselves, despite Cecilia Medina's powerful words, women's rights as a whole are simply not seen as human rights. These are usually narrowly defined as a state violation of civil and political liberties rather than merely socio-economic rights such as the right to food, shelter, work, education and freedom from physical restraint. Is it not ironic that in the world's only superpower, thousands of women and their children still go to bed hungry, often with no shelter and no guarantee or even promise of a better life regardless of their efforts?
4. When, despite all of the above, abuse of Black women is finally recognized, it is all too often considered inevitable (as in, "she brought it on herself") or so pervasive as to be impossible to deal with in any meaningful way. This again perpetuates stereotypes, created during slavery, of Black female behavior.

It must be recognized that sexism does, indeed, kill and that for many women, "the home has become the most dangerous place and is frequently the site of cruelty and torture" (Bunch, 1990, p.489).

When combined with race, class and other forms of oppression, (sexism) constitutes a deadly denial of women's right to life and liberty on a large scale....

Victims are chosen because of their gender. The message is

FORUM ON PUBLIC POLICY

domination: stay in your place or be afraid. (Such violence is not personal or cultural but profoundly political.) It results from the structural relationships of power, domination and privilege between men and women in society. Violence against women is central to maintaining those political relations at home, at work, and in all public spheres (Bunch, 1990, pp.490-491).

Health activists acknowledge that many poor Black women are more likely to be infected with sexual diseases because of their situation as victim in the home. They are usually unable and often unwilling to insist on contraceptive devices or other preventive measures for fear of a negative and too often violent response.

The issue of human rights, however, cannot be made subject solely to the interests of national security, economic strategy and local traditions. This is an assertion the government of the U.S. applies consistently to other nations it scrutinizes for their eligibility for various forms of aid. However, too often it is applied inconsistently to itself especially with regard to the rights of poor women and mothers, particularly those who are poor and all too often Black. If Medina is correct in saying that “societies usually try to embody in legal provisions the values they cherish,” one is forced to ask, What are the values of U.S. society where women are still marginalized and victimized, poor women are blamed for their poverty, and women of color still can’t get the respect they deserve simply as human beings?

In recent years, we have seen an increase in attacks on programs vital to the survival of women, programs instituted in the heyday of LBJ’s Great Society, which enabled them to gradually lead lives of dignity and respect; which allowed their children to grow and develop and their mothers to raise and nurture them in an environment conducive to that growth and development. The passage in 1986 of the so-called Welfare Reform Act in the United States has had a devastating impact on Black women who, though fewer in numbers on the welfare rolls, are disproportionately present, and were targeted as welfare queens and baby-making machines, all allegedly for the sake of a few dollars more. Passage of this legislation left many women in the impossible situation of choosing between entry-level or dead-end jobs which paid little more than a subsistence wage or losing funds needed to feed, clothe, and shelter their children or both. Instead of being encouraged to remain with their children while they are young and to acquire further educational or vocational skills, as others have been encouraged, they are condemned as burdens to society, lazy, shiftless, thieves, who fatten off the public trough. The programs, small but very successful, have been cancelled while programs such as Head Start, that lived up to their name, are being threatened with strangulation by overregulation and under funding. The result has been a significant jump in the numbers of women imprisoned for petty, non-violent, and often drug-related offenses. The mandatory sentencing laws have caused the loss of innumerable young Black women to their communities and families, imprisoned often simply for less than an ounce of crack cocaine, or for holding the “bag” for their male friend, or for selling their bodies to make ends meet. While none of these behaviors should be condoned, the punishment does not

FORUM ON PUBLIC POLICY

fit the crime. What are they to do with few or no skills, graduates of failing public schools, with children but no husbands and no safety net? Increasingly, they are also having their children taken away because they cannot provide the housing, clothing, and food prescribed by law. Once taken, these children are rarely returned to the mother or any family member but are put into foster care with the intent allegedly of future adoption. This is happening to so many Black mothers that it is becoming a threat to Black family life for the assumption still is that Black family life, whether two- or single-parent headed, is somehow dysfunctional.

A further harmful trend is the increasing attack on Affirmative Action laws, which did enable women of color to have at least a running start on employment and educational opportunities. These young women are intelligent and most are eager to improve themselves. If as much time and money were spent on educating them properly and providing them with meaningful work as is spent on imprisoning them and foster care, one can only begin to imagine the shift that could take place. It must be remembered and reinforced that:

True affirmative action does not enshrine preferences or mandate quotas (which the Supreme Court has made illegal). Nor has any effective affirmative action program ever been structured to allow unqualified candidates to take jobs over the qualified (Redwood, 1999).

The result of the rollback of affirmative action has been a significant drop (over 25%) in the number of Black women enrolling in undergraduate and graduate programs.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHINGS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Women's rights are human rights and human rights are not only universal, they are also indivisible... Without respect for women's fundamental human rights, women's rights to peace, equality and development are unattainable (Amnesty International, 1995).

This assertion is firmly grounded in and supported by the teachings of the Christian churches, especially the Catholic Social Justice Tradition. The Vatican II document on the Church in the World affirms this (albeit in very non-inclusive language):

All men are endowed with a natural soul and are created in God's image; they have the same nature and origin and being redeemed by Christ, they enjoy the same divine calling and destiny; there is here a basic equality between all men and it must be given even greater recognition.

Therefore forms of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design. It is regrettable that these basic rights are not being respected everywhere, as is the case with women who are denied the

FORUM ON PUBLIC POLICY

chance freely to choose a husband, or a state of life, or to have access to the same educational and cultural benefits as are available to men (*Gaudium et Spes*, 29).

This basic teaching has its origins in the Christian and Jewish Scriptures where in the Book of Genesis, Chapters 1 and 2, we find the acknowledgement of their common humanity of men and women based on their co-creation by God in God's own image and likeness; a humanity which imparts a shared equality which while not ignoring the differences existing between men and women yet calls for recognition of and respect for their personhood and equal dignity.

John Paul II has affirmed this understanding in *Mulieris Dignitatem*:

Man is the high point of the whole order of creation in the invisible world; the human race, which takes its origin from the calling into existence of men and women, crowns the whole work of creation; both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God's image.

Yet again in *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995), he notes:

Having both been created in the image of God, man and woman, although different, are essentially equal from the point of view of their humanity. From the very beginning, both are persons, unlike the other living beings in the world about them. The woman is another "I" in a common humanity and each is a help for the other.

In creating the human race "male" and "female," God gives man and woman an *equal personal dignity, endowing them with inalienable rights and responsibilities proper to the human person* (emphasis added) (*Familiaris Consortio*, 22, 1981).

These rights, equal to those of men, are to be upheld and promoted by men and women alike, in secular society and within the Church itself. Citing the Holy Father's *Letter to the Women of the World* (1995): "(The Church) desires for her part to contribute to upholding the dignity, role and rights of women..." Calling for a courageous examination of the past, in order to assign responsibility where it is due, the Pontiff apologizes for the Church's own failures to acknowledge women's dignity and its misrepresentation of their prerogatives, noting "how many women have been and continue to be valued more for their physical appearance than for their skill, their professionalism, their intellectual abilities, their deep sensitivity; in a word, the very dignity of their being!"

The fathers of Vatican II also expressed their concern for the socioeconomic rights of women, which it sees, in company with political rights, as an integral part of human rights, noting that:

FORUM ON PUBLIC POLICY

...while there are rightful differences between peoples, their equal dignity as persons demands that we strive for fairer and more human conditions. Excessive economic and social disparity is a source of scandal and militates against social justice, equity, human dignity, as well as social and international peace (*Gaudium et Spes*, 29).

This is re-echoed by John Paul II in many of his writings including *Laborem Exercens* wherein he notes that “any adult who has to support a family should receive an adequate income” and makes it clear that women are included and his 1995 Letter to Women cited earlier which calls for “...the urgent need to achieve real equality in every area of personal rights: equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancements, equality of spouses with regard to family rights...” In this letter, he also calls for the vigorous condemnation of “sexual violence which frequently have women for their object” and the passage of “laws which effectively defend them from such violence.”

Yet, however affirmative these words may sound, we must acknowledge a vastly different reality. Although the Christian churches in their teachings have spoken clearly on the basic dignity shared by all human beings regardless of gender as well as the rights due to all women regardless of race, or class; in actuality, it has been Christianity which has been at the forefront as one of the worst offenders against the human rights and dignity of women. It is through the distortion of Christianity and the willful abuse of its teachings that Black and Native American slavery was first introduced to the “New World” in a form that the world has never seen before or since. It is as a result of Christian missionaries and traders that entire nations were annihilated and the continent of Africa was raped; men, woman, and children torn from their homeland in order to satisfy the greed of other Christians who profited not only from their sale but from their labor and from their forced breeding to produce more goods in the form of children to sell.

Christian women have, as with other religions, born the brunt of misogyny that is centuries old. They are the ones who today are not only demanding that our Scriptures be re-interpreted but are themselves doing the necessary research to reveal the buried histories of women who were not all passive entities as the Church too often asserts but bold, assertive, intelligent women who made a difference not simply in their own lives but in the lives of those around them.

The Roman Catholic Church has been at the center of the misrepresentation of women and their roles throughout the history of Christianity. We have been taught to see Mary, the virgin Mother of God, as a humble, docile woman who simply let it be “done” to her as God willed. In reality, Mary serves as a role model for young, unwed mothers of today who find themselves pregnant and alone and unable to explain their situation to the satisfaction of their elders. Mary knew that she could be stoned to death but freely chose to bear this child and by so doing changed the history of the world. She was, truly, the first Christian, the first priest, for she bore the Christ not just for a few seconds in her hands during the mass but for nine long, difficult months in her womb, praying over him constantly, and truly transforming what was spirit into human flesh.

Other women with which we, whether Christian or not, are so very familiar in this country and others because they have for so long a time been held before us as examples of how not to be women are having their stories retold in ways that bring their heroic nature to full and vigorous life. Eve, upon whose shoulders all the sin of the world has been laid, can be seen correctly as the mother of us all, as many geneticists and anthropologists now realize. Rather than being seen as a temptress, a seductive woman who entrapped the first man ever created, she should be seen as one who sought after knowledge, unwilling to be told what she could and could not know, unwilling to allow her mind and therefore her body to be enslaved. She is the voice of wisdom, the bearer of cultures, the one to whom we all owe our existence for the question is never asked: "What if she had not eaten that apple and passed it on? Where would we all be today?"

These women and so many others like them are finally being lifted from the invisibility that has kept their stories from being correctly heard and passed on for so many centuries. Their voices are once more being heard; calling all of us who are Christian to be not afraid for surely God is with us as God was with them.

African American women too are re-exploring their past and recovering the voices of those strong women of Africa who model for them the art of survival against incomprehensible odds. Hagar, the Egyptian slave woman, the concubine of Abraham, who bore a son for him and was then cast out, was taught by God how to survive and how to raise her son who, like his half-brother, would become the father of a nation. She is the only person in the Bible to see God face-to-face and live. In her strength and endurance, we see the strength and endurance of our slave fore-mothers in this country that did what they had to do in order not just to survive but to ensure that their children would also survive and be prepared to go out into a world hostile to them.

And lastly, Mary Magdalene, known for centuries as the Apostle to the Apostles, must also be resurrected as a model for contemporary women. She alone stood by Jesus when all others fled. She, the former prostitute, was commissioned by Jesus to spread the Gospel, the Good News, of his resurrection to her brothers, cowering in the darkness of an upper room. Surely, she is just as much a disciple as Paul who never saw Jesus in the flesh. For she believed when there was no reason to believe and in the face of the disbelief of others. She stood beside Jesus at his death and was the first to witness his resurrection.

These are the women whose names we call forth today as examples of women who could and did make a difference. These are the women whose stories long untold, too often deliberately misinterpreted or buried from mind and memory, are now being reclaimed and restored to their rightful place in the Christian story for they are the ones who, with little reason to believe, did believe and who, like ourselves, refuse to abandon their faith but step out on it, serving as thorns in the Church's side which are a constant reminder of its failings to live up to the mandate of God. For it is long past time that the other Genesis story be preached, that male and female God made them, in God's own image and likeness, God created them, sending them forth to be fruitful and multiply and to have shared dominion over all living things.

As the Christian churches have been complicit in the erection of the social constructs of race, class, and gender, which have been so long used to oppress so many,

FORUM ON PUBLIC POLICY

today Christian women are calling for a renewed understanding of the teachings of Jesus the Christ which return us to the inclusive world of the early church where men and women shared equally in all endeavors and responsibilities, as preachers, prophets, teachers, and healers, ministering to all in need.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

It is impossible in this brief chapter to explore in any greater depth the wrongs as well as the rights of Christianity. Rather, I would like to focus on how African American Christian women have worked and continue to work to overcome the restrictions placed on them by both church and society.

As persons of a deep and abiding faith who find affirmation from our God, we, as African American women, believe that our faith calls us to continue to affirm and support efforts to overcome the multiple oppressions with which we are opposed while simultaneously recognizing our own complicity in enabling and maintaining many of these same oppressive structures.

We must continue to follow the path forged by our foremothers who “dreamed dreams that no one knew, not even themselves in any coherent form, and saw visions no one could understand... They waited for a day when the unknown thing that was in them would be made known...,” knowing however that when it came, “they would be long dead... (Hayes, 1995, pp.10-11).

These women, our grandmothers and mothers, were artists of a new creation, a new Black woman and Black man whom they nurtured into life with their pain and suffering, yes, but with their faith and fortitude as well. We seek to grasp their flung banner of hope and water the seeds they planted, the banner proclaiming that as Black and female, we too are created of God and are to be accorded that dignity granted to all of humanity at their birth.

We recognize that responsibility for abuses against women goes beyond governments. Sexism is as much a sin as racism and must be recognized as such. Black women in the United States have come together to proclaim that they too are a part of the only race, the human race, and will work within their own community but equally as important in communities across the nation and around the globe to proclaim, promote, and defend the humanity and dignity of all women.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND WOMANISM

At this point, I need to further clarify my own context. Many of the white women speaking at this Roundtable have assumed vocally that all of the women present are, like themselves, feminists. This assumption speaks to what I have been saying of the tendency of those in dominant society to assume they can speak for all women at all times. Black women, and other women of color, are now determined to speak for and define themselves and their particular concerns, in solidarity with but also if need be, in critique and contradiction of other women and men, including men of color.

FORUM ON PUBLIC POLICY

I am a womanist not a feminist. By that I mean that I am a woman of African descent living in the United States who comes from a long line of strong, courageous Black women who did what they had to do in order to survive often in the face of opposition from those from whom they should have received support. But they did survive, building a community of men and women, young and old, children and adults, blood-relatives and play-relatives, joined by their common suffering in the U.S. and by their shared love for each other in their wholeness. They did this for themselves and theirs but also for others who also struggled like them. As Anna Julia Cooper affirmed, our struggle is a struggle for all.

We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life....

Women's wrongs are...indissolubly linked with all undefended woe, and the acquirement of her "rights" will mean the final triumph of all rights over might... (Malson, 1990, p.177).

As a womanist, I am concerned about and committed to the survival of an entire people -- male and female -- of every race and ethnicity. My rights are guaranteed only when the rights of all are guaranteed; my liberty is restricted when that of another is restricted, whether woman or man, black or white, kin or non-kin. I believe that no one is free until we are all free.

Having said that, however, it is necessary to make the assertion that in today's world, it is the lives of women that are the most severely endangered and in the United States all too often those restrictions are based, not simply on gender, but also on race and economic status. It is the poor woman of color, historically an African American woman that is, as the Harlem Renaissance poet Zora Neale Hurston noted, the "mule of the world," forced to carry burdens and endure degradations that no one, not even the men of her race, are required to carry or endure.

African American women call for recognition of women's rights not because they are women but more importantly because they are human. We challenge "the dichotomous thinking ... which poses opposites in exclusionary and hostile ways": one is female and black, and these are contradictory/problematical statuses! This either/or approach classifies phenomena in such a way that "everything falls into one category or another, but cannot belong to more than one category at the same time." It is precisely this kind of thinking that makes it difficult to see race, sex, and class as forming one consciousness and the resistance of race, sex, and class oppression as forming one struggle. Womanism inflows from a both/and worldview, a consciousness that allows for the resolution of seeming contradictions "not through an either/or negation but through their interaction" and wholeness. Thus, while black and female may, at one level, be radically different orientations, they are at the same time united, with each "confirming the existence of the other." Rather than standing as "contradictory opposites," they become "complementary, unsynthesized, unified wholes" (Barkley Brown, as cited in Malson, 1990, p.195).

CONCLUSION

It is womanist theologians who have taken the definition first set forth by Alice Walker

FORUM ON PUBLIC POLICY

and literally “run away” with it. We see ourselves as necessarily engaged in a radical reconstruction not only of our lives as women of African descent but also as Christian women. Therefore, we call forth a constructive critique of both church and society, the Black Christian community which has learned too well the phobias of sexism and heterosexism, and the larger society and its Christian churches which have made of the United States a nation claiming “liberty and equality for all” while denying it to all who are different in any way from the dominant norm of White Anglo-Saxon Celtic Protestant male.

Our battle is waged on several fronts, race, class, gender, and religion, for all have been used to entrap and limit us, to “cut” our budding wings and to “maim” our stretched forth limbs as we attempt to go about the business of setting the world aright, if necessary one person at a time. We must all remove the various “beams”, whether of racism, ethnocentrism, classism or sexism from our eyes so that we can approach the welcome table of the Lord in true solidarity as sisters and brothers.

As Christian women who believe in our God-given right to become whoever and whatever we are capable of becoming, we challenge the Christian churches and all of Christianity to live out the true message of Christ, for the truth will set us all free. We also challenge our government and its leaders who clothe themselves in the mantle of Christ while doing works of evil to more truly live the faith it so often talks about. To be a Christian is to be about the salvation of the world, not through forced conversions, not through the oppression of those who differ due to skin-color, gender, religion, economic status or sexual orientation nor through unjust wars against a weaker people but through somehow loving a new world into life, a world in which all people can live free, a world of peace. We must live the life we sing about, challenging ourselves to never be reconciled to any doctrine or ideology, which renders us less than human, speechless, and invisible.

We must “dismantle” the master’s house using new tools carved from our own discovery and recovery of our long lost and stolen past and build a house which has “plenty good room” for us all to sit down.

FORUM ON PUBLIC POLICY

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