

1-1-2003

# Women of action : the new politics of black women in New York City, 1944-1972.

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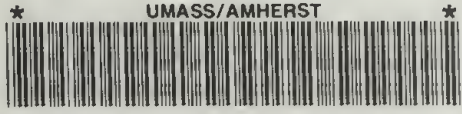
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**WOMEN OF ACTION, IN ACTION:  
THE NEW POLITICS OF BLACK WOMEN IN NEW YORK CITY, 1944-1972**

A Dissertation Presented

by

JULIE A. GALLAGHER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2003

Department of History

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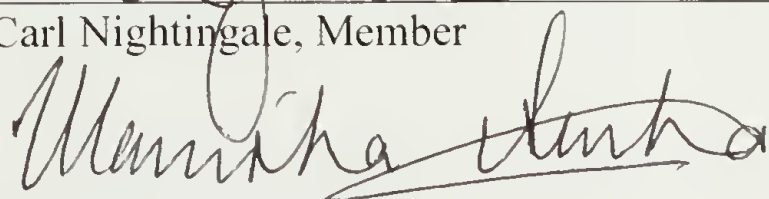
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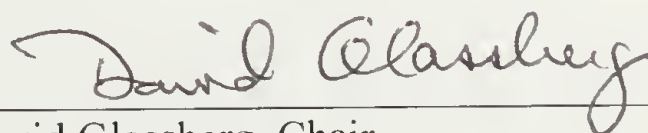
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## DEDICATION

To Mary Beth, Jessica, Peter, Katie and Cynthia.

Your love and your passion for life, for learning and for adventure are my sources of  
inspiration and balance.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a pleasure to acknowledge those who have contributed to this dissertation and have made the process of research and writing not only a rich learning experience, but a truly enjoyable one as well. I had the good fortune to work with a number of great professors at the University of Massachusetts. Kathy Peiss has been a remarkable advisor and I am grateful to have had a chance to work with her. I have benefited from her guidance and grown as a scholar in more ways than I can count. Her dedication and the encouragement she gave me throughout the years, but especially in the last few months of writing, were incredible. The courses I took and the discussions I had with Kevin Boyle were critical for helping me conceptualize this project and for thinking about politics and liberalism more broadly. He has a gift for teaching and for asking insightful questions. Carl Nightingale has a distinctive passion about thinking and learning that always reminds me that the work of historians is far more than an intellectual exercise. The breadth of his interests and his ability to see connections between areas of study are examples I hope to follow. Manisha Sinha is truly a delight to work with and I am glad that I took one of her courses a number of years ago. I immediately realized she is a model scholar and someone I wanted to learn more from.

There are a number of people in the History Department who have taken an interest in my work, have asked good questions, and shared ideas and suggestions along the way. I would like to thank in particular Joyce Berkman, Joye Bowman, David Glassberg, Brian Ogilvie and Mary Wilson. I have benefited from the History Department's generosity which has facilitated timely research trips and my participation

at conferences. I would also like to acknowledge the University of Massachusetts Graduate School for a University Fellowship.

This project came to life in the Manuscript and Archives Division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. I would especially like to acknowledge the archivists there, at the Schlesinger Library, at Rutgers University Special Collections, and at the Brooklyn Public Library. I would also like to thank the numerous individuals who kindly gave their time and shared their memories of New York City's political life with me. I would like to acknowledge Joan Maynard at the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History, Andy Cooper, Jocelyn Cooper and Dr. Jeanne Noble for their notable contributions to my project. Also, I would like to thank Martha Biondi. During a couple of chance meetings at the Schomburg, she generously shared ideas and gave me valuable suggestions.

As I turn now to thank friends and family I am reminded about how absolutely fortunate I am. My oldest and dearest friends have been a constant source of encouragement and love. I thank in particular Virginia Oran-Sabia, Christine Corrison and Elizabeth Hamilton. They each have a tremendous commitment to social justice and I have grown as a person because of their friendships. They also have the wonderful ability to help me find the joy in life and to make me laugh. In addition, I have had a great group of friends and colleagues at the University of Massachusetts that I would like to acknowledge including: Magda Ahmed, Ojae Beale, Jane Berger, Lisa Deyo, Stephanie Evans, Robin Fordham, Richard Gassan, Kristin Harper, Frances Hitchens, Mohamed Ibrahim, Karen and Brian Lennon, Leo Maley, Marian Mollin, Erica Piedade, Sherry Russell, Julia and Lonce Sandy-Bailey, and Beth Terhune.



Finally, I would like to thank my family. Words are truly lacking to express my deep gratitude for everything that they have given me. My mother was always my biggest cheerleader. She encouraged me to seize every opportunity and take chances, to study hard, and to live fully. All I have done has been profoundly influenced by her love and her passion for life. My father in his own way has also been an inspiration and I am grateful for that. My sisters and brother, to whom I dedicate this dissertation, have been steadfast in their love and support. They are an extraordinary group of people and I am thankful to have benefited from all that they do and who they are. I would also like to recognize and thank my grandmother. At ninety-five years old, she is remarkable for her continued desire to learn from the world around her, and I can only hope to follow her path. I am glad that I can share this work with her.

My closing thoughts are for Michael Simsik, my husband and partner in this journey. He is generous in all he does, but particularly with his love and encouragement for me. It was a joy to go through these past eight years with him.

## ABSTRACT

WOMEN OF ACTION, IN ACTION:  
THE NEW POLITICS OF BLACK WOMEN IN NEW YORK, 1944-1972

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This dissertation documents a generation of black women who came to politics during the 1940s in New York City. Ada B. Jackson, Pauli Murray, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Bessie Buchanan, Jeanne Noble and Shirley Chisholm among others, worked, studied and lived in Harlem and Brooklyn. They seized the political opportunities generated by World War II and its aftermath and pursued new ways to redress the entrenched systems of oppression that denied them full rights of citizenship and human dignity. These included not only grassroots activism, but also efforts to gain insider status in the administrative state; the use of the United Nations; and an unprecedented number of campaigns for elected office. Theirs was a new politics and they waged their struggles not just for themselves, but also for their communities and for the broader ideals of equality.

When World War II began, grassroots activists operated outside the halls of formal political power. Yet they understood the necessity of engaging the state and



frequently endeavored to wrest power from it: the power that made life more bearable, that made the streets safer, that kept the roofs over their heads. These activists and others in women's clubs and civic organizations won favor in their communities and they increasingly pursued formal political positions.

As the war drew to a close, a growing number of black women ran for elected office and sought political appointments. However, to attain political posts, they had to overcome the entrenched traditions of Tammany Hall's machine and the gendered and racialized nature of New York City politics. Most were unsuccessful, but by 1954, a few succeed.

By the 1960s, black women had made their way into national politics. They were appointed to presidential commissions, the administration and won congressional office. Dorothy Height, Pauli Murray, Jeanne Noble, and Congresswoman and presidential candidate Shirley Chisholm represent the advancements black women made into the state structure.

This study illustrates the kinds of political changes women helped bring about, it underscores the boundaries of what was possible vis-à-vis the state, and it traces how race, gender and the structure of the state itself shape outcomes.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In July 1972, the Democratic party gathered in Miami, Florida to nominate its candidate to run against President Richard Nixon. Shirley Chisholm, the black congresswoman from New York City, was among the field of contenders. Chisholm recounted her experiences at the convention in her autobiography, *The Good Fight*, which documented her historic run for the United States presidency.

On a July night as the Secret Service escorted her to the convention hall, Chisholm recollected, “I felt no excitement. Backstage, watching the scene on a television set until it was time to go on, I was still calm.” But then she was ushered into the main convention hall and the energy hit. “This huge room was pulsing and jumping at me, so much more than I had expected... Almost everybody was applauding and cheering,” she reminisced.

“What I said that night was that most people had thought I would never stand there, in that place, but there I was. All the odds had been against it, right up to the end,” Chisholm wrote. “I never blamed anyone for doubting. The Presidency is for white males. No one was ready to take a black woman seriously as a candidate. It was not time yet for a black to run, let alone a woman, and certainly not for someone who was both. Someday...but not yet. Someday the country will be ready,” Shirley

Chisholm avowed as she reflected back on her bid for the United States Presidency in 1972.<sup>1</sup>

In 1968, Shirley Anita St. Hill Chisholm became the first black woman elected to the United States Congress. African American women had finally gained access to the highest levels of political power. Chisholm's victory was rightly touted as an important milestone in history. At the same time, her designation as a "first" tended to mask the efforts of all those who had gone before her. Chisholm was by no means the first black woman to run for Congress. Sara Pelham Speaks faced off against Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the illustrious representative from Harlem, in his first bid for Congress in 1944. Ada B. Jackson, a Brooklynite, ran for Congress in 1948. Speaks, Jackson and numerous others around the nation who ran suggest that by the end of World War II, the political climate had changed to the point where black women felt they could make a serious bid for office.

As a politician – a liberal urban Democrat, black and female – Chisholm worked within and outside of the legislative process. These variables of her identity surfaced in her speeches and in the legislation she supported. At a time when some within black and feminist communities chose radical resistance to "the system," Chisholm and most other black women chose to remain a part of it. In the wake of the Great Depression and the New Deal, they had come to believe that the formal political structure could be a vehicle for redistributing power and resources, and for bringing about greater human rights and

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<sup>1</sup> Shirley Chisholm, *The Good Fight* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), pp. 1-2.

equality.<sup>2</sup> They determined that any sustainable program, especially for the black community, had to originate in the state. Whether their political lives and experiences validated their beliefs and warranted their trust in the state is a question this dissertation seeks to answer.

It examines various forms of political activism that black women in New York City engaged in from 1944 through 1972 in order to assess the state as an effective arena for politically marginalized people to exact meaningful change. In this study, the state is defined as the institutions of government including the political, bureaucratic and judicial elements as well as the processes by which they worked and changed.

Many women fought for racial and gender equality, the rights of citizenship and human dignity through grassroots activism, in women's organizations and in formal politics. They led community struggles, were appointed to city, state, and national government positions, ran for elected office, and participated in international forums including the United Nations. At the same time, there were limits to what they could achieve because of racial and gender-based discrimination embedded in New York City's political institutions.<sup>3</sup> This work illustrates the kinds of political changes women helped bring about, and it underscores the boundaries of what was possible.

In the postwar years, politically conscious women moved fluidly between unions, organizational work, political meetings and international activities. They engaged in all

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<sup>2</sup> Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *"Or Does It Explode?": Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 11, 94.

<sup>3</sup> See Elisabeth S. Clemens, "Organizational Repertoires and Institutional Change: Women's Groups and the Transformation of American Politics, 1890-1920," in *Civic*



forms of political activism – activism that did not necessarily separate “politics” from everyday life.<sup>4</sup> Frequently they operated in multiple arenas at one time, braiding the strands of activism together for particular causes. Of the various strategies they employed, none were consistently successful, and none were total failures.

While Brooklyn and Harlem residents waged local battles for better housing, schools, and jobs, the national civil rights landscape changed dramatically. Women like Ada B. Jackson, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, and Shirley Chisholm were part of a much larger process of change that was underway in the United States. Their experiences and activism shaped the grassroots and national struggles and also were *shaped by* the national story. They effectively and importantly bridged the two.

This study explores the issues women in New York City defined as political concerns, and evaluates when and how they turned to the state to effect change. It suggests answers to some of the following questions: How responsive were the various levels of government to their needs? How did race, ethnicity, gender and class shape expectations about and outcomes of all levels of politics? How effective were black women in elected office? What kind of coalitions did they try to unite? How did they respond when they found themselves relegated to symbolic roles?

In addition, by the early 1960s, African American women increasingly turned their political energies to addressing women’s inequality, and they did so using the discourses of the growing feminist movement. A small number of elite black women

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*Engagement in American Democracy* eds. Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> See Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 9.

participated in the first state-sponsored evaluation of women's roles in American society. Dorothy Height was a member of the President's Commission on the Status of Women. Jeanne Noble and Pauli Murray participated on the commission's committees. Moreover, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Pauli Murray and Shirley Chisholm participated in the founding and early years of the National Organization for Women. How did black women's consciousness about gender and racial inequality intersect with the growing feminist movement? Did they see it as a useful strategy for change?

New York City, and particularly Harlem, provided refuge, opportunity, education and personal connections for black women who migrated or were born there. Most of the women highlighted here came to New York City between the 1920s and 1940s. Who were these women who called New York City home? Who aggressively pursued public leadership roles? Who honed their political skills in the city's political machines? And who served as inspiration to their communities?

Ada B. Jackson, Maude Richardson, Pauli Murray, Ruth Whitehead Whaley, Wilhelmina Adams, Bessie Buchanan, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Daisy George, Jeanne Noble, Edith Sampson, Shirley Barnes and Shirley Chisholm worked and lived in Harlem and the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Most pursued higher education as well as advanced degrees at one of New York City's universities, including Brooklyn College, Hunter, Columbia, Fordham and New York University. Some were married; few had children.

As a result of their educational and professional opportunities, they were frequently of a different class than most of the people for whom they advocated.<sup>5</sup> But they were not necessarily inspired by the tradition of racial uplift.<sup>6</sup> Their motive for gaining access into the political arena stemmed from their desire to reallocate resources to the black communities from which they came and to undo the entrenched system of racial inequality. Despite their class-based advantages, however, they remained intimately aware of the dynamics of racism and the double burden of being both black and a woman in a predominantly white and largely male-dominated society.

Just as black women in the South had been leaders in their local communities prior to the civil rights movement, so were black women in the North.<sup>7</sup> A number of women in this dissertation, particularly those who garnered leadership positions, wrote their own stories, carefully crafting narratives of struggle, of victory, and of

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<sup>5</sup> See Stephanie Shaw, *What A Woman Ought To Be And To Do : Black Professional Women Workers During The Jim Crow Era* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1996) for a discussion of women in the South who were raised by their families to be professionals and leaders.

<sup>6</sup> For a critical evaluation of black leaders' efforts at racial uplift see Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting The Race : Black Leadership, Politics, And Culture In The Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1996). For a positive one see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> See Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 21; Glenda Gilmore, *Gender & Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).



disappointment. They understood their role in the larger historical movements for rights and equality and wanted to highlight both their contributions and the barriers they faced.<sup>8</sup>

For those who ran for elected office or who assumed administrative posts in the city and federal government, the state was considered a viable forum for political activism. In this dissertation, the state is revealed as both an ally and an obstacle for black women. It was an important site of power to which, the women understood, they had to gain access. But access was often not sufficient to redistribute resources, rights and power. As Stephen Skowronek has argued, “states change (or fail to change) through political struggles rooted in and mediated by pre-established institutional arrangements.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, sociologist Elisabeth Clemens has highlighted the challenges women who ventured into the political sphere had to contend with,

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<sup>8</sup> Anna Arnold Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds: A memoir of Negro Leadership* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964); Anna Arnold Hedgeman, *The Gift of Chaos: Decades of American Discontent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987); Jeanne Noble, *Beautiful, Also, Are the Souls of My Black Sisters: A History of the Black Woman in America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1978); Shirley Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970); Shirley Chisholm, *The Good Fight* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973). See also Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. by Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995) (originally published in *Signs*, 14:95 (Summer 1989)). Hine proposes that, “in the face of the pervasive stereotypes and negative estimations of the sexuality of black women, it was imperative that they collectively create alternative self-images and shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self,” 383.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. ix, 285.

particularly “the culturally embedded equation of the political with masculinity.”<sup>10</sup> It was those “pre-established institutional arrangements” and the “culturally embedded equation of the political with masculinity,” that highly circumscribed black women’s ability to bring about change.

At the same time, historian Linda Gordon reminds us that change is possible through the state. “It has indeed been argued,” she writes, “that the maleness of the state comes not only from its personnel but is imbedded in its nature, in bureaucratic and hierarchical forms.”<sup>11</sup> But to see the state in such a schematic and limited way, she argues, ignores the advances women have made in the polity as well as the contributions that have made to its structure. My story evaluates the struggles for change through the state with these perspectives in mind.

This study broadens our perspective on the important role that black women have played in the civil rights struggles of the postwar period.<sup>12</sup> In particular, it introduces

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<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth S. Clemens, “Organizational Repertoires and Institutional Change,” 91.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Gordon, ed., *Women, the State, and Welfare* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Joyce Ann Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune and Black Women’s Political Activism* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press), 2003; Vicki L. Crawford et al. editors, *Women in the Civil Rights Movement*; Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); David J. Garrow, ed., *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987, 1996); Kimberly Springer ed. with preface by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women’s Contemporary Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, eds., *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).



their activities in the Northern struggle.<sup>13</sup> Focusing particularly on Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem, it offers a new perspective on community, race, and politics in New York City, a subject of much interest to recent historians.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, it suggests a way to evaluate the state as a site of political change for black women, a group that has been historically marginalized in society. The literature on women's integral role in the creation of maternalist welfare policy is extensive. Some works, although not all, engage the important intersections of race and gender.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century, African American and white women have used

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<sup>13</sup> Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Craig Steven Wilder, *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Clarence Taylor, *The Black Churches of Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Steven Gregory, *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Roger Sanjek, *The Future of Us All: Race and Neighborhood Politics in New York City* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998); Philip Kasinitz, *Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); Frederick Binder and David Reimers, *All the Nations Under Heaven: An Ethnic and Racial History of New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Maurice Berube and Marilyn Gittell, eds, *Confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville: The New York School Strikes of 1968* (New York: Praeger, 1969); Fred Shapiro and James Sullivan, *Race Riots: New York 1964* (New York: Crowell, 1964).

<sup>15</sup> Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 1994; Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press,



women's clubs and religious organizations to exercise influence in their communities and in the polity. A number of studies examine the role of these organizations and institutions.<sup>16</sup> Yet another growing area of women's political history documents women's direct interactions with the state – how they pressured, gained access to and changed the formal political structure – to address such issues as welfare, equal rights and equal pay.<sup>17</sup> This study brings together these different lines of inquiry, bridging the categories of grassroots, organizational and state-centered activism.

A number of political and labor historians have marked the conclusion of World War II as the end of New Deal liberalism,<sup>18</sup> while others carry the story through the

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1992); Seth Koven, and Sonya Michel, eds., *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Gilmore, *Gender & Jim Crow*; Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, eds., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Cynthia Harrison, *On Account of Sex: The Politics of Women's Issues, 1945-1968* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1988); Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Linda Gordon, ed., *Women, the State, and Welfare* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). For women in party politics, see: Melanie Susan Gustafson, *Women and the Republican Party, 1854-1924* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); M. Gustafson, Kristie Miller and Elisabeth I. Perry, eds., *We Have Come to Stay: American Women and Political Parties, 1880-1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999); Susan J. Carroll, ed., *The Impact of Women in Public Office* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Elisabeth Israel Perry, *Belle Moskowitz: Feminine Politics and the Exercise of Power in the Age of Alfred E. Smith* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); Steven Fraser, "Sidney Hillman: Labor's Machiavelli," in *Labor Leaders in America*, ed. Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, Eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton

1960s and peg its final breath in 1968.<sup>19</sup> They attribute its demise in large part to labor's failure to maintain its commitment to reconfiguring the political economy. Historians and sociologists in this field lament the turn to rights-based activism. They argue that racial conflicts arising out of the Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty dealt the fatal blow to the New Deal coalition. Although these historians differ somewhat on the forces and "moments" of decline, none carry liberalism's story beyond 1968.

Historians, however, have not evaluated women's achievements in the state in the ideological context of post World War II liberalism. Women are rarely, if ever mentioned. This study engages the debate on the decline of liberalism and suggests at minimum a reassessment of the moment of its decline.

For instance, Shirley Chisholm's career as a liberal Democrat and the significant gains in women's status during the late 1960s and early 1970s suggest that women

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University Press, 1989); Nelson Lichtenstein, "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era," in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, eds. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989); Alan Brinkley, "The New Deal and the Idea of the State," in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, eds. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989)

<sup>19</sup> Allen Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers), Chapter 14; Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), Chapters 5-8; Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: Basic Books), Chapter 9; Ira Katznelson, "Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity," in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order 1930-1980*, eds., Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), Chapter 7; Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, "The Failure and Success of the New Radicalism", in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order 1930-1980*, eds., Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 212-232; Jonathan Rieder, "The Rise of the 'Silent Majority'" in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order 1930-1980*, eds., Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, New



should be considered in the liberal framework. With respect to women, liberalism remained a powerful political ideology into the 1970s. In that decade, for example, the courts gave women legal access to abortions in *Roe v Wade*, the Equal Rights Amendment was passed by Congress (though later defeated by the states), Title IX of the Education Act gave women greater access to equality in higher education, and the minimum wage laws for domestic workers were changed. And over time, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission became an effective tool for women to challenge sexual discrimination on the job.

By measuring success of the liberal agenda only in terms of class, many political and labor historians discount the achievements of the postwar social movements. These movements were relatively successful in bringing political and economic rights to many people, particularly African Americans and women who had historically suffered from state-sanctioned and de facto discrimination and inequality.

This is the story of committed, talented black women in New York City who worked politically to undo entrenched racial and gender-based discrimination. Although they were exceptional individuals, these women must also be seen as part of a much larger process of change underway in the United States from the end of World War II through the 1970s. They knew that “words were not enough” and so they took action, willingly and continuously. Through their efforts we understand more fully the kinds of changes that are possible vis-à-vis the state, and further, the profound limits of what is

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Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), Chapter 9; Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), pp. 23-24.



possible for a group of people who are at once politically marginalized and yet committed to the promise of the system.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE POLITICS OF LOCAL ACTIVISM

A decade and a half of upheaval generated by worldwide depression and war transformed America's social and political landscapes by the 1940s. In New York City, the nation's urban epicenter, the reverberations were felt across the five boroughs, in every neighborhood. African American women in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, the two largest black communities in New York by this time, seized the opportunities generated by World War II and its aftermath. Even as they continued to follow older traditions of resistance, they developed new ways to redress the entrenched systems of oppression that denied them full rights of citizenship and human dignity. Moreover, they waged their struggles not just for themselves, but also for their communities and for the broader ideals of equality.

New York was historically a complex city. It promised opportunity and relative freedom to those who settled within its borders. Nearly all the black women in this study migrated there from other parts of the nation or were children of Caribbean immigrants. Harlem had been a haven in the late 1920s and 1930s, a place to feel accepted and to be relieved, even temporarily, of the reminders of discrimination. As YWCA administrator Anna Arnold Hedgeman noted, "I often journeyed to Harlem [from Jersey City across the Hudson], for freedom, recreation and social contact."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Arnold Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds: A Memoir of Negro Leadership* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 39.

Yet the city's long-standing relationship with its black residents was also fraught with racism and violence. Even as they felt relief from the omnipresent racism of the South or the pangs of discrimination in other northern cities, black women in New York understood the challenges they faced. To make matters worse, New York's political and economic structures were steeped in male-gendered traditions.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, like generations before them, African American women in New York City refused to surrender to discrimination.

Community residents of Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant readily accepted and often sought out the leadership of women like Ada B. Jackson, Maude Richardson, Bonita Williams, Daisy George and many others. For these women, government bureaucracies, the courts, the city, state, and national legislatures – the structures of the state – were important elements in their struggles.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes they employed the

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<sup>2</sup> For the way gender is used, see Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6 and Elsa Barkley Brown, "What Has Happened Here": The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics," in Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King, Linda Reed, eds., *"We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible": A Reader in Black Women's History*, (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, Inc, 1995), 42.

<sup>3</sup> For discussions on the expansion, the limits of and control over state structures, see: Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Theda Skocpol, Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Linda Gordon, ed., *Women, the State, and Welfare* (Madison, Wis. : University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Bertell Ollman, "Going Beyond the State?" *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 4, December 1992, 1014-1017; William Leuchtenburg, "The Pertinence of Political History: Reflections on the Significance of the State in America," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 73, Issue 3, 585-600. For the particular role women have played in the creation of the welfare state, see: Gordon, ed., *Women, the State, and Welfare*; Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*; Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Domain*; Koven & Michel, *Mothers of a New World*;



rhetoric of state policies, even expired ones; other times they threatened or took direct action. The arguments they made for improved conditions in their neighborhoods were based on ideals of economic fairness and human rights, not primarily on a gendered sense of identity.

Grassroots activists and clubwomen like Jackson, Richardson, Williams and George operated outside the halls of formal political power. Yet they understood the necessity of engaging the state, and they frequently endeavored to wrest power from it -- the power that made life more bearable, that made the streets safer, that kept the roofs over their heads, that kept the food in stores safe for consumption. And in the moments of real victory, they scored important gains, winning access to jobs, commitments to end police brutality, and better schools for their children. As the war drew to a close, change was in the air. However, the racist and sexist legacies of the past were tremendous, and the challenges remained daunting. The heavy cloud of discrimination still lingered, and it was unclear which way the winds would ultimately blow.

### *African-Americans in New York*

From the days of New Amsterdam's settlement in the 1600's through the early nineteenth century, African Americans lived in the city, mostly as slaves. Though there were efforts to outlaw the practice in the late eighteenth century, slavery remained an integral part of New York City life until it was outlawed in 1827. Small black communities flourished in Manhattan and Brooklyn before the turn of the twentieth

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Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*; Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood*, Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*.

century, but it was not until the early decades of the 1900s that the African American population in New York grew significantly. The World War I industrial boom enticed southern migrants and Caribbean immigrants to the city with the promise of stable work and a better life. The steady flow of migration begun in the 1910s became a flood in the 1920s.<sup>4</sup> As the Great Depression set in, the black population of New York City reached 4.7 percent of the total population. Historian Philip Kasinitz noted an important distinction in the city's demographics. "[New York] was the only city in the United States where a significant proportion of the black population was of Caribbean origin. By 1930, 16.7 percent of New York's black population was foreign born."<sup>5</sup>

In Harlem, white flight and black in-migration resulted in a dramatic change in demographics. In some sections of Harlem, black people made up nearly 90 percent of the population by 1920. Brooklyn, one of the nation's major manufacturing centers, saw its population double from 1890 to 1940.<sup>6</sup> The Depression slowed these trends

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<sup>4</sup> Edwin R. Lewinson, *Black Politics in New York City* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1974); Roi Ottley, *New World A-Coming: Inside Black America* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1943); John B. Manbeck, Editor, Introduction by Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Neighborhoods of Brooklyn*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Clarence Taylor, *The Black Churches of Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Between 1910 and 1920, the city's black population increased from 91,709 to 152,567. This represented a 66 % increase. From 1920 to 1930 it expanded to 327,706, which represented a 115% increase. Source: U.S Census cited in George W. Groh, *The Black Migration: The Journey to Urban America* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1972), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Kasinitz, *Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) pp. 41-42.

<sup>6</sup> Groh, 59; Nathan Kantrowitz, "Negro and Puerto Rican Populations of New York City in the Twentieth Century," *American Geographical Society*, 1969. Manbeck, ed., p. xxiv. The population grew from 1.2 million in 1890 to 2.7 million in 1940. Brooklyn's black population grew from 68,921 or 2.7 percent in 1930 to 208,478 or 7.6 percent in



temporarily. But when war industries beckoned again in 1940, migration to the North rose to its highest level. Newly constructed subway lines made relocation within New York City, from Harlem to Bedford-Stuyvesant, a neighborhood in central Brooklyn, easier as well. The African American population there swelled as the community became an attractive alternative to overcrowded Harlem. Mainstream newspapers like the *New York Times* took to calling Bedford-Stuyvesant “Little Harlem.”<sup>7</sup>

Racism as much as opportunity greeted African Americans and infused all aspects of life: real estate restrictive covenants, job discrimination, and poor schools dimmed the original optimism that migrants felt. The economic upheavals of the 1930s were disproportionately difficult for the city’s black residents, but as journalist George Schuyler remarked, “Negroes had been in the Depression all the time.”<sup>8</sup> New York’s black churches, clubs, organizations and a number of talented individuals sustained their communities and advocated for equality, just as the previous generations had done in the South.<sup>9</sup>

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1950. Source: *U.S. Census, 1930, Fifteenth U.S. Census, Population, Vol. III, Part 2; 1940 Sixteenth Census of U.S., Vol. II, Characteristics of the Population, Part 5, New York; Taylor, 103.*

<sup>7</sup> The neighborhood had more than 65,000 African American residents by 1940. Taylor, 75, 103; Manbeck, 13. *New York Times*, November 16, 1943, 1; November 22, 1943, 1; November 27, 1943, 26; December 2, 1943, 29; December 3, 1943, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Thomas Kessner, *Fiorello H. La Guardia and the Making of Modern New York* (McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1989), 205.

<sup>9</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999); Floris Barnett Cash, *African American Women and Social Action: The Clubwomen and Volunteering from Jim Crow to the New Deal, 1896-1936* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender*



Traumatic times brought significant changes, however. As Cheryl Greenberg argues in *Or Does it Explode?*, New Deal relief efforts, while not sufficient, improved conditions for those on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder. Organized protests such as the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign as well as the Harlem riot of 1935, exerted pressure on those with power and resources. But African Americans’ near total exclusion from skilled trades and white-collar jobs continued to undermine the pursuit of equality. Economic and social frustrations led to a second devastating riot in Harlem in 1943.<sup>10</sup> This second riot in less than ten years demonstrated that partial efforts and unfulfilled commitments could not bring about equality or improve economic and race relations in the city. At the same time, the Depression and war years generated some important political and economic reconfigurations. The nature of grassroots activism, party politics, unions and the state bureaucracy changed considerably.<sup>11</sup>

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& *Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*; Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn, *Black Neighbors: Race and the Limits of Reform in the American Settlement House Movement, 1890-1945*; Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984); Elsa Barkley Brown, “Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke” in *Signs* 14, Spring 1989; Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson Publishing, 1994); Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972); Linda O. McMurray, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Groh, 116; Edwin R. Lewinson, *Black Politics in New York City* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1974), 70; Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, “*Or Does It Explode?*” *Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp 216, 221-22.

<sup>11</sup> Cheryl Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode?: Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1983); John C. Walter, *The*

### *Grassroots Activism*

Because of their gender, race, and class, most Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant women were unable to pursue institutional political power.<sup>12</sup> That was a realm of activity preserved largely by men for men, including by the mid-1940s, a number of African American men.<sup>13</sup> The few African American women who made inroads tended to have higher education and some means of access that gave them a fighting chance against the sexism of the political system. But grassroots activists had other resources from which to draw, particularly the support of their communities, as well as a rich legacy of protest, resistance, and creative adaptation.

In the North, African American women had more resources and greater latitude to push for change than did their southern sisters. The harrowing threats of violence in the South were largely absent in the North. The black population in New York City by the 1940s represented an important voting bloc. They garnered an increasing amount of attention from New York City's three major political parties: the Democrats, the

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*Harlem Fox: J. Raymond Jones and Tammany, 1920-1970* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989); Charles V. Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography of an American Dilemma* (New York: Atheneum, 1991); E. Curtis Alexander, *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: A Black Political Educator, African American Educator Series, Vol. II* (New York: ECA Associates, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 209.

<sup>13</sup> At the same time, Linda Gordon argues in *Pitied But Not Entitled*, that white women wielded a significant degree of influence over the foundational ideals embedded in the recently created national welfare system.



Republicans and the American Labor Party (ALP).<sup>14</sup> In addition, New York was a hotbed of progressive activity. There were two Communists serving in the City Council by the end of World War II. The progressive coalition brought African Americans together with labor and leftist leaders. Together they defined their most pressing concern, jobs.<sup>15</sup> But their focus and the forms of protest they employed quickly spread to include a broad array of civil rights issues. The left coalition demonstrated that the struggles for equality could bring whites and blacks together.<sup>16</sup> However, discrimination frequently circumscribed the boundaries of economic and political possibility for black men and women.

Whether involved in progressive coalitions, in their neighborhoods, or in their separate organizations, New York City's black women fought to improve the quality of life and end the myriad forms of racism in the city in the 1930s. Northern racism revealed itself in exorbitant rents, higher food prices in black communities than in other parts of the city, and job discrimination. In both the prosaic elements of life and in the flash-points of conflict, grassroots activists continuously waged battles for power and equality. Neighborhood efforts to thwart discrimination included rent protests, price

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<sup>14</sup> The American Labor Party (ALP) was created in 1936 by New York labor leaders. New York City was the party's base, and it fielded a number of successful candidates for city council. Its biggest victory was in 1948 when Vito Marcantonio won his Congressional seat exclusively on the ALP ticket. J. David Gillespie, *Politics at the Periphery: Third Parties in Two-Party America* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 257.

<sup>15</sup> Martha Biondi, "The Struggle For Black Equality in New York City, 1945-1955," Diss., Columbia University, 1997; Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, 112.

<sup>16</sup> Naison, pp. xviii, 11, 47, 57, 117, 194; Martha Biondi, "The Struggle for Black Equality in New York City, 1945-1955," Diss. Columbia University, 1997, 106.



control campaigns, and job actions. Some of these campaigns were organized by radicals. Others were led by frustrated parents, and faithful church-goers. And finally artists played signal roles in dramatizing the effects of discrimination in all aspects of life.<sup>17</sup>

During World War II, the need for a “Double V,” a victory at home against racism as well as a victory overseas against fascism, was apparent in the everyday worlds of Harlem and Brooklyn. The Harlem riot of 1943 exposed just how raw the tensions were.<sup>18</sup> But the streets did not have to erupt in violence for the manifestations and frustrations of inequality to be in evidence.

### *A Community Defends Itself*

In late 1943, a Kings county (borough of Brooklyn) grand jury issued a report on crime in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. In addition to criticizing Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and the police commissioner for poor leadership, the report pilloried the community. The jury stated that the neighborhood was in an “extremely deplorable

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<sup>17</sup> For a full discussion of Communist-led protests in the 1930s, see Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, passim. For a discussion of broader-based battles for racial equality during the 1930s and early 1940s, see Greenberg, “*Or Does It Explode?*” passim. See also Haygood, *King of the Cats*, Chapter 2; Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell*, Chapters 3 and 5; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995 originally published in 1985 by Basic Books), 215; Biondi, “The Struggle for Black Equality”, passim; Gail Lumet Buckley, *The Hornes: An American Family* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1986), Chapter 6; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), pp. 310-311, 369-370; Roslyn Terborg-Penn, “Discrimination Against Afro-American Women in the Woman’s Movement, 1830-1920,” in S. Harley and R. Terborg-Penn, *Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1978), 27.

state of lawlessness.” The area was plagued by “dangerous and unsafe” conditions. “Many fine churches have closed completely because their parishioners do not dare attend the evening services,” they concluded.<sup>19</sup>

The *New York Amsterdam News* and the *People's Voice*, two of the city's black newspapers, responded immediately, defining both the grand jury's report and the press coverage of it as a “smear campaign.” Brooklyn's black communities sprang to action just as quickly, forming two protest organizations.<sup>20</sup> Maude Richardson, a long-time Brooklyn activist, worked with the Peoples' Committee of Brooklyn to challenge the allegations and to fight for desperately needed city services, housing and jobs. A native of Arkansas, Richardson was vice president of the Brooklyn NAACP, chairman of the Four Freedoms Committee of Brooklyn, vice-chairman of the Negro Republicans of Kings County, and staff writer for the *New York Amsterdam News* and the *People's Voice*.<sup>21</sup>

Ada B. Jackson, another Bedford-Stuyvesant advocate, was named co-leader of the Interracial Assembly, a coalition of sixty-five organizations. Jackson, a native of Savannah, Georgia, daughter of a former slave, college graduate, and mother of four children, was a long-standing activist in Brooklyn in her church, local school struggles and the Y.W.C.A. Originally a Republican, Jackson would abandon the party in 1946 in

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<sup>18</sup> See Cheryl Greenberg, “Or Does It Explode?,” 211; Kessner, pp. 531-32.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in *New York Times*, November 16, 1943, 1.

<sup>20</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, December 4, 1943, B1; December 11, 1943, B1; *New York Times*, November 24, 1943, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Richardson wrote for the progressive *People's Voice* in 1948 after Doxey Wilkerson had left and shortly before it went under.

favor of the American Labor party, charging the GOP with “the insulting ‘lily white’ policy of separate clubs for Negro members.”<sup>22</sup> The Interracial Assembly wanted an interracial commission established to work on race relations and the exclusion of African Americans from the “general life of the city.” The group condemned the report and expressed “resentment of the implications of the grand jury indictment of the area as a crime and disease-ridden neighborhood.”<sup>23</sup>

For Bedford-Stuyvesant’s African American residents, the grand jury report was an unwarranted attack on their dynamic community. The report’s racism was thinly veiled. Harry Wolkof, a white Brooklyn Democratic leader, had testified before the grand jury. “Decent men and women in the Bedford-Stuyvesant sections,” he claimed, “have been imprisoned in their homes fearing to come out at night because of the serious mugging situation.”<sup>24</sup> Those readers who were inclined to believe racist scare tactics could easily interpret “decent men and women” as white men and women. The African American community understood that. They both defended and sought to control the definition of their community. They challenged the language used to describe them. And they tied the problems in the community to the countless expressions of racism in the job market, in housing, and in a lack of city services.

According to the progressive *People’s Voice*, a Harlem-based weekly, Ada Jackson was the right person to lead the community in the campaign. The *People’s Voice* noted, “There is hardly a project ... concerned with improving race relations or ...

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<sup>22</sup> *Daily Worker*, March 20, 1946. [Ada Jackson Clipping File, Schomburg Clipping File]

<sup>23</sup> *New York Times*, December 1, 1943, 23.



the welfare of Negroes in the borough in which Mrs. Jackson has not played an active role in its leadership.”<sup>25</sup> Her path to civic and political leadership started with her work in the local PTA. An advocate of racial equality and improved schools, Jackson’s talents and commitments were well recognized.

Within weeks of the report, the Brooklyn Interracial Assembly held a meeting that drew over 600 attendees. The *New York Times*, the city’s largest paper, covered the Kings County grand jury report and the subsequent activities extensively, often on the first page of the paper.<sup>26</sup> But even as they noted that Jackson was named the chair of the Interracial Assembly, they failed to mention her in their report of the mass meeting, choosing instead to quote a number of male participants.<sup>27</sup> Jackson, like so many community women, did not fit the cultural and media-defined gendered ideal of leadership. It was extremely difficult for New York City’s black women to make their voice heard to the city’s largest audiences; their community leadership roles remained in the background as the media chose instead to privilege both black and white men’s activism.

Regardless of the press coverage, Jackson’s Interracial Assembly studied the conditions of Bedford-Stuyvesant thoroughly and proposed ways to improve race relations and conditions in the neighborhood. The recommendations included an

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<sup>24</sup> *New York Times*, November 12, 1943, 23.

<sup>25</sup> *People’s Voice*, October 21, 1944, 11.

<sup>26</sup> *New York Times*, November 12, 1943, 23; November 16, 1; November 19, 1; November 22, 1; November 24, 13; November 25, 27; November 27, 26; December 1, 23; December 2, 29; December 3, 25; December 7, 1; December 13, pp. 1, 23.

<sup>27</sup> *New York Times*, December 13, 1943, 23.

extension of policies administered by the wartime Office of Price Administration Board (OPA) to combat the discriminatory pricing system that plagued black shoppers and renters.<sup>28</sup> They insisted that until systemic racism was rooted out, the poor living conditions and limited opportunities for Harlem's and Bedford-Stuyvesant's residents would remain.

### *The Struggle for Affordable Housing*

Housing was another battleground issue in the northern civil rights struggle. Finding affordable, safe housing was a constant challenge for Harlem and Brooklyn residents. With wartime migration, the situation became even more dire. Realtors and mortgage companies maintained racist practices like red-lining and enforcing restrictive real estate covenants. Landlords frequently took advantage of the fact that African Americans were literally hemmed into specific neighborhoods. With little room for movement, blacks became targets of price gouging and neglect. As historian Kenneth Jackson has written, the federal government, through the Federal Housing Authority (FHA), "helped to turn the building industry against the minority and inner-city housing market, and its policies supported the income and racial segregation of suburbia."<sup>29</sup> Jackson says that "very few voices were raised against FHA red-lining practices," but in

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<sup>28</sup> *People's Voice*, October 21, 1944, 11. The OPA was one of Roosevelt's wartime agencies. It was established to keep inflation in check, particularly through the use of price controls. For a discussion of OPA activity in New York City, see Nat Brandt, *Harlem at War: The Black Experience in World War II* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 215 and Kessner, *Fiorello H. La Guardia*, 539.

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontiers*, 213.

fact many African Americans, including a large contingent of women, organized consistently for improved housing.

The situation on St. Mark's Avenue in Brooklyn was typical of that facing African Americans in 1943. When "Negro tenants displaced the former white tenants," the landlord raised the rent from \$52 to \$65. Tenants refused to pay the inflated rent and took immediate legal action, demanding a reduction in rents to the level established by the Office of Price Administration.<sup>30</sup> With the war underway and government agencies like the OPA to turn to, the black community had at least a fighting chance to challenge their landlords. As chair of the Interracial Assembly, Ada B. Jackson led the court fights to enforce federal rent control regulations. The organization won some critical battles which resulted in rent reductions. The Interracial Assembly was "prepared to assist any group of tenants in obtaining fair rents and services, whether through OPA or court action,"<sup>31</sup> using established state mechanisms to challenge racism.

Once the war drew to a close, even more Brooklyn tenants organized in response to the postwar housing crunch. Lee Maran, chair of the Brooklyn Consumers and Tenants' Council, called a borough-wide conference to protest the conditions returning veterans faced. "Millions of veterans are without homes and thousands of families are being evicted," she protested. "Trees grow in Brooklyn but we can't live in them... We are calling upon all tenants to defend their homes by organizing for united action."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, December 25, 1943, B1.

<sup>31</sup> *People's Voice*, July 1, 1944, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Mrs. Lee Maran, chair of the Brooklyn Consumers and Tenants' Council, *New York Amsterdam News*, May 3, 1947, B1.



Maran gathered the mayor's assistant, union leaders, and members of the state legislature to hear the concerns of Brooklyn's residents. The four-point program she outlined included "the retention of rent controls; resistance to evictions; increased services and decent health standards; and a public housing program."<sup>33</sup> The list demonstrated community leaders' willingness to advocate an extension or creation of government programs.

Harlem residents took action as well that same spring. As federal officials lifted price controls, landlords raised rents by fifteen percent. Harlem tenants organized in response. In addition to setting up committees to meet with the mayor, they directed their attention to state legislators. More than 1000 marchers went to Albany to protest the governor's poor housing programs. "A solid wall of grim-faced state troopers" greeted them. Harlemite Bonita Williams, executive secretary of the United Harlem Tenants and Consumers Organization, "drew tumultuous applause as she blasted the 'reactionaries' for their apathy and name-calling, while people 'are dying in Harlem' due to the results of ill housing."<sup>34</sup>

Williams also collaborated with other tenants' leagues to mobilize "broad participation in organized labor's May Day Parade." They challenged the nascent Cold War policy that sent money overseas to fight communism rather than supporting affordable housing at home. Williams urged tenant league members to fight for "federal

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<sup>33</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, May 3, 1947, B1.

<sup>34</sup> *People's Voice*, March 1, 1947, 6.

housing projects instead of \$400,000,000 to Greece and Turkey.”<sup>35</sup> Women were central actors in the roving picket lines that she organized to fight exorbitant increases in rent and the scare tactics that landlords used. Through such resistance, Williams helped “spur tenants and civic groups to think [in] terms of united action in the people’s interests.”<sup>36</sup> She educated tenants to understand their rights, to use the federal and state laws to protect themselves, and to resist landlords’ efforts.<sup>37</sup>

Patsy Graves, the neighborhood secretary of the East Harlem Urban League, organized a block program that sought to alleviate a number of neighborhood concerns, particularly bad housing. It was the most common complaint among the area’s residents. She formed neighborhood councils “composed of housewives and others, young and old, who meet regularly and work for the betterment of their community.” Graves initiated a resident education project, similar to Septima Clarks’ citizenship schools, wherein she taught residents how to lodge complaints.<sup>38</sup> “They are told of the proper agencies which deal with housing, sanitation, recreation, health and other elements of urban life, and the best procedure for getting action on their problems.”<sup>39</sup> Graves focused not only on citizenship education but also on issues that improved the quality of life and enhanced community bonds. She fought for recreational facilities for children and sponsored a

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<sup>35</sup> *People’s Voice*, May 3, 1947, 2.

<sup>36</sup> *People’s Voice*, July 12, 1947, 5.

<sup>37</sup> *People’s Voice*, July 19, 1947, 3.

<sup>38</sup> See Grace Jordan Mc Fadden, “Septima P. Clark and the Struggle for Human Rights,” in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement*, edited by Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, pp. 85-97.

<sup>39</sup> *People’s Voice*, April 12, 1947, 6.

neighborhood amateur night. Graves's success in the local community garnered enough attention to land her a job in the Department of Agriculture in Washington. She was one of many African American women who brought their understanding of local economic conditions and race relations into the administrative state.

Ada B. Jackson, Lee Maran, Bonita Williams and Patsy Graves were vocal community activists. They did not justify their positions of leadership in the public sphere as earlier generations of black welfare reformers did, by using maternalist rhetoric. Rather they argued for economic fairness, equality, "full citizenship," "the right to act as an American," and human dignity on which women based their claims.<sup>40</sup>

Although Harlem and Brooklyn residents waged successful battles in courts and filed petitions with legislators, the federal government created a new set of problems. While New York state law tried to alleviate housing discrimination, the new national policy, the Housing Act of 1949, perpetuated and indeed encouraged it.<sup>41</sup> It all but guaranteed that the small gains made throughout the late 1940s and into the 1950s would not be cumulative.

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<sup>40</sup> News Clips, October 3, 1944; n.d., Ada B. Jackson Clipping File, The Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library. See Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, 126. Gordon notes that "like their white counterparts, black women welfare activists in this period [1890-1935] can be described, cautiously, as maternalist."

<sup>41</sup> See Biondi, Chapter 5. See also *Congressional Record - Senate*, U.S. Doc 81/1 4, 4849-55; "History of the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Housing Bill, 80<sup>th</sup> Congress" from Papers of the NAACP, Part 5. The Campaign against Racial Segregation, 1914-1955, Microfilm 7582, Reel 16/0687, pp. 4, 9; Letter to President Truman from Walter White, Secretary of the NAACP, dated February 1, 1949, and Memorandum to the President of the United States Concerning racial Discrimination by the Federal Housing Administration, by Thurgood Marshall, Special Counsel to the NAACP, from Papers of the NAACP, Part 5. The Campaign against Residential Segregation, 1914-1955, Microfilm 7583, Reel 7/0643, 0644.



When in 1951, the New York State Committee on Discrimination in Housing issued its report, it reminded the nation what black New Yorkers already knew, that racism was not just a “Southern problem” but a national one<sup>42</sup> Throughout the 1950s, rent hikes, city slum clearance projects, and battles against Jim Crow practices in public housing kept Harlem and Brooklyn community activists very busy. Local women “prepar[ed] cards, telegrams, and petitions to shower on legislators”<sup>43</sup> They continued to fight, to board buses to Albany, and to pressure legislators<sup>44</sup> For female community leaders, the state was one of the few potential allies they had

#### *Challenging City Leaders for Better Schools*

When traffic conditions outside an elementary school in Harlem proved unsafe in September 1957, it was *mothers* who took to the streets to protest. Without prior organization, “some [of the women] with infants and young children in their arms, stood defiantly in the street” for over half an hour. They put pressure on Borough President Hulan Jack, Mayor Wagner and the local police. One woman threatened to use her vote against the mayor on this single issue if he failed to act. After the traffic stall and a meeting with Hulan Jack, they gained the needed safety measures<sup>45</sup> Theirs were the

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<sup>42</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, April 21, 1951, 2.

<sup>43</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, February 3, 1951, 2.

<sup>44</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 29, 1952, 16; March 14, 1953, 1; May 16 and 23, 1953, pp. 4, 7; June 6, 1953, 3; October 24, 1953, 23; May 8, 1954, 6; December 25, 1954, 1; March 12, 1955, 19; April 9 and 23, 1955, pp. 16, 21; December 3, 1955, 21; July 28, 1956, 4.

<sup>45</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, October 2, 1954, 1.

demands of *mothers*, not claims of *women*, women of color, grassroots activists or citizens. Mothers had a unique weapon to use against the state, and it was particularly effective in the educational dimension of the civil rights struggles. The power of the maternal image and rhetoric and the school setting yielded more immediate results than almost any other protest local residents mounted.

Two years after the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* decision, an *Amsterdam News* editorial addressed the patterns of segregation in New York's schools. The editor conceded that the violence over school integration in the South held national attention. But he thoughtfully noted, "While we condemn the lily white school at Mansfield, Texas, we must also condemn the all-Negro schools in New York... And we would remind ...city officials, that it is just as much a violation of the law to operate a Jim Crow school in New York City as it is to operate one in Clinton, Tennessee."<sup>46</sup> The mothers of Harlem and Brooklyn demonstrated their concern through the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and direct protests.

Former president of the New York NAACP, unsuccessful candidate for city council, and national civil rights activist Ella Baker led over 100 mothers in a condemnation of the city's racist education system. They highlighted the dilapidated physical conditions of the schools and challenged the differential funding for schools in black neighborhoods compared with white neighborhoods, as well as the de-facto segregation that the *Amsterdam News* had noted. Baker led the protestors to the City Planning Commission. They wanted a new school and made their appeals in ethical terms. They detailed the decrepit state of the schools that young Harlem students had to

face, arguing, "It is morally wrong to continue to give 'hand-me-downs' to children who have had to put up with slum conditions most of their lives!"<sup>47</sup> Discriminatory housing and education patterns were mutually reinforcing. Where there was discrimination in one, there was sure to be discrimination in the other.

The PTA representatives made their way to City Hall in buses provided by Rev Callender of the Mid-Harlem Community Parish. Though the minister provided critical material support, there was not a single man's name on the list of activists. Children were deemed the responsibility of mothers and mothers ventured into civic activism, many for the first time, to protect their children's rights. They employed the language of morality to legitimize their claims and stake in the public sphere.

Despite the moral upper hand, the Harlem women found it extremely difficult to wrangle concrete action from the city government. In September 1957, Ella Baker led five hundred African American and Puerto Rican parents in a picket line around City Hall. When Mayor Robert Wagner Jr. finally agreed to talk with a selected delegation, he found himself in an unpleasant position. Baker charged that the city had "renege[d] on its promise to desegregate its public schools." She used the most direct language she could when she threatened, "We know the ballot has speaking power and parents are concerned with what happens to their children."<sup>48</sup> Though she managed to wrest a number of verbal commitments from the mayor, Baker knew the pressure had to be kept on. She returned to the picketers, some carrying placards that read, "Is Brooklyn, New

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<sup>46</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, September 15, 1956, 10.

<sup>47</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, October 13, 1956, 7.



York Above the Mason Dixon Line?” and “Rezone for Integration.” The fight over integration and control of the schools would go through many phases before the final explosive confrontation in Ocean-Hill Brownsville in 1968.<sup>49</sup>

Ora Mobley-Sweeting, a native of North Carolina, provides an uncommonly close look at the personal transformation of one woman as she confronted the manifestations of discrimination in housing and education. She had moved to New York in 1951. After her children were born, she became active in the community. Her initial efforts focused on the local elementary school and improving the St. Nicholas Housing Project in Harlem, where she and well over 1000 families lived. The housing and school problems in the neighborhood were so compelling that when Mobley-Sweeting was asked to organize a tenants’ association, she agreed.<sup>50</sup>

When she took her son Ezekiel to school in 1957 she remarked, “I couldn’t believe my eyes. The conditions at the school were deplorable.”<sup>51</sup> The turn-of-the-century building was crumbling, and there was nowhere for the children to play. She immediately mobilized the press and called the *New York Age* to investigate. She and another local organizer, Ennis Francis, created the Harlem Volunteer Committee to get a new school built on 127<sup>th</sup> Street. She linked the energies of the St. Nicholas Tenants Organization to the school-building project. In an effort to get a new elementary school

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<sup>48</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, September 28, 1957, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Maurice R. Berube and Marilyn Gittell, eds., *Confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville: The New York School Strikes of 1968* (New York: Praeger, 1969).

<sup>50</sup> Ora Mobley-Sweeting with Ezekiel C. Mobley, Jr., “Nobody Gave Me Permission: Memoirs of a Harlem Activist,” 1997, 34, unpublished manuscript at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

built, she recalled, “We carried the petitions to Hulan Jack, President of the Borough of Manhattan.” She mentioned that Ruth Whitehead Whaley, the first black woman on the Board of Estimate, “said we kept them up many nights on many issues.”<sup>52</sup> The school was eventually built and the Central Harlem Mother’s Association monitored the city’s maintenance of the area and wrote to the mayor and governor to keep the area safe for children.

From community organizing, Mobley-Sweeting migrated into the world of Democratic party club politics. She joined the New Era Democratic Club of Harlem in 1958, seeing it as a way to address many of Harlem’s needs. “I was excited,” she said, “to have the chance to call for change so people could really sense, feel and understand some of the benefits that could come from politics.”<sup>53</sup> But after two years she left the club, disillusioned because “women simply were not recognized in the New Era Democratic Club with one or two exceptions during the late 1950s.”<sup>54</sup>

Although Mobley-Sweeting was concerned about women’s lack of opportunity she did not directly address the issue. Instead she “embraced any opportunity that offered itself to move our Black political figures forward. All the while, I was speaking, educating and advocating to the people of Harlem about the importance of their using the power of their votes.”<sup>55</sup> She turned to organizing and political activism because of

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<sup>51</sup> Mobley-Sweeting, “Nobody Gave Me Permission,” 35.

<sup>52</sup> Mobley-Sweeting, “Nobody Gave Me Permission,” pp. 36-37.

<sup>53</sup> Mobley-Sweeting, “Nobody Gave Me Permission,” 40.

<sup>54</sup> Mobley-Sweeting, “Nobody Gave Me Permission,” 42.

<sup>55</sup> Mobley-Sweeting, “Nobody Gave Me Permission,” 43.

the abysmal conditions around her. The state had failed in its responsibility to maintain decent, affordable public housing and to provide quality education to Harlem's youngest residents. She called in the media and the government officials, including Hulan Jack, the first black borough president, to see problems first hand. She used the media as a pressure tool just as the white grand jury had done a decade and a half earlier in Brooklyn. But this time an African American woman was shaping the discourse around the poor conditions in the mostly black neighborhoods. She didn't use scare tactics, but instead adopted a near-crusading tone for full rights. She did not cease her activism after some important local victories. Instead, she remained engaged into the 1960s, the decade defined by civil rights activism and racial conflict.

Education proved to be a particularly compelling flashpoint for civil rights activism. The 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* decision finally crippled the legal doctrine of separate but equal. For Ora Mobley-Sweeting, her tenant organizing was a training ground. Her children's well-being spurred her to a full engagement with local politics. She was not alone. Many women without a prior record of activism were compelled to mobilize for the sake of their children.

### *The Battle Against Merchants for Fair Prices and Decent Food*

Just as Harlem and Brooklyn residents, often led by outspoken female activists, fought damaging representations of their communities, poor living conditions and segregated schools, they also added access to decent food to their list of struggles.



Women had a history of organizing consumer-based protests.<sup>56</sup> As historian Darlene Clark Hine argues in her work on the Housewives League of Detroit, the League “combined communal womanist consciousness and economic nationalism to help black families and black businesses survive the depression.”<sup>57</sup>

In Harlem more than fifteen years later, women protested discriminatory pricing schemes, arguing that local residents paid more than “in other sections of the city.” Irma Wilson, Mrs. Walton Andrews-Pryor and Mrs. Roger Flood co-chaired the Consumers Protection Committee. They began their campaign by calling a mass meeting. Though their express purpose was to fight inequality for the most basic of human needs, affordable and available food, the group also aimed to address “high rents and other abuses by landlords.”<sup>58</sup>

As the protests continued, many people found ways to avoid the exorbitant prices, especially on the area’s main thoroughfare, 125<sup>th</sup> Street. Abyssinian Baptist Church, Adam Clayton Powell Jr.’s pastoral home, opened a cooperative general store in the basement. In the *People’s Voice*, women were pictured with Powell, inspecting the canned goods, fruits and vegetables as the community side-stepped exploitative middlemen.

The issue took a higher profile as the *Amsterdam News* pictured eight women under the banner headline, “Housewives Threaten To Quit 125<sup>th</sup> St. Unless Merchants

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<sup>56</sup> Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Hine, *Hine Sight*, pp. 129-145; Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode?*, 116.

<sup>57</sup> Hine, *Hine Sight*, 139.

Cut Prices.” Women protested “high mark-ups, inferior merchandise and fraudulent practices.” The newspaper remarked that “typical housewives” revealed “a militant desire to beat down prices, even if such would mean shifting their trade elsewhere.”<sup>59</sup>

The paper listed the occupation of those they interviewed and the majority were listed as housewives. Among the other professions mentioned, one woman was a beautician, another a domestic worker, and a third a social investigator.

Both the *Amsterdam News* and the *People's Voice* cast the food protests in particularly gendered terms. The *People's Voice* played to women's role as the guardians of the private sphere, but urged them to take their frustrations public. An editorial suggested, “By this time Mrs. Housewife should be downright angry. Prices in Harlem are still shooting skyward...But getting angry isn't enough. It's time you got together with other housewives and did something to fight this vicious trend. Prices can come down Mrs. Housewife, if you organize to bring them down.”<sup>60</sup>

In October 1947, the *Amsterdam News* wrote about the growing protests against exorbitant food prices and poor quality. Like the *People's Voice* it addressed an idealized gendered consumer, commencing an article with, “Harlem housewives took things into their own hands this week...and set up the Consumers Protection Committee for the express purpose of battling the twin evils of high prices and inferior merchandise,

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<sup>58</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, October 11, 1947, 24.

<sup>59</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 1, 1947, 1 and November 15, 10.

<sup>60</sup> *People's Voice*, August 2, 1947, 15.

which they charge are prevalent in this area.”<sup>61</sup> The press appealed to women as housewives and the household shoppers.

These women demonstrated a more complex politics than the newspapers represented. First, women who were able to shop elsewhere did so – they went “downtown” to white neighborhoods where they found lower prices for the same goods and better quality food than in Harlem. They decried the discriminatory pricing system at work in the city. Ruby Jackson, a stenographer from Harlem noted thoughtfully that there was “something wrong somewhere whe[n] the lowest income group in the city pays the highest prices.” The Harlem women also complicated the image of household management. Some women commented that they shopped with their husbands. “Twice a week,” Vera Townsend said, “my husband [and] I go downtown for our vegetables.” Virginia Brown made a similar claim, “My husband and I go downtown to do our shopping every Friday.”<sup>62</sup> Women were not the sole shoppers in the family, though the newspapers and even the civic protest organizations made their appeals solely to them.

The protests continued to gain momentum throughout the fall of 1947. The *People's Voice* noted, “Harlem Business Men Ask Price Control” as they petitioned President Harry Truman “to go before Congress and demand government control of prices.” Though the grassroots efforts were led by housewives, it was Harlem’s businessmen who wrote the President.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, October 11, 1947, 1.

<sup>62</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 1, 1947, pp. 1, 25.

<sup>63</sup> *People's Voice*, November 15, 1947, 3.



The *Amsterdam News* hinted at the threat of violence in an editorial on the subject. "Law abiding citizens of Harlem have not forgotten that it took a united and persistent campaign, punctuated by two destructive riots in a ten-year period, to get jobs for the people of the community in Harlem stores. We hope there will never be a repetition of violence, bloodshed and robberies in this community."<sup>64</sup> The area's merchants, who made over \$270 million in the neighborhood each year, must have hoped for the same thing. The newspaper suggested what the future of unsatisfactory negotiations could be.

As the movement intensified, the leadership clearly migrated from women to men. Two ministers' organizations and James Peck, an official with the Committee of Racial Equality, discussed plans for mass demonstrations. Former Assemblyman James Stephens, president of the Sanhedrin Civic Association, promised support "to gain a square deal for the people of Harlem." The Harlem Committee for Price Control called for federal price controls. As the community prepared to "Train Big Guns on 125<sup>th</sup> Street Gyps," Harlem housewives "stood ready to support a boycott."<sup>65</sup> When a number of the area's ministers urged their congregations to support the demonstrations, as the *Amsterdam News* noted, the campaign took on "proportions of a crusade."

What is striking about the food protests is how the press portrayed consumers and leaders throughout the stages of the campaign. The exploited housewives disappeared from the newspapers as Harlem's religious leaders "formed a flying brigade to activate the entire membership ... to force down prices and eliminate double-

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<sup>64</sup> *Amsterdam News*, November 15, 1947, 15.

dealing.”<sup>66</sup> By early 1948, the Mayor’s Committee on Unity, stepped in to mediate the situation.

Harlem lawyer Edith Alexander was the Committee’s associate director. The committee conducted numerous meetings and interviewed the editors of the *Amsterdam News*, who were maintaining public pressure on the store owners through front page stories, as well as the merchants from the Uptown Chamber of Commerce. The resulting report stated that “the issues are not basically interracial, but tensions which grow out of them have serious implications for interracial [*sic*] in the community as a whole.” It addressed the unfair pricing system and discrimination in hiring practices on the part of merchants in the area. It recommended that a community monitoring system be set up, and that the proposal for a new market be implemented.<sup>67</sup>

What started with angry housewives became a mass protest led by male church and community leaders, and ended with a promise by the city government to mediate a mutually acceptable solution. As gender, race and class conflict fused to the point of threatening another Harlem riot, the state stepped in, in the form of the Mayor’s

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<sup>65</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 15, 1947, 27; December 20, 1947, 1.

<sup>66</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, December 20, 1947, pp. 1, 26.

<sup>67</sup> *New York Age*, January 24, 1948, 1. Note: The Mayor’s Committee on Unity was formed by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia in the wake of the 1943 Harlem riot. It was charged to “study the root causes of prejudice, discrimination, and exploitation.” Cited in Thomas Kessner, *Fiorello H. La Guardia and the Making of Modern New York* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1989, 532. According to Martha Biondi, the Mayor’s Committee on Unity later became the New York City Human Rights Commission. She noted that it “lacked political autonomy, sufficient financing and staff as well as enforcement powers,” and she argued that it ultimately “functioned as a go-between in civil rights battles, with an eye toward defending the mayor’s office.” Biondi,

Committee on Unity. And although no one but the Mayor's Committee actually put the language of race into the discussion, it informed the actions of consumers, merchants, ministers, and politicians alike

For the moment, the situation was alleviated. As with the housing problems, however, unfair merchant practices continued to haunt the city's predominantly black neighborhoods. Throughout the 1950s, "dollar-conscious housewives" were encouraged to fight against exploitative prices, "unscrupulous practices," and "inferior food." Bedford-Stuyvesant housewives, were called to action by the *Amsterdam News* periodically. And the paper also demanded that city regulatory agencies step in to "wipe out . . . unlawful practices."<sup>68</sup> After more than ten years of struggle, Harlem scored a major victory. In 1955, the community succeeded in securing a public market, at whose opening Mayor Robert Wagner Jr. and Borough President Hulan Jack officiated.<sup>69</sup>

Consumer protests were also used to pressure businesses to open up jobs to African Americans. Economic issues, race, and politics had historically intertwined themselves to create a distinct set of challenges for New York City's job-seeking African American men and women. Some of the strongest voices against economic discrimination came from nationally prominent black women like Dorothy Height and Anna Arnold Hedgeman and locally active women like Maude Richardson, who had assumed leadership in Bedford-Stuyvesant during the media "smear" campaign of late 1943. During the Depression, Height and Hedgeman, two of New York's leading civic

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"The Struggle For Black Equality in New York City, 1945-1955," Ph. Diss, Columbia University 1997, 31

<sup>68</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, December 2, 1950, 1, May 24, 1952, 22



activists and club women, had investigated the “Bronx Slave Markets” where black women’s labor was bartered or sold for horrifically low wages.<sup>70</sup> They pressured the city council to address the problem. Eventually Mayor La Guardia, with the support of the State Department of Labor and the federal government, established employment offices which helped women find work and diminished the barter for human labor that had been taking place on the streets.<sup>71</sup>

Two years after the war ended, the challenge to eliminate job discrimination against African Americans remained as large as ever. The struggles were waged one store at a time – first at a dry cleaners, then a hamburger place. Maude Richardson, chair of the Brooklyn Provisional Committee for Jobs, claimed one victory when a local meat store “hired a butcher after a preliminary meeting with members of the committee.”<sup>72</sup> Her group based its arguments for hiring African American workers on the ideals of the wartime Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), even though the program was now defunct. Whitney Parker, the Brooklyn organization’s secretary, stated the determination of the Committee: “We insist that fair practices be practiced in Brooklyn even if we have to spend the rest of our lives on the picket line in front of the

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<sup>69</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, May 21, 1955, 36.

<sup>70</sup> Ruth Edmonds Hill, ed., *The Black Women Oral History Project: From the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College*, Volume 5, Dorothy Height Interview, (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1991), pp. 56, 60-62 and Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 68-69. See also Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Out to Be and To Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 197.

<sup>71</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, April 17, 1948, pp. 1, 31.

<sup>72</sup> *People’s Voice*, August 30, 1947, 10.

discriminating stores.”<sup>73</sup> When legal redress and government pressure were not directly applicable, the Brooklyn activists used the principles of the FEPC to make their case.

The Brooklyn Provisional Committee for Jobs also sponsored a political symposium that called together the city council candidates. Richardson demanded that the candidates propose job-creation projects for African Americans. The group asked candidates “to discuss the role they intend to play in securing more opportunities for Negroes, if they are elected.”<sup>74</sup> Richardson knew that most local merchants would not end racially-based discrimination in their hiring practices without a great deal of pressure. The community effectively waged protests and boycotts. But she believed that the local and state levels of government were necessary allies in the fight. She forced commitments from candidates to bring improvements to the neighborhood.

*Fighting for Equality and Justice Their Own Way - Women's Organizations In N.Y.C.*

Many of the women who participated in grassroots activism also worked with women's organizations, usually all-black women's organizations. While grassroots efforts could include women and men from different classes working for a common community goal, the same kind of cross-class mixing was seldom seen in women's organizations. In addition to fighting for the community, black women organized “in defense of themselves” as historian Deborah Gray White has argued. Largely excluded from white women's organizations throughout the first half of the twentieth century, black women created their own organizations. They “persistently spoke on their own

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<sup>73</sup> *People's Voice*, August 30, 1947, 10.

behalf on issues of race leadership, negative stereotypes, woman's suffrage and woman's rights, and civil rights and civil liberties."<sup>75</sup>

Local branches of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) and the Key Women of America were valuable sites of civic education, leadership training, and emotional support. They were also vibrant parts of the struggles for racial and gender equality. They, too, often turned to the state to redress their grievances, just as the grassroots activists did. Women's organizations played an important role in bringing about political and civil rights. They served as places where women could come together to learn about and participate in ongoing struggles for racial equality. There were, however, class issues embedded in the organizations that narrowed the field of choices for "appropriate" forms of protest and activism.

The Metropolitan Council of the National Council of Negro Women advocated strong civil rights measures, and after the war ended, "discussed concerns about full and fair employment, housing, health and minority group problems."<sup>76</sup> Rather than taking to the streets, however, it held a benefit dance at the Savoy Ballroom to raise money for post-war employment efforts.

At the NCNW Annual Convention in 1947, president Mary McLeod Bethune said: "It is my firm belief that the recent issuance of the Civil Rights report by the President's committee has stimulated women all over the country to take an increased

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<sup>74</sup> *People's Voice*, October 18, 1947, 12.

<sup>75</sup> White, *Too Heavy A Load*, 16.



interest in present-day issues.” With a heightened awareness, New York women attended the national forum to learn strategies for improved health, education and child welfare, employment, and housing. Anna Arnold Hedgeman was in charge of the convention. For the NCNW women, the national civil rights struggles could not be separated from local issues.

A year later, Bethune circulated a memo to the Board of Directors of the NCNW. They were told to give the highest priority to implementing President Truman’s civil rights program through a special “Civil Rights Project.” Bethune modeled the kind of political activism she wanted local branches to pursue. She circulated a “Dear Friend” letter to the members of the NCNW regarding federal education funding legislation:

You, no doubt, are aware of the fact that many communities spend as little as or less than \$10.00 per year on each Negro public school child.

The fate of this important legislation, which can so greatly benefit our people, may rest in the hands of the above-listed committees. . Now is the time to act!<sup>77</sup>

Daisy George, Dorothy Height, and Anna Hedgeman were prominent among the New York members of the National Council of Negro Women. George was most well-known in Harlem as a leading trade unionist and an officer of Local 6, Hotel and Club Employees Union. Born in the first decade of the twentieth century in South Carolina, George attended Benedict College before moving north to New York City. From 1936 to 1951, she worked for Hotel Trades Council as an organizer and corresponding

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<sup>76</sup> *People’s Voice*, October 20, 1945, 25.

secretary for the Hotel Employees Union. In addition to her union work, George served as national first vice president of NCNW.<sup>78</sup> She warned labor unions about the trouble that would result with the end of FEPC. In her 1944 Labor Day message, she wrote, “Our future will depend upon the degree to which we participate in the affairs and interests of our trade unions.”<sup>79</sup> To George the economic future for African Americans required both federal and union support. One was often needed to pressure the other.

In the watershed civil rights years, she served as one of the NCNW’s regional directors and spoke to women’s groups around the country. At the same time, Harlem leaders like Rev. James Robinson, head of Church of the Master on West 122<sup>nd</sup> Street, tapped George’s talents. He wanted her to use her positive community relationships, her union connections and her membership in the NCNW to help get more Harlem women involved in local activism.<sup>80</sup>

With a dual vision on the needs of the local community and the national agenda for civil rights, George was on the NCNW delegation that met with Republican House Minority Leader Joseph W. Martin of Massachusetts in the late 1940s. The NCNW moved directly into the U.S. political scene and hurled a broad civil rights legislative

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<sup>77</sup> Letter signed by Mary McLeod Bethune, Founder-President, April 27, 1948. Box 1, Folder 6 NCNW, Daisy George Manuscript Collection, Schomburg.

<sup>78</sup> “Profile with Brief Explanations.” Folder 1 Biographical Information. Daisy George Manuscript Collection, Schomburg.

<sup>79</sup> *People’s Voice*, September 9, 1944, 13.

<sup>80</sup> Letter December 14, 1955 from Rev. James H. Robinson to Daisy George. And Box 1, Folder 7 NCNW Clippings, Daisy George Manuscript Collection, Schomburg.

program squarely into the lap of the Republican Steering Committee.<sup>81</sup> They called for equal job opportunities, the right to vote in all elections unhampered by local restrictions and qualifications, and equal educational facilities throughout the United States, all without discrimination on the basis of race, color or creed. They also wanted a federal anti-lynching law “*with adequate penalties.*”<sup>82</sup> Martin promised to refer their concerns to Congress when it reconvened.

Local branches of the NCNW aggressively pursued the National’s civil rights agenda. Two years before the *Brown* decision, the Manhattan Council of the NCNW, under the banner of the NAACP, wrote letters of protest to the New York newspapers regarding “discriminating headlines.” It also aided the East Manhattan Committee on Civil Rights in their drive to correct discrimination in public eating places. The national office of the NCNW sent Wilhelmina Adams, a local political club leader and president of the Manhattan NCNW, “to represent us on the National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing,”<sup>83</sup> which, as historian Martha Biondi has written, “campaign[ed] for fair housing laws in the 1950s and 1960s, culminating in ... the National Fair Housing Act of 1968.”<sup>84</sup> Grassroots activists challenged individual landlords or pressured state representatives, one issue at a time. Adams had another level of access

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<sup>81</sup> Box 1, Folder 7 NCNW Clippings from the *Chicago Defender*, n.d [1946-1947], Daisy George Manuscript Collection, Schomburg.

<sup>82</sup> Folder NCNW 1945-46, 1953, Daisy George Manuscript Collection, (emphasis in original).

<sup>83</sup> “Civic Participation by Entire Council or Representatives Sent by Council,” Manhattan Council of NCNW, Council Report, 1952-1953, Wilhelmina Adams Additions, Manuscript Collection, Schomburg.



to the state as well. She was part of the founding group that generated national housing law. Her local political connections and her status in the NCNW enabled her to help craft policies and to pressure government administrators.

Adams also led the Manhattan branch of the NCNW in its efforts to raise money for the civil rights campaign. It had hosted events to raise money for civil rights two years ahead of the *Brown* decision. At a mass civil rights mass meeting of the NAACP on June 16, 1954, the NCNW's liaison heard litigator Thurgood Marshall speak, and reported back to the women in Harlem who eager to learn about the new changes in the law.<sup>85</sup> Adams also sent a representative to the annual meeting of Central Harlem Council for Community Planning which discussed adequate housing for Harlem and better racial integration. All of the events, conferences and activities regarding civil rights were discussed at the branch meeting. In this way, all members kept abreast of the on-going battles. They learned tactics and strategized together to fight racism in their own city even as they attended to the growing civil rights movement in the South.

The postwar civil rights efforts were waged against a national backdrop of McCarthyism. Historian Wendell Pritchett has highlighted the particularly powerful influence the Red Scare had on progressive activists in Brooklyn.<sup>86</sup> For many women who had connections to progressive or left-leaning organizations, the change of the

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<sup>84</sup> Biondi, "The Struggle For Black Equality in New York City, 1945-1955," 315.

<sup>85</sup> Manhattan Council of NCNW, Council Report, November 1953 to October 1954 Wilhelmina Adams Additions, Manuscript Collection, Schomburg.

national political climate limited what forms of activism would be tolerated and what coalitions could survive. Neighborhood activists continued to challenge racism and economic discrimination through community protests and organizations. But anti-Communism took its toll on grassroots activists and nationally prominent organizations like the NCNW.

Long-standing Brooklyn activist Ada Jackson fell victim to red-baiting in the early 1950s. Jackson's public life was an example of the comprehensive activism African American women engaged in within their communities. She led the interracial alliance of organizations that had formed in 1943 to fight against biased media coverage of Bedford Stuyvesant. She was a member of the progressive Congress of American Women, and a five-time candidate for political office on the American Labor Party ticket.<sup>87</sup> She headed nursing homes and school committees. She was also president of the Brooklyn chapter of the NCNW.

Accused of being a Communist sympathizer, Jackson was asked to resign as head of the Board of Directors of the Brooklyn Home for Aged Colored People. The Board members who issued the request feared the allegations against her would hamper their fundraising. The accusations against Jackson stemmed from a *Daily Worker* advertisement that listed her as a speaker at a celebration of the National Council for American-Soviet Friendship. She told the Associated Negro Press that "I am not and

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<sup>86</sup> Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 105-107, 144.

<sup>87</sup> The Congress of American Women (CAW) was founded in 1946 by a group of progressive women committed to women's liberation. For an in-depth discussion on the

never have been and never dealt with people at the Communist level.” The *Daily Worker*, Jackson said, incorrectly reported that she would appear at the celebration. She suggested that she was “being persecuted for her activities with the American Labor Party and her trip to the International Peace Conference in Bucharest, Romania in 1948.”<sup>88</sup> She did not mention her visit to the Soviet Union in 1949, a trip that received positive press coverage at the time. Despite intense pressure, Jackson refused to resign from the board of directors.<sup>89</sup>

Many who worked with and knew Jackson’s commitment to equality challenged her removal from the nursing home board and publicly came to her defense. Prominent Brooklyn leaders stated in a letter,

We believe such an allegation ... far underestimates the intelligence of the public; its confidence and respect for one who has given so much of her time and energy for the betterment of our city. Mrs. Jackson’s work and devotion have been of the highest caliber, equaled by few and excelled by none.<sup>90</sup>

In a very close vote, the board reconsidered its decision. But their willingness to silence a woman who had given so much to the community demonstrated how precarious the situation was for African American leaders with progressive affiliations. The *Daily Worker* proposed that Jackson was being victimized as part of a much larger effort to undermine leaders working for racial equality. “This is another alarming

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CAW, see Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), Chapter 3.

<sup>88</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, February 14, 1953, 21.

<sup>89</sup> *New York Age*, February 21, 1953, 3.

<sup>90</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, March 7, 1953, 19.



example,” the article said, “of increasing attacks on Negro leaders of all shades of political opinion who dare speak out for democracy and peace or for equality for Negro Americans.”<sup>91</sup> Though she survived the board of directors’ vote, Jackson fell out of the news completely. Her commitment to racial equality and her untiring efforts to improve the quality of life and the dignity of African Americans in Brooklyn meant little in the face of anti-communist witch-hunts.

The co-existence of the national civil rights movement and the Cold War created a number of tensions for other women leaders as well. Dorothy Height, a native of Virginia, moved to New York City to attend NYU in 1929. The move began her long relationship with the city. A representative of the Harlem Christian Youth Council in the United Front during the Depression years, Dorothy learned a great deal from her colleagues in the Young Communist League. Like Anna Hedgeman, Height worked with the city’s Department of Welfare in the mid-1930s and after that at the Harlem Emma Ransom House of the YWCA. She also investigated the Bronx “slave markets” and reported on the abysmal working conditions of poor black women, as had Ella Baker and Anna Hedgeman.<sup>92</sup>

After a five year absence, Height returned from Washington, D.C. to New York City in 1944 and became the Secretary for Interracial Education with the YWCA. In an interview, she spoke about the effects of anti-communist repression on African Americans. “I was very active in the National Negro Congress and McCarthy held that

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<sup>91</sup> *Daily Worker* February 26, 1953, Schomburg Clipping File on Ada B. Jackson.

<sup>92</sup> Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, Vol. 5, Dorothy Height Interview, pp. 56, 60-62; Joanne Grant, *Ella Baker*, 38.

anything that was dealing with the issues that we were dealing with had to be Communist.”<sup>93</sup> Alarmed by the repressive currents that were silencing dissent, the YWCA and the National Council of Jewish Women joined together and held public affairs programs entitled, “Speak Up, Your Rights Are in Danger.”<sup>94</sup> Despite their efforts to stem the fear that McCarthyism generated, a number of black women’s organizations lost members. According to Height, “the National Council of Negro Women underwent a very rough time. There were accusations that some of the women who were in office had participated in some activities. Vivian Carter Mason (the NCNW president in mid-1950s)...had been accused by the HUAC of being a Communist.”<sup>95</sup>

The results were dramatic. “Outstanding women, particularly those who were in teaching jobs [in the South], and that’s where most black women were – just got absolutely frightened,” Height recalled.<sup>96</sup> Many black women feared losing their jobs and they steered clear of the NCNW. With women like Ada B. Jackson stifled in the North and black women avoiding the NCNW in the South, the struggles for racial equality remained daunting.

But the NCNW took on renewed vigor after the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* decision. Highlights from the national convention in 1954 included workshops on Citizenship Education, Labor and Industry, and Education and Human

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<sup>93</sup> Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, Vol. 5, Dorothy Height Interview, 104. See also Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, 1996), 21.

<sup>94</sup> Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, Vol. 5, Dorothy Height Interview, 105.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

Relations. After the *Brown* decision, the NCNW committed a full-day's program to "Women United In A Program Of Action For One School System." It was "devoted to the integration in the schools and the overall problems of education, many of which are seen to have direction relationship to the problem areas of integration."<sup>97</sup>

Four months later, NCNW president Vivian Carter Mason urged the local members to evaluate the civil rights measures regarding education, health, jobs and human relations in their own neighborhoods. She included a list of inquiries by which every council member was to judge herself and her commitment to civic betterment: "What program is your council carrying out to insure the integration of schools? Has your council conferred with the Superintendent of Schools...to work out integration plans? Is your Board of Education representative of all races in the community? If not, what are you doing about it? What is the situation in regards to jobs for women in your locality? Is there a housing problem in your city?"<sup>98</sup> Mason's message could not have been clearer. Women of the NCNW had a personal obligation to engage in the civil rights struggles in their local communities and fight for changes.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>97</sup> *Telefact* Highlight Review-19<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention, November-December 1954, NCNW, Wilhelmina Adams Collection, Box 5.

<sup>98</sup> *Telefact*, pp. 3-4, March 1955. Box 5 Wilhelmina Adams Manuscript Collection, Schomburg.

<sup>99</sup> Note: Deborah Gray White, in *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves*, argues that in order for the NCNW to survive into the 1960s it had to redirect its focus to the civil rights movement in order to draw in younger women. This shift ensured the organization's survival but it "left black women without an organization that spotlighted their particular struggles with sexual discrimination," 197.



The NCNW's local, regional and national conferences began to reflect the changes that were underway in the Southern civil rights movement. Their themes centered on civil rights, and the conference panels explored implementation strategies. In 1956, Daisy George, as Director of the New York Region, led the conference whose theme was "*Women Working Together: A Lever for Removing Barriers to Integration.*" In the same year, the NCNW's national conference reflected the changes in the federal policies on race. Panels were dedicated to and speakers strategized about women's cooperation in bringing these changes into local communities. Two days were devoted specifically to an interracial conference of women. Representatives of thirty organizations "discussed the job women have to do in the community to process the implementation of human rights."<sup>100</sup>

The *New York Amsterdam News* acknowledged women's efforts for civil rights. In an editorial they remarked, "We...never grow tired of saying that Negro women certainly deserve a Medal of Honor for the fight they are waging on the Battlefield of Civil Rights." Naming Mamie Bradley (Emmett Till's mother), Autherine Lucy, Rosa Parks, and Daisy Bates, they suggested "these are but a few of our Negro women who at times seem to take the torch of civil rights from the hands of our faltering men to make sure that the light does not fail."<sup>101</sup> They could have added their own local heroes – Ada Jackson, Maude Richardson, Ora Mobley-Sweeting, Bonita Williams, and Daisy George.

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<sup>100</sup> NCNW Report 1953-1957 Dated November 8, 1957, Wilhelmina Adams Collection, Box 5.

<sup>101</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, October 5, 1957, 6.

## *Conclusion*

Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant communities continuously chose African American women as leaders, and they willingly assumed that mantle. Their female identity did not inhibit their communities' understanding of their capabilities. Only in the case of the school battles was there a clear maternalist justification for their presence in the public sphere. Insisting that "words were not enough" they took action and fought against racist representations in the press, and for affordable housing, safe schools and better quality food. They did not make their claims on the basis of their womanhood or as mothers. They did so on the basis of "the right to act as an American," as Ada B.

Jackson argued.<sup>102</sup>

These women understood the challenges they faced in improving the conditions in their communities. Although concerns about racism informed and shaped their efforts, New York's women addressed their struggle in broad terms, claiming human dignity, full citizenship, and a higher quality of life, and expressing those claims in the language of rights and morality, of individual and social good. They were not afraid to step into the limelight, to confront political leaders and to take direct action. They seized every opportunity and employed every mechanism available not only to eliminate the inequality that plagued New York, but also to achieve community betterment. Through their

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<sup>102</sup> News Clips ,October 3, 1944; n.d., Ada B. Jackson Clipping File, The Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library.

efforts, politicians were held more responsible, landlords chastised, merchants put on notice, newspapers cautioned, and school boards called to account.



## CHAPTER 3

### PUSHING THROUGH THE DOOR

In May 1944, Gladys Tillett, assistant chair of the Democratic National Committee, told a meeting of the Women's National Democratic Club, "[W]omen are...taking on political jobs from precinct to national committee, ...running for the positions in the Legislature, State Senate and Congress."<sup>1</sup> Her statement underscored the changes that three years of war had created. The call to arms drained men from political clubhouses just as it had from factories. Throughout the country, women eagerly filled the gaps. In the process, women in the major and minor political parties and from all backgrounds challenged gendered notions of politics and advanced women's positions in the state. The changes were uneven at best, the gains exceedingly fragile. But for the moment a window of opportunity opened.

African American women throughout the 1940s were political activists, just as many of their foremothers had been.<sup>2</sup> But they took some important steps forward in the war years and the subsequent decade. They believed change was possible and could be brought about through pressure on and in the state. New York City's black women

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, May 23, 1944, 20. See also Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 208. Murray said she and other women at Howard University during the war years gained the opportunity to lead protests because so many male students were involved in the war effort.

<sup>2</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that African American women were actively involved in Republican party politics from the time women gained the right to vote and throughout the 1920s. See Higginbotham, "In Politics to Stay: Black Women Leaders and Party Politics in the 1920s," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 292-306.

were among the many who capitalized on the political fluidity of the period. An unprecedented number ran for elected office. Various others sought political appointments that were, until that time, nearly impossible for black women to gain.<sup>3</sup> Together they defied conventions of gender and race, challenging the pervasive image of the urban political operative and the high-level office holder.

Despite persistent barriers, women forced open the gates to the corridors of political power, entering chamber by chamber. They gained places not only in legislatures and the administrative state, but also in political clubhouses, the heart and soul of New York City politics. In each of these arenas, African American women pushed a multi-faceted agenda that included civil rights, women's rights, and quality of life issues. They reflected the tremendous sense of vision and belief in the state structure that African American women maintained. Yet they also exposed the institutional, cultural and political dynamics that significantly limited their access to the inner circles of power.

Their activism also reflected their belief in gender equality. No level of political office was too high to pursue, as Sara Speaks and later Shirley Chisholm showed. Some ran with real hopes of winning; others ran for symbolic gains. But to attain political posts, they had to overcome the entrenched traditions of Tammany Hall's machine and the gendered and racialized nature of New York City politics.

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<sup>3</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune is the exception. She was the director of the Negro Division of the National Youth Administration during the depression in FDR's "Black Cabinet." "It was the highest position in the federal government ever held by a black woman." Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 252.

Tammany Hall was widely known and considered the strongest political machine in the nation well into the twentieth century. Tammany leaders at the local level knew the people in their neighborhoods and in return for votes, they doled out local support - jobs, money or contracts to those in need. According to historian Oliver Allen, “the Tammany Boss was, in many ways, a law unto himself.”<sup>4</sup> It was against the backdrop of this ethnic, white, male-dominated political culture that African American women pursued their goals.

### *Twentieth Century New York City Politics*

New York City sustained waves of migration and immigration, economic booms and busts, and cultural renaissance in the first half of the twentieth century. It also nurtured the rise and eventually saw the fall of the infamous Democratic Party political machine, Tammany Hall. The Tammany Society, founded in the late eighteenth century, became the dominant political force in New York City in the nineteenth century, and continued to dictate local politics into the early decades of the twentieth century.

When the Great Migration north began in the 1910s, Tammany Hall’s district leaders courted new black voters. A handful of black leaders distributed the minimal patronage the black community received from Democrats.<sup>5</sup> Leadership positions did not

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<sup>4</sup> Oliver E. Allen, *The Tiger: The Rise and Fall of Tammany Hall* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993), pp. x, xi.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Ferdinand Q. Morton won favor with Tammany leader Charles Murphy and was the leader of the United Colored Democracy from 1915 through the 1920s. He headed the Indictment Bureau of the New York County District Attorney’s office and was the first black member of the Municipal Civil Service Commission, Edwin Lewinson, *Black Politics in New York City* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), pp. 45-46, 62;



necessarily translate into jobs for the black community. But even token gestures were an improvement from the past, and black voters began to migrate politically, from the Republican to the Democratic Party throughout the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> In addition, as Philip Kasinitz, historian of Caribbean New Yorkers noted, the immigrants from the West Indies, who made up over fifteen percent of New York's black population, "[l]acked the deep antipathy of many African Americans toward the Democratic party."<sup>7</sup> Marcus Garvey, the influential Jamaican born leader of the "Back to Africa" movement, gave his support to Tammany Hall in the early 1920s, as did Harlem leaders Hulan Jack and J. Raymond Jones.<sup>8</sup>

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Hulan Jack, *Fifty Years a Democrat: The Autobiography of Hulan E. Jack* (New York: The New Benjamin Franklin House, 1982), 65; John C. Walter, *The Harlem Fox: J. Raymond Jones and Tammany, 1920-1970* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989); George M. Furniss, "The Political Assimilation of Negroes in New York City," Ph. Diss., Columbia University, 1969, 62.

<sup>6</sup> Lewinson, *Black Politics in New York City*, 62. When Mayor Hylan ran for re-election in 1921 he won the majority of black votes. Alfred E. Smith, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, received between 60 percent and 70 percent of the black vote in New York City.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Kasinitz, *Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 213. Many of New York's first black leaders were either Caribbean immigrants or children of immigrants including: Herbert Bruce, the first black Tammany district leader, J. Raymond Jones, the first black Democratic county leader, Hulan Jack, the first black borough president, Bertram Baker, the first elected official from Brooklyn, Constance Baker Motley, the first black woman in the New York State Senate, Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to Congress, and Wesley Mc Donald "Mac" Holder, the "dean of black politics" in Brooklyn.

<sup>8</sup> Lewinson, *Black Politics in New York City*, 59; Walter, *The Harlem Fox*; Hulan Jack, *Fifty Years a Democrat: The Autobiography of Hulan E. Jack* (New York: The New Benjamin Franklin House, 1982), 50; *People's Voice*, August 11, 1945, 2; *New York Amsterdam News*, September 22, 1945, 5.

Republicans had very little representation in the city's legislative body, the Board of Alderman.<sup>9</sup> Of the seventy members of the Board in 1929, for example, four were Republican. Two of the four were black. In subsequent years, only one African American, Conrad Johnson, won in New York City on the Republican Party ticket.<sup>10</sup> When the Depression set in, African Americans demonstrated loyalty to those who provided economic opportunity and support, regardless of party affiliation. Black neighborhoods gave Republican-ALP Mayor La Guardia strong backing in his 1937 and 1941 re-election campaigns even as they gave Franklin Roosevelt their vote for President.<sup>11</sup> As Nancy Weiss argued in her history of African American political

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<sup>9</sup> In 1936, the New York City voted to replace the Board of Alderman with a city council. Members of the council were elected by a system of proportional representation until it was voted out of practice in 1946. Source: *Annual Report of the Board of Elections of the City of New York, 1937, 1946*, Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

<sup>10</sup> Lewinson, pp. 63, 67. Johnson was elected to the Board of Alderman when LaGuardia was elected mayor in 1933.

<sup>11</sup> New York continued the practice of "fusion tickets," allowing candidates to run for office on more than one party's ticket long after most states stopped the practice. J. David Gillespie, *Politics at the Periphery: Third Parties in Two-Party America* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 255. La Guardia's relationship with New York Republicans was a rocky one. He was the Republican's last choice because he was a strong labor supporter and a New Dealer. In fact, Adolph Berle, a member of Roosevelt's brain trust, actively supported him. His 1933 victory for mayor came in the wake of a dramatic Tammany scandal. In 1936 La Guardia, as a progressive, helped push Roosevelt's administration to the left and contributed to the creation of the American Labor Party. La Guardia actively campaigned for Roosevelt and encouraged him to run on the ALP ticket in 1936, which he did. Thomas Kessner, *Fiorello H. La Guardia and the Making of Modern New York* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1989), pp. 186, 240, 249, 408-410, 413. In 1937 and 1941 La Guardia ran again as a fusion candidate, this time on the American Labor Party ticket as well. It provided a way for Democrats to support him. Kessner, 419 and Edward N. Costikyan, *Behind Closed Doors: Politics in the Public Interest* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966), pp. 16, 44.



realignment, “blacks became Democrats in response to the economic benefits of the New Deal and ... they voted for Franklin Roosevelt in spite of the New Deal’s lack of a substantive record on race.”<sup>12</sup>

In 1936, New York City experienced two noteworthy changes that affected its political landscape for the next decade and a half. First, Gotham’s voters went to the polls, and in significant numbers, voted in favor of proportional representation for the election of City Council members.<sup>13</sup> Second, the American Labor Party (ALP) was formed. The ALP was a product of both labor and New Deal leaders including the city’s mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, and was given President Roosevelt’s blessing. The creation of the ALP gave the city’s Democrats a way to vote for the Fusion-Republican candidate, LaGuardia.<sup>14</sup> According to political scientist J. David Gillespie, although the ALP had limited reach across New York State, “for some fifteen of its twenty-year life [it] held near-major status in its New York City base.”<sup>15</sup> The liberal-left coalition had

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<sup>12</sup> Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), xiv.

<sup>13</sup> The vote in favor of proportional representation was 923,186 to 555,217 against. Proportional representation, according to the City Charter provided that “Each borough shall be a single separate district for the election of councilmen by proportional representation and shall elect one councilman for every seventy-five thousand voters who cast valid votes for councilmen within it.” *Annual Report of the Board of Elections, 1937*, 39, Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

<sup>14</sup> LaGuardia’s nominations always caused great conflict within the Republican party, though they came around to supporting him three times. As he contemplated a fourth term in 1945, the city’s GOP finally drew the line and said no. LaGuardia had not groomed a successor, and the fusion candidate suffered a resounding defeat from the Democratic candidate William O’Dwyer. Kessner, pp. 239-245, 480-481, 496, 568.

<sup>15</sup> J. David Gillespie, *Politics at the Periphery: Third Parties in Two-Party America* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 257.



gained enough ground that, as Gillespie noted, “Peter Cacchione and Benjamin Davis, two Communist party enrollees who held seats on New York’s city council during World War II, enjoyed allied working relationships with ALP in election campaigns and while on the council.”<sup>16</sup> The ALP flourished during the eleven years that proportional representation was in place, from 1936-1947.

But before the war even drew to a close, the American Labor Party suffered a significant blow – from the inside. Some of the original founders, including socialist labor leaders David Dubinsky and Alex Rose, were staunch anti-communists. They first criticized the party for allowing communist influence, and then split off to create the Liberal Party in 1944.<sup>17</sup> Though the ALP continued to score electoral victories throughout the 1940s, including sending Congressman Vito Marcantonio back to Washington in 1948 with only ALP support, the party suffered from the ideological division, and was eventually undermined by the red scare.<sup>18</sup>

Democrats regained control of the mayor’s office in 1945 when Tammany favorite William O’Dwyer, just back from the war, scored a big victory over his opponent. J. Raymond Jones and a number of Harlem-based Tammany activists worked on O’Dwyer’s campaign, bringing both Jones and the community greater influence.<sup>19</sup>

On the national level, African Americans also gave their support to FDR’s successor

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<sup>16</sup> Gillespie, *Politics at the Periphery*, 258.

<sup>17</sup> See Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), pp. 517-518, 520-523.

<sup>18</sup> Vito Marcantonio was first elected to congress in 1934 as a Republican. He, like LaGuardia, benefited from running as a fusion candidate. Gillespie, 257.

despite progressive candidate Henry Wallace's outspoken commitments to racial equality. Historian Hanes Walton argued that African Americans realized "they could accomplish more by working and voting for the Democratic party, because it had a much greater possibility of carrying out its promises."<sup>20</sup>

In 1949, Carmine DeSapio became the Tammany boss. But the Tammany organization he took over was significantly weaker than the force that had ruled the city before La Guardia. Between publicly exposed scandals of the 1930s and 1940s, and La Guardia's twelve years in office, the machine struggled along for another decade, but it never reached the pinnacle of power in New York City again.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, it served as the launching ground for a number of African American men and women to enter politics in the 1950s.

### *Anatomy of a Local Political System*

Despite its relative loss of power, Tammany Hall continued to influence the New York County [Manhattan] Executive Democratic Committee until the early 1960s. The Democratic county leader was also the Tammany chief. The machine framework included the county leadership, the assembly district leader and co-leader, and the

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<sup>19</sup> Lewinson, 75; Walter, pp. 83-85; Jack, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Truman received 75 percent of the black vote nationally. In Harlem, Wallace received 21,000 votes, Dewey 25,000 and Truman 90,000. Hanes Walton, Jr., *The Negro In Third Party Politics* (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Company, 1969), 59.

<sup>21</sup> Oliver Allen, *The Tiger: The Rise and Fall of Tammany Hall* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993), 261; Warren Moscow, *The Last of the Big-Time Bosses: The Life and Times of Carmine De Sapio and the Rise and Fall of Tammany Hall* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971).

election precinct captains. Party leadership was divided along gender lines – men were always the district leaders and women the co-leaders. The assembly district was the basic political unit in the city. The highest-ranking party position in an assembly district was district leader – a position not necessarily held by the assemblyman. According to Tammany politico Hulan Jack, the district leader “was responsible for the functioning of the party in each of its election districts, and that meant the returns that the Democratic Party enjoyed every election day.”<sup>22</sup>

The election captain’s primary responsibility was to get out the party faithful on election day.<sup>23</sup> Brooklyn activist Andy Cooper described his experience in the clubhouse system.

A captain means that you have a specific area within the district that you are assigned to. [I]t’s a pretty big deal because you are responsible for a certain number of votes in the area in which you work. And conventional wisdom is that you do not expand the votes. Get as small as vote as possible, but a regular vote. You don’t recruit new people. If you have a loyal group of people and you can count on their vote, that’s the best thing that can happen. Because you keep the vote low, ... you usually reward those people for the small vote. You give them turkeys, jobs.<sup>24</sup>

The system was designed to avoid surprises, and it usually worked.

Democratic party politics worked through political clubhouses. The club’s primary function was to support the party’s candidate at election time. Nearly every

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<sup>22</sup> Jack, *Fifty Years a Democrat*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> The precinct captain was in charge of one election district within an assembly district. It was the size of a city block. Jack, 90-91. See also Edward N. Costikyan, *Behind Closed Doors: Politics in the Public Interest* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966), Chapters 5 and 6.



neighborhood had a club, usually headed by the district leader. The majority of politicians “regardless of the office they seek or the resources they have at their disposal,” according to political scientists Norman Adler and Blanch Davis Blank, “court the support and endorsement of the political clubs of their party... Political clubs are where politics is happening.”<sup>25</sup> Members of different clubs gathered periodically to choose candidates for offices beyond their own assembly district, for example for congress, judgeships, and state senators.<sup>26</sup>

Over time, however, this very local-level exercise of politics began to decline. From the LaGuardia years in the 1930s through the Lindsey years of the 1960s, the political clubs’ authority waned fairly steadily. The club had “moved from a position of primacy in the city’s politics and influence to a peripheral position in city affairs.”<sup>27</sup> However, despite their marginal status or perhaps because of it, political clubs were critical for African American women who sought elected office in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition, although they were not hotbeds of radical activity, insurgents sometimes managed to overthrow the traditional system, as was the case in Bedford-Stuyvesant. The insurgent Unity Democratic Club of Bedford-Stuyvesant would launch Shirley Chisholm’s political career in the 1960s.

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<sup>24</sup> My interview with Andrew Cooper, Brooklyn, New York, February 17, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Norman Adler and Blanche Davis Blank, forward by Roy V. Peel, *Political Clubs in New York City* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Adler and Blank, 42.

*African American Women and Clubhouse Politics*

From at least the 1920s, black women were involved in New York City's party politics. They assumed co-leadership roles in the Democratic Party. Even though women participated in party activities, the Democrats were much less supportive of women in elective politics than were rival parties, the Republicans and later the American Labor Party and the Liberal party.<sup>28</sup> Black women, as much as white women and black men, pursued positions of power in both party politics and the administrative structures of the city, state, and national government. Those who were able to pursue these higher-status positions often differed from the grassroots activists discussed in the previous chapter. Nearly all of the women in this chapter -- Wilhelmina Adams, Ruth Whitehead Whaley, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Maude Richardson, Pauli Murray and Bessie Buchanan -- were college-educated. Some had advanced degrees. And although a few had been manual laborers at one point in their lives, by the 1940s, all of these women had professional careers.

Educational access and careers marked an important class boundary that set these women apart. Although they represented a growing group of women, they were still a

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<sup>27</sup> Adler and Blank, 18.

<sup>28</sup> For a history of women in Republican party politics, see Melanie Susan Gustafson, *Women and the Republican Party, 1854-1924* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001). "The party structures created before 1920 were incredibly resilient, even as more and more women were incorporated into the Republican party. In spite of the new effort to establish equality in party organizations from the national down to the precinct levels, women and men organized separately in 1920 and again in 1924. The party fed this separation." 191.

fraction of the African American population in New York.<sup>29</sup> The pathways to political power for these middle to upper class professional women were different from many Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant activists. Some came to politics from women's clubs, organizational work and civic activity. Others were inspired by their grassroots experiences and pursued formal politics as yet another way to bring about change.

The concern for gender equality was more frequently articulated by middle class women who pursued formal political power, than by grassroots activists. But it was a complicated desire for gender equality that was informed by race, region, ethnicity and class. Grassroots activists rarely legitimized their role in the public sphere on their female identity. Were the issues of economic survival and quality of life more pressing than gender equality, or did local activism assume a level of equality that precluded a separate recognition of black women's conditions in the neighborhoods? The women running for office did not necessarily *justify* their public roles with gendered language, but they appealed for support from black women with "racialized gendered" language.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> In 1930, there were 93,781 women in private/domestic work in Manhattan alone. In 1950, there were 42,410. The census data does not break the figure down by race in 1930 (and no comparable figure was available for 1940), but it does in 1950. In 1950 there are 106,044 domestic/private workers in the whole New York City area, and 71,373, or two-thirds are Negro. By 1950, there were more young African American women under 24 years old (1,145) with college degrees than men (555). See *1950 Seventeenth Census of the United States*, Vol. II, Characteristics of the Population, Part 32, New York, pp. 32-231 and for domestic work figures. See also *1930 United States Department of Commerce, Fifteenth Census, Population*, Vol. III, Part 2.

<sup>30</sup> Eileen Boris warns of the danger of compartmentalizing race and gender as separate categories. She notes, "Though scholars often attempt to disaggregate the working of "race" from "gender" these constructions have existed in conjunction with one another to transform profoundly the ways that each works alone." She suggests the term "racialized gender" which reflects the interaction of gender and race, particularly how they reconstruct each other and class hierarchies. In "You Wouldn't Want One of 'Em



Did the benefits of class create a psychic space that enabled college-educated African American women the opportunity to reflect on the functions of gender in combination with their racial identity? Was the world of formal politics more highly gendered than grassroots activism in a way that compelled a different level of gendered awareness? The political careers of a number of New York's black female leaders may suggest some answers.

*Wilhelmina Adams*

Wilhelmina Adams was a consummate civic and political activist. Although born in Florida in the first decade of the twentieth century, Adams spent almost her entire life in New York, attending its public schools and Hunter College. The diversity of her activism is representative of many African American women in New York City at mid-century. Committed to racial equality, Adams helped organize the New York Urban League and was the first president of the New York Women's Auxiliary of the NAACP.<sup>31</sup> Acutely sensitive to the needs of the underserved in Harlem, Adams founded the Aeolian Ladies of Charity to aid the elderly, and was vice president of the Utopia

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Dancing With Your Wife"; Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II," in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 80. In addition, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham writes about the overwhelming effect of race suggesting that it "not only tends to subsume other sets of social relations, namely, gender and class, but it blurs and disguises, suppresses and negates its own complex interplay with the very social relations it envelops." Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," in *"We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible": A Reader in Black Women's History*, edited by Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King, and Linda Reed (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1995), 5.

<sup>31</sup> Campaign Flier, 1941, Samuel Kantor and Wilhelmina Adams, 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly District. Wilhelmina Adams Manuscript Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Schomburg.

Neighborhood Club for underprivileged children. Attendant to the importance of an all-women's organization, Adams served as the president of the Manhattan branch of the National Council of Negro Women. Even as she addressed the most local concerns, the Harlem doyenne simultaneously worked on national and international struggles for human rights. When the African nation of Liberia marked its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Adams was on the American Celebration Committee. And finally, Wilhelmina Adams demonstrated her commitment to the unique concerns of African American women, particularly middle-class women, through her leadership roles in the National Council of Negro Women, the Business and Professional Women's Club, and the New York World's Fair Committee of Negro Women.<sup>32</sup> On the eve of the *Brown v Board of Education* decision, Adams had already given over twenty years to the fight for racial equality.

Clubhouse politics suited Adams' disposition. She waded into the political waters as a candidate, winning the post of district co-leader in 1939. It was the highest political level black women attained at that time in New York City. As an executive member of the New Deal Democracy Club, Adams wrote that, "the solution of our present perplexing problems and a permanent betterment of our economic condition" lay with the Democrats.<sup>33</sup> She held her position for almost a decade until a political row in the Tammany ranks found her on the losing side, after which she was stripped of her

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<sup>32</sup> Meeting Minutes: New York World's Fair Committee of Negro Women, March 22, 1938. Wilhelmina Adams Manuscript Collection, Schomburg.

<sup>33</sup> New Deal Democracy Annual Dance Program Greeting signed by Samuel Kantor and Wilhelmina Adams, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1940. Wilhelmina Adams Manuscript Collection, Schomburg.

post.<sup>34</sup> Adams was committed to Democratic clubhouse politics despite the “glass ceiling” for women. If she was troubled by the sexist structure of leadership that reserved the highest posts for men, she did not make it a central cause in her public life.

Although little information is available about her personal life, it is known that Wilhelmina Adams never married and filled her time with other commitments. She had worked on a number of political campaigns, including Herbert Lehman’s re-election for Governor in 1938, Roosevelt’s bid for President in 1940, and William O’Dwyer’s run for Mayor in 1941. For the New York Democratic State Committee to Re-elect FDR, Adams wrote a speech, “What the New Deal Has Done for the Colored People,” which was circulated and widely used across New York State.<sup>35</sup>

In 1944, with large numbers of servicemen overseas, women outnumbered men on Republican, Democratic and American Labor Party (ALP) voter registration rolls.<sup>36</sup> This fact was not lost on any of the political parties and they all began to actively court female voters. Vincent Impellitteri, President of the City Council and later Mayor,

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<sup>34</sup> *New York Times*, August 7, 1947, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Jean Poletti, Chairman of Speakers’ Bureau, Democratic State Committee, November 15, 1940. Wilhelmina Adams Manuscript Collection, Schomburg.

<sup>36</sup> *Annual Report of the Board of Elections in the City of New York, 1944*, pp. 34-35. Women did not outnumber men on voter registration lists in both the major parties again until 1960. Interestingly, women consistently outnumbered men registered in the Republican party throughout much of the 1950s and 1960s. *Annual Reports of the Board of Elections of the City of New York, 1940-1968*. Though no specific statistics are available for the number of women who voted compared to the number of men in the 1944 election, according to the *New York Times*, “Women are estimated to have cast... 50.3% of the ballots in this Presidential election, although wartime dislocations indicate that they actively surpassed that figure.” *New York Times*, November 10, 1944, 14.



noted, "With the votes counted, we are made to realize what an increasingly important role women are playing in the political world."<sup>37</sup> The Republicans and the ALP ran African American women for elected offices, from the U.S. Congress to the city council.<sup>38</sup> Although the Democrats recognized the importance of female voters, they were seldom willing to field female candidates, especially African American women.

As part of the 1944 Democratic party effort to hold the African American vote against New York Governor Thomas Dewey, the Democrats pushed Adams, co-leader of the Fourteenth Assembly District, to use her connections to women in the city to get out the vote. Some urged her to "do everything possible to get every possible Democratic voter especially women" to register. A key element of her campaign strategy was to link African American women's advancement in the war years to Roosevelt's leadership. In comparing the gains that women in general had made during the war, Adams noted that "Negro women, in particular, have experienced a larger share of integration into the social, political, and economic life of our nation." In addition to listing advances, she also held out promises that were familiar to everyone in Harlem who desired a victory against domestic racism in the "Double V" campaign. "By supporting our President for a fourth term," she proposed, "Negro women can...[s]upport the passage of laws protecting the interest of minority groups such as the

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<sup>37</sup> Telegram from Michael Kennedy to Wilhelmina Adams, October 8, 1942; Letter from Vincent Impellitteri to Wilhelmina Adams, December 1, 1945. Wilhelmina Adams Manuscript Collection, Box 3, Schomburg.

<sup>38</sup> The Republican party ran Sara Pelham Speaks against Adam Clayton Powell for the newly created Twenty-second district congressional seat. Speaks was badly defeated. The GOP ran Ada B. Jackson in the primary for the Seventeenth State Assembly District in Brooklyn. When she lost the primary, she ran on the ALP and lost again.

anti-poll tax, a permanent FEPC, better housing and social security for domestic workers.”<sup>39</sup> That Roosevelt had not accomplished these in his first twelve years of office was not something Adams was willing to grapple with, at least not in public. In recognition for her party loyalty, she went to the Democratic National Convention in 1944.

Adams was well positioned in Harlem to connect the growing sense of political agency among women with the need for voter support among the Democrats. She simultaneously embodied the progress and the limits that African American women experienced in formal politics. At one point, the *New York Amsterdam News* called Wilhelmina Adams “one of the best informed politicians in the city,” suggesting that she always knew who would win elections.<sup>40</sup> She was highly respected and often acknowledged by Democratic candidates for her support of their campaigns.<sup>41</sup> But there were also limits to her influence. The Democratic party, although it recognized the importance of female voters, failed to translate that recognition to the selection of candidates or party leaders. They lagged significantly behind the Republican and the American Labor Parties in fielding female candidates.<sup>42</sup> As the party in power, the

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<sup>39</sup> “The Role of Negro Women in the Election Campaign of 1944,” Wilhelmina Adams Additions Manuscript Collection, Schomburg.

<sup>40</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 13, 1943, 3A.

<sup>41</sup> Letters of thanks to Wilhelmina Adams include: Congressional Representative Joseph Gavagan, May 7, 1937; Governor Herbert Lehman, November 3, 1938 and 1950; Vincent Impellitteri, December 1, 1945 and October 20, 1950; Senator James Mead, October 16, 1946. Wilhelmina Adams Manuscript Collection Box 3, Schomburg.

<sup>42</sup> Nine women were elected to the New York State Assembly throughout the 1940s. Eight of the nine were Republicans. Helen E. Weinstein, *Lawmakers Biographical*

Democrats felt little need to court female voters with female candidates. And, even more, the Democratic political machinery of Manhattan, Tammany Hall, was a self-consciously masculine structure – the idea of a female “boss” was unthinkable, a black female candidate in local elections remote. This meant that for all women, but particularly for black women, gender and racial ideology kept them lodged in the supporting role of the political dramas in New York City.

Nevertheless, Adams did seek to further African American causes in her public roles. From at least the early 1930s, her work with the organizations like the NAACP and the NCNW had demonstrated a level of commitment to racial equality both in New York and also in the South. In the midst of the Depression, she coordinated legal and financial support for Phillip Williams, a black man accused of manslaughter in North Carolina, for example. By the 1950s, she was meeting with civil rights activists to address the violence in the South, particularly Emmett Till’s murder, and racism in the northern housing market.<sup>43</sup> The president of the Manhattan chapter of the NCNW, Adams represented organization on the National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing. As a leader with a dual vision on local and national issues, Adams functioned at the nexus of New York City politics and civil rights efforts. She mobilized her base in Harlem, particularly the women of the Manhattan NCNW, and helped them formulate

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*Sketches of the Women of the New York State Legislature, 1918-1988*, New York State Library, Albany. And Democratic women never outnumbered Republican women in the U.S. Congress throughout the 1940s either. *Fact Sheets on Elected Women*, Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.

<sup>43</sup> See correspondence from Roy Wilkins, Assistant Secretary of the NAACP to Wilhelmina Adams, August 17, 1936 and November 5, 1936, Box 4, Folder 4, Adams



strategic responses to racism. She was not alone in calling upon a variety of organizations, political resources and inner strength to fight for social change.

### *Ruth Whitehead Whaley*

Harlem attorney Ruth Whitehead Whaley made history as the first black woman to practice law in New York and argue a case before the New York Court of Appeals. Born in Goldsboro, North Carolina in 1901, Whaley was also the first African American woman admitted to the bar in her home state of North Carolina.<sup>44</sup> Abandoning the party of Lincoln ahead of most African Americans, Whaley was active in the Democratic party by 1924. She defended her decision by saying that the New York Democrats “were offering more toward the advancement of colored citizens.” Like Adams, she was committed to civic and organizational work at the same time that she pursued political goals.<sup>45</sup>

Ruth Whaley was very familiar with the challenges women faced in public service. By the time she entered the political arena, she had already been dealing with

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Manuscript Collection. And letter from Harry Emerson Fosdick to Wilhelmina Adams, October 21, 1955, Adams Manuscript Collection, Sc Mg 37.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin Brawley, *Negro Builders and Heroes* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 262; Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 277. *New York Times* December 25, 1977, 26.

<sup>45</sup> Whaley was the first president of the New York City National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women (NANBPW), chair of the Council of Democratic Women, an active member of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), and counsel for the New York City Colored Women’s Federation. Campaign Literature 1945, [Ruth Whitehead Whaley Clippings File, Schomburg Clippings File]; *People’s Voice*, August 11, 1945, 2; *New York Amsterdam News*, September 22, 1945, 5.

racial and gender discrimination for over fifteen years. In a Depression-era interview with the *Afro-American*, she explained that people never believed that she, a black woman, was a lawyer. Instead they constantly mistook her for her clients. In the male and predominantly white world of jurisprudence, Whaley had to prove herself constantly. “The attitude of the public toward the woman in the professions is still unfavorable,” Whaley lamented in 1931. Being a career woman, men questioned her morals and scrutinized her actions. On women’s experiences, Whaley explained, “If she is serious, people say she is masculine; if she is natural they accuse her of trading on her sex; and so it goes, she is put between the devil and the deep blue sea.”<sup>46</sup> Almost twenty years later, Whaley reaffirmed those sentiments in an interview with the *New York Age* demonstrating that change came at a painfully slow pace and sometimes not at all.<sup>47</sup>

Although optimistic about women’s future in the legal profession, Whaley was certain that the woman lawyer would “have to be better than the average man, . . . neither the community nor the profession will permit her to make many mistakes.” Suggesting that gender discrimination knew no racial boundaries, Whaley concluded that this “is [as] true of the Negro woman lawyer [as it] is also true of the white woman lawyer.”<sup>48</sup>

Whaley’s mere presence in the New York legal community was a challenge to

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<sup>46</sup> George Murphy, Jr., “N.Y. Woman Lawyer Takes Off Her Hat to Argue Her Cases,” *The Afro-American*, Week of July 25, 1931, Ruth Whitehead Whaley Clippings File, Schomburg Clippings File.

<sup>47</sup> *New York Age*, October 29, 1949, 27.

<sup>48</sup> George Murphy, Jr., “N.Y. Woman Lawyer Takes Off Her Hat to Argue Her Cases,” *The Afro-American*, Week of July 25, 1931, Whaley Clippings File, Schomburg Clippings File.

institutionalized discrimination. And more than that, as Pauli Murray said in her autobiography, *Song in a Weary Throat*, Whaley actively helped other African American women in the legal profession. In 1947, the veteran Whaley gave Murray a great deal of support as she struggled to launch her legal career in New York. Murray expressed appreciation to Whaley for her contributions, “in a field in which it was extremely difficult for a black woman to make headway.”<sup>49</sup>

Despite her frustrations with entrenched biases, Whaley moved forward in the public sphere. She understood party politics intimately, having served as a campaign manager for William O’Dwyer when he ran for mayor in 1941 against Fiorello LaGuardia.<sup>50</sup> Though the campaign failed, O’Dwyer and Whaley maintained a political relationship that would pay off for both of them over time. On his next attempt for mayor, O’Dwyer succeeded. Whaley’s career also advanced after her 1945 run for city council.

In the summer of 1945, Tammany Hall split over the controversial decision to endorse Ben Davis, an avowed Communist, for city council. Historian Martha Biondi argues that Davis’ re-election represented the new power of the black-labor-left coalition in city politics and progressive circles.<sup>51</sup> The Democrats initially threw their support behind Davis. He had first made his name as a lawyer in the early 1930s defending Angelo Herndon, the African American Communist organizer in Georgia. Influenced by his experiences defending Herndon, Davis moved to New York and became a constant

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<sup>49</sup> Murray, 277.

<sup>50</sup> *People’s Voice*, August 11, 1945, 2.



crusader for racial justice, taking on such explosive issues such as police brutality and discrimination in housing, the military and prisons.<sup>52</sup> He was very popular in Harlem and had been the chosen successor by and for Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. who left city politics to run for U.S. Congress.

Mayoral candidate William O'Dwyer insisted that Davis be removed from the Democratic ticket, and ordered the party to "designate in his stead another Negro of indisputable faith in the Democratic Party and its principles."<sup>53</sup> The Tammany leadership complied and sought a sacrificial lamb to run against the popular Communist activist. The candidate "of indisputable faith" they chose was Ruth Whaley.<sup>54</sup> Whaley may well have been the least controversial in their arsenal of party loyalists. But it was clear that whomever Tammany chose would face near-certain failure. Regarding Whaley's candidacy, the *New York Age* went so far as to say, "Benjamin J. Davis Jr., now faces formidable opposition in his campaign for reelection as an independent."<sup>55</sup> That prediction would prove wrong.

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<sup>51</sup> Biondi, 9.

<sup>52</sup> Gerald Horne, *Black Liberation Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994).

<sup>53</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, July 28, 1945, 1.

<sup>54</sup> *People's Voice*, July 28, 1945, August 4, 1945, 3, August 11, 1945, 2; *New York Amsterdam News*, July 28, 1945, 1; *New York Age*, August 11, 1945, 1; *New York Amsterdam News*, September 22, 1945, 5; *New York Age*, November 17, 1945, 1.

<sup>55</sup> *New York Age*, August 11, 1945, 1.

Whaley publicly chose to interpret her nomination “as symbolic...it’s a recognition of Negro women by the Democratic party.”<sup>56</sup> If it was a symbolic victory for African American women, it was a dubious one at best. As historians Martha Biondi and Gerald Horne demonstrated, Whaley’s campaign suffered from the wholesale support of Davis by the Harlem leaders of her own political party.<sup>57</sup>

Whaley’s single foray into electoral politics was a decisive failure.<sup>58</sup> However, it proved to be a strategic career move. For her willingness to sacrifice herself in a losing race, Whaley was rewarded with civil service job that gave her both power and a life-long position.

O’Dwyer won the mayoral election, however, and soon he was under attack from black constituents. In 1947 Harlem leaders representing all political parties and diverse organizations met with O’Dwyer at Gracie Mansion, the mayor’s home, to discuss the community’s grievances. Led by Democratic leader J. Raymond Jones, Deputy Commissioner of Housing, the group delivered “emotionally charged indictments of official neglect of the Harlem community – dirty streets, fire trap houses, exploiting landlords, crime producing slums, numbers racket, poor police protection, Jim Crow

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<sup>56</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, September 22, 1945, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Biondi, 114; Gerald Horne, *Black Liberation Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), Chapter 9.

<sup>58</sup> Ruth Whitehead Whaley had 10,967 votes and ranked eleventh in a field of 21 candidates followed in twelfth place by B. F. McLaurin, Republican-Liberal, with 10,381. Davis had over 56,500 votes. *New York Age*, November 17, 1945, 1.

schools, inadequate health facilities.”<sup>59</sup> Two of the few women in the leadership group were Ruth Whitehead Whaley and Edith Alexander, both Harlem attorneys.

O’Dwyer sought advice from the city’s black leadership on how to use the city departments more effectively in Harlem. Whaley offered a slate of proposals to alleviate some of Harlem’s most immediate concerns. As a result of their meeting with the mayor, the group established the Citizens Planning Council of Harlem, and they elected Ruth Whitehead Whaley as the vice-chair. Among her priorities were improved health, welfare and jobs for the Harlem community.

In 1950, Whaley was one of mayoral candidate Vincent Impellitteri’s most active campaign workers in Harlem. She made a “daring gamble” campaigning for Impellitteri’s re-election bid as he split the Tammany Hall Democrats with his decision to stay in the race without the support of its political bosses.<sup>60</sup> After his victory, Mayor Impellitteri appointed his Fordham law classmate Ruth Whaley as Secretary to the Board of Estimate. Members of the Board, including Whaley, helped decide on the city budget and approved all major capital projects. The board was considered a “full-time participant with the mayor in governing the city.”<sup>61</sup>

In her official position Whaley spoke to women’s groups throughout the city and received awards and honors for her work, including the Sojourner Truth Award for

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<sup>59</sup> *People’s Voice*, April 19, 1947, 3.

<sup>60</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 11, 1950, 1.

<sup>61</sup> Walter G. Farr, Jr., Lance Liebman, Jeffrey S. Wood, *Decentralizing City Government: A Practical Study of a Radical Proposal for New York City* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), pp. 16-17. See *Amsterdam News* August 29, 1953, 14. See also Ruth Whitehead Whaley Schomburg Clippings File, Microfiche.



outstanding community service.<sup>62</sup> Speaking at the annual Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs in 1956, Whaley urged the audience to vote "to gain greater benefits from the democratic system of government." Recalling the hard-won victories of women in the past, she warned that, "we should not allow the priceless heritage which they left us and our children to slip away by a lackadaisical attitude toward voting." As a mayoral appointee, Whaley understood that votes could be used as political leverage if enough people went to the polls. "Those who don't vote, don't get counted by those who make and administer the law."<sup>63</sup> Northern black women had an important political resource in the ballot that their Southern sisters still did not. Whaley made frequent pleas for women to use it to gain political power and benefits.

### *Anna Arnold Hedgeman*

Among the many black female leaders in Democratic politics, few embodied the comprehensive levels of the battles for human rights and social justice more than Anna Arnold Hedgeman. Hedgeman, a native of Minnesota, was the first black graduate of Hamline University, the oldest institution of higher education in Minnesota.<sup>64</sup> This was the first in a lifetime of "firsts" that marked a commitment to ending the nation's scourge of racism. Searching for a community and a place to belong as a black woman,

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<sup>62</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, April 19, 1952, 23.

<sup>63</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, July 21, 1956, 1.

<sup>64</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, July 3, 1948, 7; Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds: A Memoir of Negro Leadership* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 13; Black Women Oral History Project, Unpublished Interview conducted by Ellen Craft

unwelcome and overwhelmed by the racism she experienced as a teacher in Mississippi and as an executive in the YWCA in the north, Hedgeman moved to Harlem in the late 1920s.

Ironically, the Depression enabled the relative newcomer to get her first city job, as a consultant on racial problems with the Emergency Relief Bureau. She used that experience to organize young black women to fight for jobs in Brooklyn. She prepared them for dealing with “the system,” instructing them on how to ask for work, to use the black press and black leaders. Noting their success, Hedgeman said, “It was no accident that we secured the first 150 provisional appointments the city had ever given the Negro community.”<sup>65</sup>

One of the consistent components of the struggle for racial equality throughout the 1940s was the fight for a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). A wartime measure wrangled from the President only after A. Philip Randolph threatened a march on Washington, the program became a political battleground in the war’s aftermath. In January 1944, Randolph asked Hedgeman to be Executive Secretary of the National Council for a Permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission.

Hedgeman accepted Randolph’s request. She spoke at FEPC rallies with other civil rights advocates like Pearl Buck, Walter White of the NAACP, John Brophy of the CIO and actor Canada Lee, and she led strategy meetings on how to get the legislation

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Dammond with Anna Arnold Hedgeman, December 6, 1978, 22. Schlesinger Library Collection.

<sup>65</sup> Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 74. See also Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Out to Be and To Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 188.

through Congress.<sup>66</sup> As World War II came to a close, Hedgeman declared, “The minorities of this country will not feel the war has really been won unless FEPC is made permanent.” She remarked on the irony, “Here in the United States, unless Congress acts quickly, FEPC is automatically abolished by the winning of the same war that made the Potsdam Declaration possible.”<sup>67</sup> Even as the Potsdam Declaration announced the victory against fascism overseas and, among other things, abolished all discriminatory Nazi laws, the victory for racial equality at home seemed to grow.

A tireless advocate, Hedgeman reminded people of the need for the FEPC, stating, “there is hardly a spot in this melting-pot country of ours where there isn’t some discrimination on racial or religious grounds.” She traveled across the nation, urging voters to pressure their legislators to move the FEPC to the floor for a vote.<sup>68</sup> She believed that only a groundswell of grassroots pressure at all points would override the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 86; Black Women’s Oral History Project, 91; *New York Amsterdam News*, February 5, 1944, 3A and February 12, 1944, p. 1+.; *New York Amsterdam News*, May 20, 1944, 10A; *People’s Voice*, June 23, 1945, 2. For a full discussion on the history and fate of the FEPC, see Merl E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), *passim* (though it fails to mention Hedgeman) and Paula Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), Chapter 3. Pfeffer discusses the tensions among the National Council’s leadership and noted that Hedgeman voiced complaints “about the problems caused by the complexity of unsuspected rivalries among the supporting groups,” 109. In addition, Pfeffer argues that Randolph never had “mutually rewarding working relationships” with women and “he never treated them as equals.” He often dismissed their advice, including Hedgeman’s. And he appointed her as “executive secretary” because she would work for less money. pp. 301-302.

<sup>67</sup> “Failure To Have Strong FEPC Dampens Peace News,” *New York Age*, August 25, 1945, 3. Note: The Potsdam Declaration was made by Truman, Stalin and Attlee on August 2, 1945.



Southern bloc, particularly Senators James Eastland and Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi. Despite her efforts, the FEPC budget was slashed in half and then eliminated completely.

Nevertheless, her FEPC work attracted national attention. Congressman William Dawson of Chicago brought her on board the National Citizens for the Re-Election of President Truman campaign in 1948. For her commitment to the Democratic Party, she received a high-level federal appointment as assistant director of the Federal Security Agency (later the Department of Health, Education and Welfare) working under Oscar Ewing.<sup>69</sup> With Hedgeman's appointment in Washington, India Edwards, executive director of the women's division of the Democratic National Committee, "crossed the first name off her list of women for whom she is seeking responsible posts in Government."<sup>70</sup> Hedgeman's reputation had spread far beyond the borders of the predominantly black communities that had nurtured her and within which she had honed her political skills.

Anna Hedgeman maintained a progressive commitment to fairness and equality once inside the administration. She advocated socialized medicine to improve minority health care and she won favor with labor unions – gaining distinction as the first woman

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<sup>68</sup> "Ambitions That Could Not Be Fenced In," n.d. publication in Anna Arnold Hedgeman Manuscript Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

<sup>69</sup> *Afro-American* [Baltimore], February 19, 1949, 1; *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 19, 1949, 1; *Chicago Defender*, 1.

<sup>70</sup> *New York Times*, February 12, 1949, 9.

to address the United Automobile Workers annual convention.<sup>71</sup> She believed in the state apparatus as a way to advance racial equality.

When control of Congress and the White House changed parties for the first time in twenty years in 1953, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, a Democratic appointee in Washington, returned to her adopted hometown. A group of Harlem citizens welcomed Hedgeman back to the North by requesting that she run for the Manhattan Borough Presidency on Robert Wagner Jr.'s ticket.<sup>72</sup> Although she was open to the idea and briefly explored the possibility, Hedgeman understood too well the nature of clubhouse politics to challenge Hulan Jack, the Tammany choice, in any serious way. Hedgeman said that "Jack was vehement about the fact that a woman would not be acceptable as Borough President."<sup>73</sup>

Despite being discounted by the Wagner camp, Hedgeman campaigned for the Democrats and even produced some minor miracles. She brought Harlem's warring political factions together to support the Tammany ticket. Her Washington clout carried back to New York as she insured that Eleanor Roosevelt and Averill Harriman attended a meeting of the city's Democratic leadership. James Hicks of the *Amsterdam News* wrote a glowing report about Hedgeman's ability to keep everyone, including

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<sup>71</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, October 15, 1949, p. 1+; *New York Amsterdam News*, January 9, 1954, 1; *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 3, 1954, 4.

<sup>72</sup> *New York Times*, July 28, 1953, 20.

<sup>73</sup> Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 110. See also Unpublished Oral History conducted by Ellen Craft Dammond with Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Black Women's Oral History Project, Schlesinger Library, pp. 139-142.

Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, from grandstanding at the meeting.<sup>74</sup> With disputes settled, the Tammany slate went on to victory.

The election results had barely been tallied when speculation began in Harlem about who would represent the black community in Wagner's administration. Hedgeman "loomed as one of the top possible appointees." According to the *Amsterdam News*, several senior New Dealers including Oscar Ewing, Averell Harriman, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Senator Herbert Lehman encouraged Wagner to name Hedgeman to the city's \$15,000 a year Commissioner of Welfare post. Underscoring the dearth of black representation in the city administration, the article noted that, "Negroes are in policy-making positions in only two of the city's 42 departments and these are only token appointments."<sup>75</sup>

The newly elected mayor proved slow in making good on his promise to name an African American to his administration. But after intense pressure from the black community, he named Hedgeman as one of the eleven members in his cabinet. With this post, Anna Arnold Hedgeman became the "first Negro to serve in a policy-making position at City Hall."<sup>76</sup> The *Amsterdam News* remarked, "The selection of the veteran social worker, as an Assistant to the Mayor, brings to City Hall one of the most experienced and capable women in the field of social welfare administration in this

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<sup>74</sup> "Voters' Vineyard" by James Hicks, *Afro-American*, November 14, 1953, 4.

<sup>75</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 28, 1953, 6.

<sup>76</sup> "Mrs. Hedgeman Named To City Cabinet Post," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 30, 1954, 2; See also Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 116-118.



country.”<sup>77</sup> But this impressive victory was not without its blemishes. In a letter to the newly elected mayor, Edward Lewis, member of the Urban League of Greater New York, expressed his dismay that “the published salary for this job [Hedgeman’s] raises some questions as to whether or not this is really a top policy-making position.”<sup>78</sup> Rather than a \$15,000 a year post, Hedgeman was given a vaguely defined position at \$8,000 a year. The question remained as to whether the first African American woman in a New York City mayor’s cabinet would be given a substantive position with real opportunity to bring about change or if it was indeed a token appointment.

Hedgeman had been a popular speaker at numerous civic, labor and women’s events before she took her new job. After her mayoral appointment, demand for her appearance soared. She spoke at events around the city and across the country. The *New York Times* covered one of her speeches which simultaneously addressed the devastating effects of racism and the importance of self-help. At a Women’s Day service in Harlem shortly after her appointment, the mayor’s assistant “called American Negroes ‘the most significant group of people in the world.’” She elaborated,

We understand the world’s cry for freedom and equality of opportunity, which it is difficult for other Americans to comprehend...But Negroes and their ideas have been rejected so often that we have rejected ourselves, and our cities show the result...We should be determined that the world will not be run by men who do not understand that people who live in mud huts will be looking for a way out, and we hope that way will be democracy. To be sure that it will be, the best way is by

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<sup>77</sup> “Anna Hedgeman Appointed Aide to The Mayor,” by Vernon Sinclair, *New York Amsterdam News*, January 9 1954, 1.

<sup>78</sup> Letter from Edward Lewis to Mayor Robert Wagner, Jr., January 4, 1954, Robert F. Wagner Jr. Papers, Box 76, Folder 1062, Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

example. Begin in your apartment...on your street to set an example that will go out to the rest of the world.<sup>79</sup>

A black woman with class privilege, appointments in national and city government, and an overseas State Department consultancy in India in 1953, Hedgeman had a unique platform from which to speak. She lamented the persistence of racism and worried aloud about decay within the black community, about the growth of materialism and of children “not knowing of Negro’s traditional struggle for self-respect.”<sup>80</sup> At a time when the world’s colonies were shaking free of their oppression, Hedgeman linked the conditions of those who suffered racial oppression around the world to those in New York. Hedgeman laid the responsibility for modeling democracy to the world at the feet of her Harlem audience.

Two years later she picked up the theme of self-help again. At an Alpha Kappa Mu Honor Society conference, she urged university faculty and students to “help the Negro love himself.” She admitted the challenge in her proposition. “It is difficult in a society which emphasizes in every possible fashion that White is beautiful, efficient, honorable, clever, significant, important and born to lead. These affirmations of superiority have left no margin for persons of color; worse than that, they have insisted that emphasis on the inferiority of color is an essential to their superiority.”<sup>81</sup> She saw the real difficulties ahead as well as the opportunities. But rather than ending on a

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<sup>79</sup> *New York Times*, March 29, 1954, 16.

<sup>80</sup> *New York Times*, March 29, 1954, 16.

<sup>81</sup> *Alpha Kappa Mu Journal*, Vol. XII, No. 2, April 1956, Box 7, Anna Arnold Hedgeman Collection.

despairing note, she underscored the importance of the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v Board of Education* as a step towards meaningful civil rights. She called on her audience to use their long-established organizations to help with “the lag of opportunity...help all of our communities become ‘open’ communities where people may find housing, occupation and education freely.”<sup>82</sup> As a member of the Mayor’s administration, Hedgeman used her official position to challenge racial injustices, illuminating racism’s insidious capacity to obscure the past and reconstruct the present, and to summon audiences to action.

Her commitment to racial and gender equality remained as strong inside the government as it had been outside. It also continued to garner attention of government leaders. At Governor Harriman’s request, Hedgeman and Ruth Whitehead Whaley served on an advisory group to the Woman’s Program of the New York State Department of Commerce from 1956 to 1958. The Council’s Report on the Woman’s Program foreshadowed many of the themes that President Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women report, *American Women*, would highlight a few years later. It noted that the state’s work program “had been designed to assist women whose primary interest was a business in her own home.” But the findings revealed that “some 2,000,000 New York women were already working outside their homes – and that there was an increasing desire on the part of more mature women to return to the business

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<sup>82</sup> *Alpha Kappa Mu Journal*, Vol. XII, No. 2, April 1956, Box 7, Anna Arnold Hedgeman Collection.



world when their family responsibilities no longer tied them to their homes.”<sup>83</sup> Though her speaking engagements often focused on issues of race, Hedgeman’s actions revealed an equal commitment to gender equality.

Hedgeman was a role model and symbol of hope to African American women. In her weekly column on the women’s pages of the *Amsterdam News*, Betty Granger remarked, “we love to watch outstanding career women make their mark upon the world...look at the record and bow to the career girls wearing pretty wedding bands who have managed both a home and a career with above average success like...Ann Hedgeman (among a long list of others).”<sup>84</sup> These women were not suffering from the “feminine mystique.” They were celebrated community leaders. African American women had always been in the workforce in larger numbers than white women at all socio-economic levels. Yet this was emphasized as an encouraging image. By noting both their professional success and their wedding bands, Granger suggested that women could have fulfilling careers and a husband.

At the same time, however, Granger ignored a second, prevalent model of successful black female leadership. There were a number of strong, single women making their way in upper circles of women’s organizations that Granger did not discuss. Wilhelmina Adams, Dorothy Height of the NCNW, Jeanne Noble of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, and Pauli Murray, lawyer and feminist activist, found personal and professional fulfillment without husbands by their sides. These single women were

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<sup>83</sup> “Four Years of Progress: A Report to the Woman’s Council on The Woman’s Program, 1955 through 1958,” Wilhelmina Adams additions, Schomburg.

portrayed as dutiful, talented public servants when they were covered in the news. But their gendered identity, their private lives, and their sexuality were usually obscured, even by themselves.<sup>85</sup>

As African Americans throughout the South waged determined struggles against deeply entrenched white racism, Anna Arnold Hedgeman wrote articles and spoke to audiences on the challenges that lay ahead for black leaders. In a *New York Age* series, “Negro Women Fought Hard for Recognition,” Hedgeman examined the long history of black women’s struggles for equality. She wrote with respect and empathy,

One must pay tribute to the Negro women who, in the last 75 years have given such magnificent leadership. Each of them might well be called “everywoman.” These women who, with faith in their husbands and children, washed and ironed, scrubbed and cooked, took endless insults, saved nickels and dimes for tuition because there was often not even a grade school in the home community, are truly significant pioneers. This era of struggle...was served by thousands of worthy successors to women like Harriet Tubman.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Betty Granger’s Column “Conversation Piece: Women Who Work...”, *New York Amsterdam News*, November 27, 1954, 8.

<sup>85</sup> In their autobiographies and historical writings, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Jeanne Noble, Pauli Murray and Shirley Chisholm, craft the way they want their contributions to society and to its largest struggles understood. Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*; Hedgeman, *The Gift of Chaos: Decades of American Discontent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*; Jeanne Noble, *Beautiful, Also, Are the Souls of My Black Sisters: A History of the Black Woman in America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1978); Shirley Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970); Shirley Chisholm, *The Good Fight* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973). See also Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. by Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995) (originally published in *Signs*, 14:95 (Summer 1989)).

<sup>86</sup> *New York Age*, September 3, 1955, 1.

Hedgeman's militant side was evident in her address to the 1700 people gathered to honor Daisy Bates at the annual New York Utility Club annual dinner in 1958. Following statements from Bessie Buchanan and Adam Clayton Powell, Hedgeman heightened the emotion in the room with a passionate speech. According to *Amsterdam News* columnist James Hicks, Hedgeman "lashed out from her international background as a fighter for full freedom, she drew on her national experience to strike at the defects of her nation's democracy, and she rapped New York's schools from her vantage point as the mayor's assistant." Weaving together a portrait of multi-layered racism, Hedgeman tapped her audience's sympathies, acknowledged the evening's guest of honor, Bates, and made a "dramatic appeal for the mothers and housewives in the fields of the blighted south." Her fiery oratory left barely a single dry eye, Hicks claimed.<sup>87</sup>

After four years in office, Hedgeman lamented the Wagner administration's lack of political will to bring about meaningful change, especially for the black citizens of the city. In 1958, she left City Hall, frustrated and disappointed not only in the mayor but also in the black community's leadership, which she felt did not support her efforts.<sup>88</sup> In her explanatory column in the *New York Age*, Hedgeman put rumors to rest about why she left the Mayor's administration. She also talked about what she had learned about bringing about change through politics:

I learned the value of the strength of the local community, for no legislation becomes law in the Congress of the United States unless the strength and pressure of local communities is properly mobilized. During these four years, (1954-1958), I was

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<sup>87</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, June 21, 1958.

<sup>88</sup> Anna Arnold Hedgeman, "Why I left City Hall," *New York Age*, October 25, 1958, 4+.



increasingly disturbed by the lack of correlated, thoughtful, and properly broad participation by the Negro communities of the City of New York ... It is my conviction that the Negro communities of this city and across the country have within them the experience, the ability, the faith, and the potential courage to meet their needs and to give inspiration to American in her moment of world crises. I have learned the hard way that one's political voice is only important when one is free of payroll connections.<sup>89</sup>

Looking back after a number of years, Hedgeman was even more critical of Mayor Wagner. She remembered his administration as “cynical, unimaginative, ineffectual and bumbling – living from crisis to crisis.”<sup>90</sup> Her time inside city government had been riddled with frustration. For Hedgeman, it was not the most effective way to bring about change. While Hedgeman's career had been spent in the administrative arms of the government, some New York City women preferred a more public position as political candidate.

### *Sara Speaks and the GOP*

Throughout the 1940s an increasing number of African American women ran for public office, mostly on the Republican and ALP tickets. They ran in both Brooklyn and Harlem, demonstrating that black women across the city saw possibilities opening up in the field of electoral politics. When the state legislature reapportioned congressional districts in 1944, the GOP felt they had a fighting chance to win the newly created

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<sup>89</sup> *New York Age* October 25, 1958, pp. 4, 22.

<sup>90</sup> *New York Times*, August 15, 1965, 56.

Congressional seat and they chose a woman to compete for it.<sup>91</sup> After twelve years of Republican Mayor LaGuardia, local Democrats had lost some power in the city; and New York Governor Thomas Dewey was running against President Roosevelt. Still, they faced a formidable opponent in Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the popular pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church and first African American elected to New York's city council. Powell had been endorsed both by Tammany Hall and the American Labor Party.

The Republicans chose Harlem resident, criminal lawyer, and party activist Sara Speaks. She embraced the challenge. No stranger to party politics, Speaks had extensive experience in the GOP. And like Wilhelmina Adams and Ruth Whitehead Whaley, she was a civic and political activist.<sup>92</sup>

Speaks and Powell had dramatically different campaign styles. He aggressively pursued the Harlem spotlight from his church and on the streets. She challenged what she called his "emotional and inflammatory approach." Powell had the Communist Party's support, a point that Speaks tried unsuccessfully to exploit.<sup>93</sup> "Cooperative activity within the framework of an established political party will lead to the improvement of the position of the Negro in America," Speaks argued. "[Y]ou can't

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<sup>91</sup> Lewinson, 75.

<sup>92</sup> Speaks held memberships in the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, the New York Urban League, was president of the New York State Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs and former chair of the Anti-Discrimination Committee. *New York Times*, May 11, 1944, 13 and May 13, 1944, pp. 3A and 10.

<sup>93</sup> Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1983), 312; Charles V. Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political*

pass bills with one vote. A Representative must work through friendships and party associations.”<sup>94</sup> She was hardly a radical in the making.

Speaks promised to fight for “the abolition of the poll tax, for legislation to make lynching a federal crime and effective enforcement of anti-Jim Crow laws.”<sup>95</sup> According to the *Amsterdam News*, her nomination by the GOP “electrified the community.” The paper asserted that political leaders were long overdue in their “recognition of Negro women.” They remarked that “women have rallied to her campaign in a manner unlike anything seen in political history.”<sup>96</sup>

The Republican candidate presented herself as the more respectable leader, and she may very well have been. But Sara Speaks was not a front-line fighter. Although she was an ardent advocate for racial equality, she intended to conduct her battles in the traditional political establishment, in conventional ways. Her desire to collaborate with fellow congressional representatives did not win over the residents of the Twenty-second district. In a ten-year period, they had waged successful “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” boycotts. They were fighting in the war, and the “Double-V” campaign. They had lived through two race riots.<sup>97</sup> Political decorum was not what they wanted.

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*Biography of an American Dilemma* (New York: Atheneum, 1991); 150, *New York Times*, July 29, 1944, 26.

<sup>94</sup> *New York Times*, May 13, 1944, 10.

<sup>95</sup> *People’s Voice*, May 20, 1944, 5.

<sup>96</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, May 13, 1944, 3-A and May 20, 1944, 4-A.

<sup>97</sup> Groh, 116; Lewinson, 70; Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, “Or Does It Explode?” *Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).



The *Amsterdam News* engaged in a severe bout of wishful thinking when it predicted a landslide vote for Speaks in the August 1 primary. In fact it was a landslide, but for Powell.<sup>98</sup> Speaks lacked Powell's connection to the people. And more than that, she was a Republican in a Democratic city and a black woman trying to enter a predominantly masculine world.

*A Close Call - Maude Richardson*

Women across the East River in Brooklyn waged their own political battles. Like their Harlem sisters they found that the double layers of discrimination made the fight significantly harder than for black men. Brooklyn's Democrats gained strength in black neighborhoods after West Indian native Bertram Baker founded the United Action Democratic Association in 1931.<sup>99</sup> However, not everyone left the party of Lincoln during the Roosevelt years. Maude Richardson was among those who did not. A loyal Republican throughout the 1940s, she aggressively pursued political office three times in four years. Like Speaks, Richardson was a prominent civic leader and champion of racial equality. She was vice president of the Brooklyn NAACP, vice-chair of the Negro

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<sup>98</sup> Powell defeated Speaks in both party races – in the Democratic campaign, 3,358 to 734, and in the Republican party, 1,397 to 1,038. Hamilton, 156. It is not surprising that the *New York Amsterdam News* supported Speaks. In addition to being a relatively conservative paper, it was also not likely to support the co-owner, Powell, of its rival paper, the *People's Voice*.

<sup>99</sup> Lewinson, 84.

Republicans of Kings County, and staff writer for the *New York Amsterdam News* and the *People's Voice*.<sup>100</sup>

In 1945, Bedford-Stuyvesant residents formed a non-partisan committee to choose the candidate they believed would “get the widest public support” in the city council race. Maude Richardson was their choice.<sup>101</sup> During her campaign, Richardson underscored the poor state of race relations in Northern cities. Claiming that New York City was “sitting on an atomic bomb of race hatred,” she promised to “sponsor an ordinance outlawing the preaching of racial intolerance and discrimination.”<sup>102</sup> With the war just over, job opportunities and housing conditions became ever-greater concerns, particularly for the city’s largest minority group. Despite the Bedford-Stuyvesant community’s support, Richardson lost badly.<sup>103</sup> But her appetite for elected office was only whetted.

The following year, Richardson was one of only two African American women to run for elected office in New York City. They were the only black candidates from Brooklyn, and they were vying for the same state assembly seat. Maude Richardson met her first opponent, Ada B. Jackson, in the Republican primary. The two contenders had migrated to New York from the South. Maude Richardson was a native of Arkansas;

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<sup>100</sup> Richardson wrote for the progressive *People's Voice* in 1948 after Doxey Wilkerson had left and shortly before it went under.

<sup>101</sup> *People's Voice*, May 5, 1945, 18. Note: New York City Council members were chosen by proportional representation from 1937 to 1947. To win, a candidate needed 75,000 votes.

<sup>102</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, October 31, 1945, 19.

<sup>103</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 17, 1945, B1 and November 24, 1945, B1.

Ada B. Jackson was from Georgia. These women had similar backgrounds – both were long-standing, highly respected citizens in Bedford-Stuyvesant, active in their churches and community. The two had worked with organizations to fight for racial equality and led numerous endeavors to improve the area’s quality of life. They shared the distinction of polling in the top ten of the *Amsterdam News*’ “10 Leading Brooklynites” annual contest. Richardson and Jackson even shared party affiliation. The editors of the *Amsterdam News* feared that the black vote would be split “so that the white Democrats will have an easy time romping on to victory.”<sup>104</sup>

Ada Jackson won favor in Bedford-Stuyvesant for her public work. And she had already tried her hand at electoral politics in 1944 and 1945. A “Citizens’ Non-Partisan Committee” comprised of thirty African American and white leaders had formed to elect her to the State Assembly in 1944. The group proposed that Jackson enter the three primary contests – Democratic, Republican, and American Labor Party. They issued a statement insisting that, “Any ‘unity candidate’ for the assembly from the 17<sup>th</sup> A.D. should support a fourth term for Pres. Roosevelt and have a consistent record of fighting for the needs of the people.”<sup>105</sup> Jackson accepted the request.

As the June 1946 primary day approached, the fight grew heated, but Richardson was predicted to win the GOP nomination. According to the news, “No other fight has caused such furor in the uptown area.” Women gathered to formally endorse Richardson. She had strong party support and the endorsement of the city’s largest black newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*. Jackson, however, had her own impressive

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<sup>104</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, June 8, 1946, B1.



backing from the Left and labor. Progressive leader Henry Wallace campaigned for Jackson. The *People's Voice* endorsed her. The Transport Workers Union also backed Jackson, stating, "She is an outstanding leader, fighting for the welfare of the people."<sup>106</sup> And the Congress of American Women (CAW), founded in 1946 by a group of progressive women committed to women's liberation, stood fully behind her campaign.<sup>107</sup>

Richardson defeated Jackson in the Republican primary.<sup>108</sup> She then faced Democratic incumbent John Walsh in the general election. Walsh, backed by the powerful Democratic machine, thought he had little cause for concern, particularly if Richardson and Jackson continued to battle against each other. Jackson remained in the race and ran as an ALP candidate. Brooklyn's 125,000 black residents had never elected an African American to public office. There was a real risk that with two black female candidates wooing the same voters, the outcome would remain unchanged.

In the November election, the vote was so close that a recount was necessary. Richardson lost to the Democratic incumbent by 77 votes. The *Amsterdam News'* warnings had proven accurate. With Ada Jackson polling 4,397 votes, the black vote

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<sup>105</sup> *People's Voice*, June 3, 1944, 14.

<sup>106</sup> *People's Voice*, August 17, 1946, pp. 2, 4.

<sup>107</sup> For an in-depth discussion on the Congress of American Women, see Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), Chapter 3.

<sup>108</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, September 1, 1946. The vote was 1,024 to 729. The Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library.

was split and Maude Richardson was denied what would have been a remarkable  
victory.<sup>109</sup>

Richardson likely benefited from the national political mood swing to the right in 1946. For the first time in at least sixteen years, New York sent more Republicans than Democrats to Congress. But New York was still a heavily Democratic city. Her near victory sounded a clear warning to the Democrats. Bedford-Stuyvesant was ready for a black candidate, and at least in 1946, the candidate's race seemed to factor as significantly as their party affiliation for voters.

In 1945 Maude Richardson and Bertram Baker had run for city council from Bedford-Stuyvesant. Neither won enough votes under the proportional representation system to secure a council seat.<sup>110</sup> In 1948, the two faced off again, though this time for a seat in the state assembly. With the two major parties fielding black candidates, it was certain that Brooklyn would finally have its first black elected official. Baker ran on both the Democratic and ALP tickets. In the presidential election year of 1948, the Seventeenth Assembly District heavily supported the Democratic candidate, as it usually

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<sup>109</sup> *New York Age*, November 16, 1946, 1; *People's Voice*, November 16, 1946, 17.

<sup>110</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, July 21, 1945, B1, August 25, 1945, 2B, September 22, 1945, B1, October 6, 1945, B2, October 27, 1945, 18. *New York Amsterdam News*, November 24, 1945, B1. Vote tallies showed Baker and Richardson far behind the leader, Peter Cacchione, Communist councilman who had over 75,000 votes. Richardson had fewer than 6,000 votes and Baker had over 10,000, *New York Amsterdam News*, November 17, 1945, B1.

did. Baker beat Maude Richardson by a 2-1 margin to become the first African American elected in Brooklyn.<sup>111</sup>

Bedford-Stuyvesant residents wanted a black representative. The political parties finally responded. Richardson had come dangerously close to beating the white, male Democratic incumbent. The Democratic leadership heeded the warnings. They would not risk losing the seat by running a white candidate against Richardson again. Despite her work towards racial equality and community betterment, the political climate did not sustain this vocally pro-Dewey Republican. Richardson had run – and lost – her last political race.

#### *A Rising Star – Pauli Murray*

The decade closed with a campaign effort by a rising star among black female leaders. Pauli Murray was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1910. She was raised in North Carolina, graduated from Hunter College in New York in 1933, received her law degree from Howard University in 1944 and an L.L.M. from the University Of California School of Jurisprudence in 1945. Murray made her one and only bid for office in 1949 when she ran for City Council from Brooklyn. She had developed a keen sensitivity to race and gender-based injustices, challenging the Jim Crow admissions policy at University of North Carolina and the sexist admissions policy at Harvard.<sup>112</sup> More than

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<sup>111</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, November 4, 1948, The Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library; *Amsterdam News*, November 6, 1948, B1.

<sup>112</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, August 19, 1944, 8-A, September 2, 1944, 8-A; “Biographical Material on Pauli Murray, Issued by Citizens Committee for the Election of Pauli Murray” in Pauli Murray Manuscript Collection, Schlesinger Library, Box 73,



any of the black female candidates before her, Murray articulated black women's oppression in terms of sexual discrimination as well as racism.<sup>113</sup> In addition, she had demonstrated her willingness to put herself in physical danger, first helping defend Odell Waller, a black sharecropper convicted of murder; and second leading lunch counter sit-ins and pickets in Washington, D.C.'s racially exclusive restaurants while a law student at Howard University in the 1940s.

Of the 102 candidates, Pauli Murray was the only African American woman, and the only black candidate from Brooklyn running for city council.<sup>114</sup> She was not an ideologue. Her campaign embodied many of the issues that grassroots activists had been fighting for – more and better schools, safe streets, and quality of life issues.<sup>115</sup>

Murray ran on the Liberal party ticket with Herbert Lehman, Robert F. Wagner Jr., and Abe Stark. She explained her decision to run in her autobiography. "As a budding feminist I recognized the importance of women actively seeking public office, ... especially Negro women, who were then virtually invisible in politics."<sup>116</sup> The Panamanian native and union activist, Maida Springer, business agent of Local 22 of The

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Folder 1274; *New York Age*, January 19, 1946, 1; *Pittsburgh Courier*, Saturday, October 29, 1949, 25; *New York Age*, November 5, 1949; Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, pp. 207-208.

<sup>113</sup> See Pauli Murray, "Jim Crow and Jane Crow," in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, ed. by Gerda Lerner (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 592-599.

<sup>114</sup> Campaign Flyer, Clippings File, and Press Release, Pauli Murray Manuscript Collection, Box 73, Folder 1273; *New York Age*, October 29, 1949, 9; *New York Amsterdam News*, October 29, 1949, 13.

<sup>115</sup> Campaign Letter, October 28, 1949, Pauli Murray Manuscript Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Box 73, Folder 1273.

Dressmakers Union, was her friend and campaign director.<sup>117</sup> Springer recalled that she and Murray “passed out copies of her platform at busy intersections and shouted themselves hoarse.” Despite a lack of resources, Murray was a source of worry for the Democratic incumbent, Sam Curtis. In an effort to undermine her legitimacy, he used class-based, not race or gender-based attacks. Ignoring her college education and law degree, he accused her of being “unqualified to hold office because of her occupational background as a waitress and a dishwasher.”<sup>118</sup>

The *New York Post* said Murray was “a witty and a penetratingly earthy speaker.” Contrary to her opponent, the paper played up her working-class background. Murray saw her past experiences and connection with the community as an asset, not a liability. The *Post* quoted her, “It is more important to the people...that I worked longer as a dishwasher, waitress, elevator operator, ... than as a practicing attorney.”<sup>119</sup> Murray understood the needs of her community on an intimate level. However, empathy was not enough.

In the end, Pauli Murray was no more successful in winning elected office than Sara Speaks, Ruth Whitehead Whaley, Maude Richardson or Ada B. Jackson. She finished third out of four candidates, beating out only the American Labor party candidate, Helen Wishnofsky. Proportional representation, approved in 1936, had been

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<sup>116</sup> Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 280.

<sup>117</sup> Campaign Letter, October 3, 1949, Pauli Murray Manuscript Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Box 73, Folder 1273.

<sup>118</sup> Yvette Richards, *Maida Springer: Pan-Africanist and International Labor Leader* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 90.

voted out in 1947. The Democrats then had a lock on politics, winning 24 of the 25 available seats. Murray's campaign director, Maida Springer, sent out thank-you letters to supporters which stated, "Although we did not elect our candidate, we demonstrated that independent liberals can arouse and activize [*sic*] citizens who have never before participated in political affairs."<sup>120</sup>

Pauli Murray ran on the issues that grassroots activists had fought for, just as Ada B. Jackson had. The decision to run was a choice among many that they pursued to fight racial and gender inequality throughout the 1940s and 1950s. In sum, none of the women who ran on grassroots issues won their elections. They were not life-long political party activists. For the time being, African American female candidates had to content themselves with "arousing citizens" and symbolic gains. Harlem and Brooklyn residents had shown they were not afraid to vote for the ALP and Communist party in the 1940s.<sup>121</sup> But they were not ready to elect a black woman, whether she was a Republican, a Liberal or an American Laborite.

Despite different party affiliations, most of the African American women who ran for office prior to 1954 had similar backgrounds. They were rooted primarily in community-based politics. As these numerous failed attempts to win public office illustrate, committed activism on the local level was not enough to win elected office.

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<sup>119</sup> *New York Post*, October 26, 1949, 43, Pauli Murray Manuscript Collection, Schlesinger Library (SL), Box 73, Folder 1276.

<sup>120</sup> Letter dated December 1, 1949 from Maida Springer to "Dear Friend," Pauli Murray Manuscript Collection, SL, Box 73, Folder 1273.

<sup>121</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 17, 1945, B1, *People's Voice*, November 17, 1945, 4. See also Horne, *Black Liberation Red Scare*, pp. 164-165.



Those who ran and lost, as well as those who were victorious, illustrate how the complex mixture of race, gender, party politics and personality was continuously reconfigured throughout this time period and determined, in large part, who won and who lost.

*Finally a Victor – Bessie Buchanan*

The landmark *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in May 1954 legally undermined Jim Crow. Although the pace seemed glacially slow, federal law finally backed racial equality. How attentive were New York City Democrats to the changing winds at the national level? It is hard to say. But with a new national dialogue on race underway and with a record number of women registered as Democrats in Harlem, the party finally decided to back a black woman for State Assembly.<sup>122</sup>

In 1954, two women ran for the twelfth assembly district seat, as Ada B. Jackson and Maude Richardson had done in 1946. This time, however, they both ran on major party tickets. Bessie Buchanan ran on the Democrat and Liberal tickets; Lucille Pickett, a repeat candidate for the Republicans, ran against her. Bessie Buchanan was well-known and loved in the Harlem community. Her husband Charles Buchanan was an owner of the famous Savoy Ballroom. A former dancer and screen star, Bessie

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<sup>122</sup> In the 1952 (a presidential election year), there was a record number of women registered as Democrats in the 12<sup>th</sup> A.D., 23,828. In 1954 in Bessie Buchanan's district, the 12<sup>th</sup> A.D., 16,766 women and 13,853 men were registered as Democrats. *Annual Report of the Board of Elections of the City of New York, 1952, Table VII* and *Annual Report of 1954, Table VI*.

Buchanan had worked at one point with Josephine Baker.<sup>123</sup> She was a socialite with a political conscience. As an active Harlem Democrat, she contributed to Mayor O'Dwyer's successful re-election campaign in 1949.<sup>124</sup> Not only was she voted the best dressed woman in Harlem, Buchanan was also given an award for fifteen years of community service.<sup>125</sup>

Buchanan entered the Democratic primary to challenge two-time Assemblyman Leslie Turner. Commenting on her motivation to run, she said, "Women form the majority of voters in Harlem, and it is time they took a stand in the political affairs of the community." Black women outnumbered black men on voter registration lists in the predominantly black assembly districts from 1944 onward.<sup>126</sup> This was a unique trend not sustained on the general registration lists for the city. While Ruth Whaley a decade earlier had suffered electoral defeat in large part because Tammany Hall abandoned its candidate, this time Bessie Buchanan benefited significantly from the organization. She beat the two-time incumbent in the primary. She attributed her victory to Tammany's backing and "the importance of women in voting."<sup>127</sup>

Buchanan's victory in the primary pitted her against the returning Republican candidate, Lucille Pickett. Pickett's struggle was overwhelming, as the twelfth assembly

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<sup>123</sup> *New York Age*, October 13, 1951, 11; *New York Amsterdam News*, July 17, 1954, 3.

<sup>124</sup> *New York Age*, September 24, 1949, 3; October 15, 1949, 32.

<sup>125</sup> *New York Age*, January 17, 1953, 19; March 28, 1953, 1.

<sup>126</sup> *Annual Reports of the Board of Elections of the City of New York, 1944-1960*. See especially the 17<sup>th</sup> A.D. in Kings County and the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> assembly districts in New York County (except the 14<sup>th</sup> A.D. in 1948).

<sup>127</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, October 2, 1954, 32.

district had not voted for a Republican in more than a decade. Buchanan waged a campaign for “greater recognition for Negro women in politics.” She also pledged to fight for “stronger anti-discrimination laws, more day care centers and increased unemployment and workmen’s compensation benefits,” demonstrating a concern for race, class and gender issues.<sup>128</sup>

The earlier match up of female candidates, Jackson and Richardson, did not focus on their femininity or beauty. In the 1954 campaign, however, the papers set up the competition in a more typical gendered framework.<sup>129</sup> Campaign coverage focused on appearance as well as intellect. Newspapers assured readers that these women were still feminine, despite running for political office. The *Amsterdam News* headlines suggested it was a “Battle of Brains [and] Beauty in Election.” In the immediate postwar years, Maude Richardson and Ada B. Jackson had functioned in a social and political context that was more fluid regarding women in the public/political sphere. But by 1954, the national rhetoric had largely returned to promoting “traditional” gender norms. When Bessie Buchanan and Picket ran for office, the newspaper coverage reflected the shift.

Buchanan’s local popularity, the Democratic party’s support, the record number of female registered voters, and the trend for African Americans to vote Democratic all

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<sup>128</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, October 23, 1954, 2.

<sup>129</sup> See Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique,” in *Not Just Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, edited by Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), pp. 233-234. Meyerowitz has argued that in the postwar era, “allusions to femininity and domesticity probably helped legitimate women’s public achievements.” At the same time, she argued that the focus on appearance did not preclude attention to the important work women were doing in the public sphere.



worked in Buchanan's favor. She soundly defeated her opponent and headed to the state house where she made good on her promise to fight against discrimination."<sup>130</sup>

And fight it was. The first bills Buchanan introduced addressed pay inequities based on sex, and discrimination in banking, education and insurance based on race. Buchanan teamed up with veteran colleagues and reintroduced these and other civil rights bills every year, but made no headway in seeing them translated into law. Despite her best efforts, she succeeded in getting only three of her bills passed into law in her eight years in the State Assembly. They were a social welfare bill in 1959 and two bills establishing city and state responsibilities for social welfare infrastructure in 1959 and 1960.<sup>131</sup>

Two phenomena help explain her lack of success. First, not only was it nearly impossible for an African American woman to win elected office, it was equally difficult to accomplish anything substantive without a network of support. One woman alone served as an important symbol to her hometown constituents. But she was unable to convert that local support to political power in the state house. Second, racism and sexism still plagued the city, the state and the nation. Most legislators were unwilling to use their political power to undo the long-standing systems shaped by racist ideology. More women and men with commitments to equality were needed in elected positions before those ideals were translated into reality.

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<sup>130</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 6, 1954, 1. See also *New York Times*, November 4, 1954, 27. The vote tally was 23,399 for Buchanan to 6,013 for Pickett. *New York State Legislative Record and Index, Vols. 1955-1962*.

<sup>131</sup> See *New York Legislative Record and Index*, Section on Individual Record Assembly Bills, for 1955-1962. New York Public Library State Records.

## *Conclusion*

The women discussed in this chapter lived and participated in the community life of Harlem and Brooklyn. They understood at the most personal levels the needs and challenges of their neighborhoods and beyond, and their understanding propelled them into public life. Wilhelmina Adams, Ruth Whitehead Whaley, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Sara Speaks, Maude Richardson, Bessie Buchanan, and many others, shared a commitment to racial equality and considered formal politics and the state an important point of entry for demanding significant changes. Many of these women were unsuccessful. For those who pursued elected office, the losses as much as the victories underscore the complicated mix of politics, race and gender at work in each of the campaigns and in the larger context. The barriers to entry were tremendously high. The political party culture and race and gender discrimination continuously reinforced women's exclusion.

The women who penetrated clubhouse politics and administrative branches of the state found themselves in the distinct minority. Wilhelmina Adams chose not to address gender discrimination at all but focused instead on the immediacies of party politics, narrowly defined. Ruth Whitehead Whaley was much more outspoken on race and gender issues in interviews to the press, but it is hard to know how vocal she was with the mayor and city administrators. Black women with her professional talents struggled for legitimacy. Recognition was difficult to attain, but the ability to implement effective policies was almost nil.

This was what Anna Arnold Hedgeman found as well. At the national level and in city government, state institutions proved a barrier to change. Their structures and purposes were highly racialized and gendered. After four years, Hedgeman gave up on the administrative state, although she did not abandon her commitment to equality or politics.<sup>132</sup>

The successful candidate, Bessie Buchanan, was a Democrat with strong party support. In a heavily Democratic city, this mattered. In addition, she strategically turned her two greatest potential liabilities – her sex and her race – into two of her most important assets. She called on black women to help undo the historical legacy that kept them out of political office. With women outnumbering men on voter registration rolls, her appeal found a rich source of support. And in an era that witnessed a national upheaval about civil rights, Buchanan, as well as the women who lost, stressed the need to fight for racial equality, locally and in the larger context. Her political victory not only mirrored but also benefited from the changing national perspective on race. Whether these women won or lost, they were clearly more than trailblazers. They were the embodiment of the historical struggle for racial and gender equality.

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<sup>132</sup> Hedgeman ran for political office three times in the 1960s as an insurgent Democrat. *New York Amsterdam News*, March 26, 1960, 2 and May 14, 1960, 1; *New York Citizen-Call*, June 4, 1960, 12. See also *New York Times*, April 4, 1960 and July 25, 1965, 1; *New York Times*, March 14, 1968, 30 and June 20, 1968, 40. In her last race, Anna Arnold Hedgeman ran for State Assembly and lost to Charles Rangel.



## CHAPTER 4

### VISIONS OF EQUALITY AND JUSTICE BEYOND THE BORDERS

From the moment the gavel fell on the opening session of the United Nations in 1945, African Americans gained a new vehicle with which to combat racial discrimination. Across the nation and around the world, peoples of color followed the founding meetings of the U.N. in San Francisco with cautious optimism.<sup>1</sup> Just prior to the San Francisco conference, activists had gathered in Harlem to discuss the creation of the U.N. and its potential to serve as a forum to fight for equality. Historians Brenda Gayle Plummer and Gerald Horne have highlighted the significance of that April 1945 meeting. Those who had assembled in New York to evaluate the United Nations had a clear message for the delegates headed to California. The overwhelming sentiment was that colonialism had to end.<sup>2</sup>

Progressive activists understood the potential of the United Nations to serve as a unifying forum to fight racialized oppression including colonialism in Africa and Asia, as well as racial discrimination in the United States. But the immediate onset of the Cold War precluded comprehensive change and pan-African alliances were unable to survive

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<sup>1</sup> Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 70.

<sup>2</sup> Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 133. See also Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944-1963* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986). He notes, "This conference was a spectacular success and may have been the most significant signpost on the road to anticolonial independence." pp. 28-29.

beyond the immediate postwar period.<sup>3</sup> While some of the more progressive windows of opportunity closed with the onset of the Cold War, African American women, who were based in New York and involved in struggles for racial equality, suggest another way to examine the transitional period.

Historians have written about few women in the pan-African, anti-colonial movements, and those are more radical women including Claudia Jones, a Communist party activist in Harlem who was convicted under the Smith Act and exiled to Britain after serving a year in prison; Maida Springer, a Panamanian native, union activist and Pauli Murray's campaign manager; Josephine Baker, the renowned performer who made Paris her home after World War II in reaction to racism in the United States; and Shirley Graham Du Bois, pan-Africanist, Communist, and wife of W.E.B. DuBois.<sup>4</sup> But there were many other black women who capitalized on the opportunities created by the U.N.'s founding in innovative ways and they are highlighted in this chapter.

African American women, already strategic advocates for racial equality, understood the U.N. as another way to argue for rights. They appreciated the expansiveness of human rights discourse and they used it to lend political and ethical

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<sup>3</sup> Von Eschen, 120.

<sup>4</sup> For histories of African American women's involvement in international labor activism, political protest, and Pan-Africanism, see Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), Chapter 5; Yvette Richards, *Maida Springer: Pan-Africanist and International Labor Leader* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); Gerald Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Mary Dudziak, "Josephine Baker, Racial Protest, and the Cold War," in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 81, Issue 2, pp. 543-570. For details of Claudia Jones's conviction and exile, see *New York Times*, October 14, 1953, 17; November 19, 1953, 18; November 18, 1955, 10.



authority to their struggles for racial equality. Furthermore, they seized on the U.N. documents to advocate for women's equality. As they embraced a broad definition of human rights, they also related American white supremacy to colonialism and argued that both were exploitive systems based on racism.

In addition, there had been a long tradition in American black communities of maintaining relationships with people in Africa. Black churches and their missionary arms served as vehicles for some of the earliest interaction between communities in the United States and those in Africa.<sup>5</sup> By the turn of the twentieth century, Pan-African groups sponsored conferences that provided black Americans with further opportunities for contact and coalition-building.<sup>6</sup> Although those efforts continued into the post-war

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<sup>5</sup> On black churches and their missionary outreach in Africa, see: Sylvia M. Jacobs, ed., *Black Americans and the Missionary Movement in Africa* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982); Walter L. Williams, *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa, 1877-1900* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982); Sylvia M. Jacobs, "African-American Women Missionaries Confront the African Way of Life," in *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: A Reader*, edited by Rosalyn Terborg-Penn and Andrea Benton Rushing (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1996); James T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). For an anthology on non-church based interest in Africa see Martin Kilson and Adelaide Hill, eds., *Apropos of Africa: Afro-American Leaders and the Romance of Africa* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971).

<sup>6</sup> On a history of black activism and Pan-Africanism, see: Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944-1963* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), Chapter 2; Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 2000); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961*



period, New York women expanded the cultural and educational exchanges particularly with women from Africa. And with the United Nations being situated in New York City, black women's organizations there embraced unique opportunities to learn about the liberation struggles from African representatives to the new body.

Finally, women in leadership capacities including Edith Sampson, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Jeanne Noble, and Dorothy Height traveled overseas for their organizations and also as representatives of the U.S. government. While they fought racism and women's inequality at home and abroad, they embraced U.S. foreign policy rather uncritically. Through their travels, they also tried to understand their own personal connections to Africa.

#### *A New Instrument for World Peace and Human Rights*

Mary McLeod Bethune, founder and president of the NCNW, was a consultant-observer for the NAACP at the San Francisco Conference to found the United Nations. She argued that "Negro women like all other women must take a part in building this world, and must therefore keep informed on all world-shaping events."<sup>7</sup> Once the U.N.

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(Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), Chapter 1. In addition to African American political consciousness regarding African colonial oppression as represented in the literature listed above, racial self-determination was heavily influenced by the Garvey Movement and the Universal Negro Improvement Association of the 1920s. Edmund David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1955) and Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 136.

was firmly established, she asserted that the Council intended to use it “as an instrument for world peace.”<sup>8</sup>

The NCNW had ready-made pipelines for information-sharing based on its structure as an “organization of organizations.” Local branches sponsored meetings to educate members about international developments. In Chicago, one chapter called a gathering to discuss the importance of the Dumbarton Oaks proposals, which called for the creation of the United Nations. They also evaluated the possibilities and limits of economic development based on the Bretton Woods Plan, which created the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. And finally they explored the ideals of liberation and self-determination that were embodied in the Atlantic Charter, and the Yalta and San Francisco Conferences.<sup>9</sup> The women engaged in a grassroots educational process on rights and possibilities for change.

The U.N. Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights gave a significant boost and lent legitimacy to the claims of self-determination and racial equality. But a number of women also appreciated the opportunity to advocate for women’s equality that stemmed from these new documents. As Von Eschen has argued, “the language of rights helped make possible the critical leadership of women such as Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Charlotta Bass and Bethune and initiated the disruption of

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<sup>8</sup> Memo to the Members of the Board of Directors, NCNW from Mary McLeod Bethune, Progress Report, November 15, 1947-April 15, 1948. Daisy George Manuscript Collection, Box 1, Folder 6, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts and Archives Division.

<sup>9</sup> See White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 149. *Chicago Defender*, April 28, 1945, 4.

gendered political categories.”<sup>10</sup> NCNW leaders tried to exploit that disruption in creative ways.

In her 1948 progress report to the NCNW Board of Directors, Bethune underscored the importance of building international relations. She led the NCNW’s efforts to “strengthen the friendship between ‘women of darker races’ by exchange of information.”<sup>11</sup> And she used her national prominence to advance her vision. The Council women cultivated cross-cultural relationships through diplomatic receptions like those they sponsored for the Haitian embassy and Liberian delegation.<sup>12</sup>

By 1950, civil rights and social welfare were central components of the NCNW’s agenda. They actively sought “cooperation with organizations in other countries with purposes similar to those of the Council,” in order to attain not just domestically-based rights, but universal ones as well.<sup>13</sup> The largest African American women’s organization

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<sup>10</sup> According to Penny Von Eschen, “The 1940s anti-colonialism represented a radical departure from earlier gendered language. Africa was...the site of struggle for the extension of universal rights...regardless of race, nationality, or sex.” *Race Against Empire*, 79. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Prime Minister Nehru’s sister, became the president of the General Assembly of the United Nations in the early 1950s. See also: White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 149; Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 144; See *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Preamble and Article 2 in particular.

<sup>11</sup> “Human Rights Day December 10 Included in NCNW Resolutions,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 26, 1949.

<sup>12</sup> Progress Report Memo To: Members of the Board of Directors, NCNW from Mary McLeod Bethune, April 17, 1948. Daisy George Manuscript Collection, Schomburg, Box 1, Folder 6 NCNW. See also Joyce A. Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune & Black Women’s Political Activism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), pp. 181, 192-194.

<sup>13</sup> “Telefact,” Vol. 8, No. 1, January 1950, p. 5. Wilhelmina Adams Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts and Archives Division.



in the United States committed itself to building bridges with women's organizations around the world and put human rights among its highest priorities.

The NCNW maintained an observer at the United Nations. In 1955, Marian Croson assumed that position. Through her monthly column in the organization's newsletter, Croson kept the council's membership abreast of African people's struggles for independence. In her March 1955 column Croson noted,

Over 300 petitions have been received at the United Nations from natives of various Trust Territories in Africa. The petitioners have not spared the pen in describing their needs, and the injustices they suffer. [T]he visiting missions, *call things the way they see them* much to the discomfort, and dislike of the powers that be, "or used to be" now that Administering Authorities are responsible to the United Nations towards self-government.<sup>14</sup>

Croson tied those struggles and racial oppression across the Atlantic to African Americans' experiences in the United States. She attacked the British colonial powers in Tanganyika who claimed that "African [s]elf-government may take anywhere up to 99 years [because] natives are not nearly ready yet." She underscored the all-too-familiar features of racist power dynamics. "As I listen in these subtle stormy sessions," she wrote, "I recognize the same old refrain echoed in defense of segregation here at home. 'Not ready yet, it will take many, many years.' In the meantime, 8 million natives being governed by less than one per cent non-natives in Tanganyika are becoming impatient. Suffering, injustice, poverty and disease plus illiteracy, will bring more petitions and

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<sup>14</sup> "Telefact," March, 1955, p. 5 "With the United Nations," by Marian Croson. Wilhelmina Adams Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, Schomburg (emphasis in the original).

visiting missions.”<sup>15</sup> She outlined the abuses of colonial power along racial lines and discrimination in the States. Her constant updates kept 800,000 members of the National Council of Negro Women fully informed of race-based abuses on an international scale; she urged them to take action.

The National Council of Negro Women understood that the battle for human rights included more than civil rights. They exploited the fact that the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration for Human Rights established both the legal grounds for women’s equality with men and the language to fight for it. These documents reaffirmed “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, [and] in the equal rights of men and women,” and they did so “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”<sup>16</sup>

As the Cold War tensions escalated in the early 1950s, Mary McLeod Bethune wrote an editorial in the *New York Age* urging women of the world to unite for peace. She declared that, “[t]he influence of the women ... can well be the turning point in the most decisive period of threatened war our world has ever experienced.” She went on,

If the [women’s] groups could come together in a united effort their combined intelligence and spirit and power would exert such an influence on international thinking that bombs and shells and all the devastating implements of war together with the very spirit of war itself would

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<sup>15</sup> “Telefact,” March, 1955, p. 5 “With the United Nations,” by Marian Croson. Wilhelmina Adams Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, Schomburg.

<sup>16</sup> Preamble to the *Charter of the United Nations*, See also Articles 13, 55 and 76 and *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948, Article 2.

disappear from the earth. A powerful spirit of peace and productivity of peace would envelop our world.<sup>17</sup>

For the moment, Bethune disregarded the economic disparities and racial hierarchy among women and instead focused on an idealized sisterhood that portrayed women as morally superior and placed upon them the potential for establishing world peace. It is unclear whether Bethune went beyond the editorial to forge relationships across the color line in the United States or across the ethnic divide with women in Africa to try to implement her vision.

In her August 1955 update from the U.N., Marian Croson reported on the annual meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women. The Economic Security Council had established these annual meetings in 1946 to assess and promote women's human rights. By the early 1950s, the Commission on the Status of Women had created a new tool with which women could fight for political rights, the Convention on the Political Rights of Women which the General Assembly ratified.<sup>18</sup> Croson wrote that Minerva Bernadino of the Dominican Republic and chair of the Commission asserted that the Convention on the Political Rights of Women was "the most significant instrument ever signed under the aegis of the United Nations."<sup>19</sup>

Croson highlighted rights that women had been guaranteed by the United Nations by 1955: "Women have equal rights to those of men without discrimination – *Equal pay*

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<sup>17</sup> *New York Age*, October 10, 1953, 10.

<sup>18</sup> *Convention on the Political Rights of Women* (GA Res. 640 (VII), 20 December 1952, Entered into force 7 July 1954), Articles 1, 2, 3.



*for equal work – Equal rights in education – Equal political rights and Equal rights in marriage and divorce.*<sup>20</sup> The legal basis for women's political equality was universally established, but the Convention on the Political Rights of Women still had to go through lengthy ratification procedures in all signatory nations. Women would have to launch a comprehensive campaign before their legally established equality, which was guaranteed by the U.N. Charter and subsequent documents, was actually translated into practice.

Croson worried aloud that the gains of the Commission were insufficient and fragile. “[M]uch remains to be done by the women themselves to safeguard rights already secured,” she warned. And there was still much more to fight for. At the same time she was optimistic because women had a new way to pursue equality. “Never have women had more hope in attaining their rights,” she argued, “because today the women of the world have a powerful platform from which to make their voices heard in all lands – THE UNITED NATIONS”<sup>21</sup> Like many other African American women in New York and across the nation, Croson was strategic in her advocacy for equality. She thought broadly, even internationally, about human rights.

In the United States, an equal rights amendment made little headway throughout the 1950s even though a weakened version was passed by the U.S. Senate in 1950 and

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<sup>19</sup> “Telefact,” August, 1955, p. 3. Wilhelmina Adams Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, Schomburg. (Emphasis in the original) See also *Charter of the United Nations* and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

<sup>20</sup> “Telefact,” August, 1955, p. 3. Wilhelmina Adams Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, Schomburg. (Emphasis in the original) See also *Charter of the United Nations* and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

<sup>21</sup> “Telefact,” August, 1955. Wilhelmina Adams Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, Schomburg.

1953.<sup>22</sup> Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party, the force behind the ERA since 1921, apparently had no connection to the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women and did not consider using the U.N. as a wedge for the ERA into American legislation.

On the other hand, the NCNW amplified the U.N.'s establishment of universal gender equality and urged women to use the U.N. to fight for it. But the organization was unable to translate this awareness of the U.N.'s potential into concrete economic or political gains for women. Nor was it clear that they tried or even considered building an international or domestic women's coalition to advocate women's rights on those grounds. The international body had outlined lofty ideals. But compliance was voluntary and the challenge remained to encourage signatory nations to comply with the spirit of the charters and declarations. In the mid-1950s, the NCNW articulated the idea, but that was not nearly enough to launch a movement.

#### *New York City- The World's Gateway to America*

New York served as a particularly rich place to make contact with visitors from Africa and to learn about the global dimensions of oppression and resistance.<sup>23</sup>

Organization and church leaders continuously held meetings and rallies to inform local black communities about racial struggles for equality around the world. National women's organizations like the NCNW and the Delta Sigma Theta sorority, their local

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<sup>22</sup> Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 63.

<sup>23</sup> For a history of African students coming to the United States, see Richard David Ralston, "A Second Middle Passage: African Student Sojourns in the United States

affiliates, as well as individual women forged relationships with women from Africa, building cultural and educational bridges across the ocean.

In 1950, Ada B. Jackson moderated the Brooklyn Council of Negro Women's forum held in honor of United Nations Week. Women wrote poetry and hymns for the occasion, stressing "one world" ideals. And because of its proximity to the U.N., the group was able to host Dr. Kallaballa, one of the African representatives to the U.N., who gave the closing talk.<sup>24</sup>

Many black women's sororities also incorporated international educational components into their annual programs. The New York branch of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority invited four African women who were studying in the United States to speak on the topic "New Horizons for Women." Wede Jones of Liberia, and Ada Arnadl, Gladys Shajobi and Nebuwa Nwozo Ojji of Nigeria told their hosts about education, family relations and health care in their respective countries, and they drew comparisons with what they found in the States.<sup>25</sup>

The national division of the NCNW also hosted women from a number of African countries to educate the membership. The annual convention in 1954 featured a panel on "Women United To Understand and Help the Peoples of Africa." Speakers came from six African countries and included Nigerian Flora Azikiwe, wife of the future president of Nigeria. The editor of *Telefact* remarked that the workshop was "a thrilling introduction to what we hope may be a continuing interest in the vast continent." The

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During the Colonial Period and Their Influence Upon the Character of African Leadership," Ph. Diss. UCLA, 1972.

<sup>24</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, October 14, 1950, B1.



organization wanted to “represent a strong backlog of life-giving moral support to Africans in their thrust for freedom,” even as they were engaged in civil rights activities at home.<sup>26</sup>

But times had changed between 1945, when international labor organizing and pan-Africanist activism promised real changes to the political economies of African colonies and the United States, and 1954, the height of the Cold War. Despite the fact that Mary McLeod Bethune had belonged to the Council of African Affairs, a comparatively progressive pan-Africanist organization in the mid-1940s, she did not encourage the kind of coalition-building she and other anti-colonialists had been a part of in the 1940s.<sup>27</sup> Although the NCNW expressed a commitment to building relationships across continents with “women of darker races,” the workshop seemed less an equal exchange of resources and ideas, than an opportunity for a kind of cross-cultural uplift, particularly given the panel’s emphasis on “help” for Africa.

It is hard to know if there was an open dialogue about the comparative workings of white racism and colonialism. Moreover, the convention minutes did not outline strategies beyond moral support. They proposed no methods for pursuing civil and political rights, which African Americans in the South were on the brink of fighting for through mass protest movements. They did not introduce the use of the Declaration on

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<sup>25</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, March 22, 1952, 8.

<sup>26</sup> “Telefact,” November-December, 1954, “Highlight Review – 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention,” p. 4. Wilhelmina Adams Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, Schomburg.

<sup>27</sup> See Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*, for a full discussion of the anti-colonial politics of the 1940s and their ultimate demise which came in large part with the onset of the Cold War.

Human Rights as a justification for women's universal rights. But with many NCNW members in the South afraid of losing their jobs for any kinds of civil rights activity, the limits for any kind of progressive action were clear.

In the mid-1950s, the United States Department of State considerably curtailed the NCNW's international visitor program. Yet the women tried to keep the channels of connection open, hosting women from Europe, Asia, West Africa and the Caribbean. Meetings were conducted, however, in cooperation with the State Department, which carefully monitored cross-cultural exchanges.<sup>28</sup> High-level visitors like Mabel Dove, a Ghanaian legislator, Yolette Leconte, wife of Haitian president Paul Magloire, and Mrs. Padmore, wife of the Ambassador of Liberia were formally entertained with teas and luncheons. The NCNW did not encourage activism based on women's universally guaranteed rights, but it did enable women from around the world to meet African American female leaders and it shared knowledge of black women's position in the United States.<sup>29</sup>

Other groups and individuals sponsored similar efforts at international understanding. In Harlem, the Manhattan Intercultural Committee was founded to "promote world understanding and to improve relations among all people." In 1954 it

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<sup>28</sup> See Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line* for a discussion of the relationship between U.S. foreign policy and civil rights activities. Neither Dudziak's, Borstelmann's work, nor Azza Salama Layton, *International Politics and Civil Rights Policies in the United States, 1941-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) deal with the role of women in any significant way.

<sup>29</sup> *National Council of Negro Women Report, 1953-1957*, pp. 43-44. Wilhelmina Adams Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, Schomburg.

hosted a group of students from the Gold Coast and Nigeria. The students met with community residents and other invited guests from Israel, Iran and India. The *New York Amsterdam News* reported on the gathering, and highlighted the attention given to each group's respective cultural backgrounds as well as national problems.<sup>30</sup> But as with the sororities and other women's organizations, the committee failed to take the step beyond educating the community, which would have been to advocate activism based on the ideals it espoused.

Harlem local Regina Andrews, the first African American appointed to a supervisory position in the New York City public library system, created programs to learn about and share knowledge of peoples overseas, particularly on the continent of Africa. Presiding over an inter-racial staff, Andrews used the library to educate and build community relations among African Americans, Jews, Puerto Ricans and Irish patrons.<sup>31</sup> Historian Stephanie Shaw has argued that black female librarians were hired by the city administrators in part "to relieve, mask, or eliminate the stress generated by tension-filled interracial public encounters."<sup>32</sup>

Andrews organized "Family Night at the Library," which started as a series of lectures and discussions in the early 1950s. As both the civil rights movement and the African liberation struggles gained momentum, Andrews redesigned the programs "so

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<sup>30</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 20, 1954, 5.

<sup>31</sup> "Crusading Librarian" by M.D. Cartwright, *Amsterdam News*, August 11, 1956, 14. Schomburg Microfilm Collection on Regina Andrews.

<sup>32</sup> Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Out to Be and To Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996),



that the local community might be informed on matters concerning the land and people of the African Continent.” In addition, Andrews’s programs enabled local residents to establish “excellent contacts with students, dignitaries and visitors from emerging African nations.”<sup>33</sup> Patrons benefited from the presentations and wrote Andrews with words of appreciation. “Your talk on South Africa was so provocative and stimulating,” said one.<sup>34</sup>

In the latter half of the 1950s, the American civil rights movement had gained significant momentum after the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Little Rock standoff. Across Africa, liberation struggles were also reaching a climax and in 1957 Ghana became the first to throw off Europe’s colonial control.<sup>35</sup> The Bronx Council of Negro Women (a local NCNW chapter) watched from afar the independence efforts overseas even as they attended to the national struggle for racial equality in the States. They advocated “better understanding among peoples” and sponsored events to educate their membership.<sup>36</sup> Shortly after Ghana gained its independence, they invited Seth Kobla Anthony, the Chargé d’Affairs of the Ghanaian Embassy, to speak at the fall meeting. In

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194. See also pages 171 and 209 for a discussion of the important community development role that black women played as librarians.

<sup>33</sup> Fundraising Letter from Olive Abbott to Vivian Beauman of Links, Inc., October 12, 1963, Regina Andrews Manuscript Collection, Box 2, Schomburg.

<sup>34</sup> Letter from Alice McQuaid to Regina Andrews, June 10, 1954, Regina Andrews Manuscript Collection, Box 2, Schomburg.

<sup>35</sup> For a historical perspective on African peoples’ struggles against colonial rule, see: A. Adu Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); George Shepperson and Thomas Price, *Independent African: John Chilembwe and the Origins, Setting and Significance of the Nyasaland Native Rising of 1915* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1958, 1987).

June 1957, Ghana had become the eighty-first member nation of the United Nations and

Anthony represented the new country there.<sup>37</sup>

Anna Arnold Hedgeman, assistant to Mayor Robert Wagner Jr. of New York City, addressed women's groups around the country on "The Role of Negro Women in World Affairs." "You are the most significant people in the world today," she told a group of college women. "You have a job to do. Let's get up and get busy."<sup>38</sup> Hedgeman encouraged her audiences to make contributions as leaders in the same way that women in India, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East were making. She wanted black women to be a part of the international movements for women's equality and leadership.

At the same time, she did not ignore the challenges that persistent racism raised, but instead addressed them directly. She encouraged the young college women to take pride in their race, "We must learn new respect for the fact and beauty of color. Young people must develop a sense of kinship with Negro History."<sup>39</sup> Pride, history, leadership – these were the elements Hedgeman stressed to the young women - not just for local or national justice and equality, but for international goals as well.

While these were not dramatic actions, they were important indications of a broad vision of freedom and equality that New York City's African American women embraced and pursued. Besides, in the midst of the Cold War, the organizations could not have pursued more aggressive strategies without inviting unwanted attention from

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<sup>36</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, October 5, 1957, 8.

<sup>37</sup> See *New York Times*, June 25, 1957.

<sup>38</sup> "Senior Coeds Challenged by Mrs. Anna Hedgeman," *Journal and Guide*, May 24, 1958, 5. Anna Arnold Hedgeman clipping file, Schomburg Manuscript Collection.

the U.S. government or white supremacist communities resisting the civil rights movement.

### *Human Rights Advocates Abroad in the Cold War Context*

Organizations and sororities were vital to fostering cultural and educational exchanges. But in addition to the efforts made on the domestic front, by the early 1950s African American women began to travel in official capacities as representatives of their organizations and the United States government. They actively pursued broad human rights agendas even as they embraced an American democracy that still denied most African Americans in the South their fundamental right to vote.

Edith Sampson, a Chicago lawyer and NCNW board member, was appointed by President Truman to serve as an alternate on the United States delegation to the U.N. General Assembly. The first African American to officially sit with the delegation, Sampson's appointment was met with excitement from many. A veritable who's who of Harlem -- Borough President Robert Wagner, Jr., Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Wilhelmina Adams, Charles and Bessie Buchanan and *Amsterdam News* columnist Gerri Major -- were among the 400 guests who feted the new U.N. appointee.<sup>40</sup>

Others were less enthusiastic. An *Amsterdam News* article suggested that Sampson's appointment "was made in an attempt to discredit Soviet propaganda

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, October 21, 1950, 4.



regarding the treatment of Negroes in the United States.”<sup>41</sup> But Channing Tobias, director of the Phelps Stokes Fund, came to Sampson’s defense. He condemned the assumption that Sampson’s appointment was made “to take the sting out of Russian propaganda and instead saw it as “a realization that the Negro point of view was needed.”<sup>42</sup>

In the Cold War era, U.S. foreign policy advisors were consumed with how domestic problems were interpreted by international newspapers and politicians. Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson warned President Truman that “the existence of discrimination against minority groups in this country has an adverse effect upon our relations with other countries.”<sup>43</sup> The administration tried to manage the issue any way it could, which included employing African Americans to speak overseas about American democracy.<sup>44</sup> As historian Tom Borstelmann argues, one of Truman’s most effective ways to challenge foreign criticism of U.S. racism “was to send more conservative African Americans abroad to tell a different story than a Du Bois or a Robeson.”<sup>45</sup> Sampson and Max Yergan, formerly of the Council of African Affairs, were an important part of President Truman’s Cold War policy to challenge the allegations of U.S. racism heard abroad.

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<sup>41</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, September 23, 1950, 2.

<sup>42</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, October 21, 1950, 2.

<sup>43</sup> *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the U.S. President’s Committee on Civil Rights* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1947), 146.

<sup>44</sup> See for example Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, *passim*, and Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 74-84, Michael Krenn, *Black Diplomacy: African Americans and the State Department, 1945-1969* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 5.

Sampson's participation in overseas programs supported by the State Department has generated debate among historians, with some relatively sympathetic to her activities, and others viewing her as a government "stooge."<sup>46</sup> There is certainly some basis for skepticism about her activities. In 1949, she had been a participant in the "World Town Hall Seminar," a pro-American speaking tour created by radio host George Denny. The tour was not funded directly by the U.S. government, but it was clearly encouraged by the State Department. Its purpose was to counter charges by such African Americans as Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Josephine Baker that discrimination in the United States was on par with colonial oppression overseas. NCNW president Dorothy Height's mention of Sampson in her oral history interview suggests, in contrast, that Sampson went on the world tour because Mary McLeod Bethune assigned her to it.<sup>47</sup>

Sampson seemed undeterred by the critics. She maintained a very busy speaking schedule at home as well as overseas. She used the podium to speak positively about U.S. democracy, but she also challenged the government and her audiences to do more to advance civil rights at home. At a presentation in 1950, Sampson claimed that the United States' failure to "grant full equality and full freedom to some of our citizens

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<sup>45</sup> Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>46</sup> For a generally sympathetic treatment of Edith Sampson's overseas work, see: and Helen Laville and Scott Lucas, "The American Way: Edith Sampson, the NAACP, and African American Identity in the Cold War," in *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Fall 1996). For more critical assessments of Sampson's international activities, see: Gerald Horne's, Penny Von Eschen's and Brenda Gayle Plummer's commentaries in the same issue.

<sup>47</sup> Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, Vol. 5, Dorothy Height Interview, 138.

undermines our integrity in the United Nations and abroad.” In one sentence she simultaneously encouraged a change in U.S. domestic policy on race relations and gave a Cold War justification for doing so. She suggested that the nation conduct a self-evaluation on the annual anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Human Rights to “take inventory on the question of ‘Rights’ here in our own backyards.”<sup>48</sup> But she stopped short of calling for any direct government intervention for civil rights. Instead, she argued that individuals through their everyday activities would ultimately eliminate discrimination. She was very much a Cold War liberal who fought for behavioral rather than structural changes to the political and economic systems to redress racism and inequality. Her critics as well as her enthusiasts could find something in Edith Sampson’s speeches to justify their appraisals.

A year later, Sampson gave a presentation to the National Council of Jewish Women in New York. She assailed racial discrimination and underscored its capacity to deny individuals their full potential. She remarked that “[c]olored peoples, who are the majority of the earth’s population, are on the march,” and suggested a universality to the colonial liberation struggles and the civil rights movement. For Sampson, the United Nations was an imperfect vehicle to bring about equality, but it was the best available. Urging her audience to pressure the United States and the United Nations to back their lofty words with concrete actions, she closed her speech with a plea: “The mangled,

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<sup>48</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 11, 1950, 18.



battered word which I believe we must recondition and reinscribe is 'Freedom'...the foundation of peace."<sup>49</sup>

The tension between Cold War liberals and those critical of U.S. foreign policy boiled over in 1952. The world renowned performer Josephine Baker had made her home in Paris after World War II and rarely visited the United States, claiming that she felt much more at home in France. Baker opposed U.S. foreign and domestic policy, and during her tours in Europe and later in South America, she heaped opprobrium on the United States.<sup>50</sup> Edith Sampson refused to let Baker's accusations go unchallenged. She lashed out, insisting that, "[Baker] should stop and consider what France is doing to some 45,000,000 Negroes in its colonies. French colonialism is a blot on the world conscience... These people suffer much more than Miss Baker in Atlanta or New York." Sampson wanted to make sure Baker, and any Baker sympathizers got her point, so she went on, "When France tries to do one-tenth as much for its colonials, I will be willing to listen to Josephine Baker's complaints."<sup>51</sup> Sampson played a role as a vocal advocate of the U.S. policies that the State Department could only rejoice in. However even this Cold War liberal was unwelcome in the Republican fold. When Eisenhower took office, Sampson lost her post.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 3, 1951.

<sup>50</sup> Dudziak, "Josephine Baker, Racial Protest, and the Cold War," pp. 543-570.

<sup>51</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, January 5, 1952, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Krenn, *Black Diplomacy*, 40. See also *New York Amsterdam News*, September 20, 1952, p. 18 and February 28, 1953, 1.

Most other African American women who traveled overseas were less obviously part of the U.S. government's propaganda war, but they were still clearly sympathetic Cold War liberals. Their travels should be evaluated in the complicated context where black women were fighting for racial equality, women's rights, and also American democracy. India, one of the first countries to shake free of colonialism's grip, was an important destination for a number of black women, including New York politico Anna Arnold Hedgeman.

### *Travels to India*

India hosted the Sixth International Conference on Social Work in December 1952. United States Ambassador to India, Chester Bowles, a former New Dealer, was deeply worried about India's socialist tendencies and the possibility that it would fall into the Soviet sphere of influence in the Cold War struggle.<sup>53</sup> His concern was obvious in a 1952 letter he wrote to his friend Donald Montgomery, legislative representative of UAW/CIO: "As the situation in Europe becomes more stable we can count on increasing pressure by the communists throughout Asia. American assistance aimed at strengthening India's economy and its democracy can have a vitally important effect in keeping this part of the world free."<sup>54</sup> Bowles saw India as a potential ally and he

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<sup>53</sup> Chester Bowles, *Ambassador's Report* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), *passim*.

<sup>54</sup> Letter from Bowles to Donald Montgomery, April 7, 1952. Chester Bowles Papers, Box 89, F 137, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University (from here on, referred to as SML).

wanted to seize the opportunity to make a positive impression and build a solid friendship with the world's largest democracy.

He and his wife Steb pressured Jane Hoey of the Social Security Administration to send well-informed participants to the conference. Steb wrote Hoey, "It is quite likely that ... the Soviet Union and China will have delegates here and this is an additional reason for us to have a good representation from the United States."<sup>55</sup> The Ambassador followed up after his wife's letter. He urged a strong delegation to the Social Work Conference to challenge communist attendees. Moreover, he felt the inclusion of African Americans was vital.<sup>56</sup>

Bowles specifically requested Lester Granger, president of the National Urban League to head the delegation, arguing that it was "important that we have at least one or possibly two Negroes as members of our official group." And following up on Montgomery's recommendation, he asked that Anna Arnold Hedgeman be included on the delegation.<sup>57</sup> Bowles spelled out his concerns in his letter to Hoey,

[W]e need a strong official group who will ... have the ability and understanding not only to make a favorable impression on the conference and on the Indian people, but also to handle successfully whatever tough situations may be thrown at them by Communist delegates.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Letter to Jane Hoey, Social Security Administration, Federal Security Agency (where Anna Arnold Hedgeman works) from Steb (Mrs. Chester) Bowles, May 22, 1952. Bowles Papers, Box 208, F 124 (SML).

<sup>56</sup> Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*; Michael Krenn, *Black Diplomacy*.

<sup>57</sup> Hedgeman, who lived in Washington from 1948-1953, was friends with Montgomery and his wife Mary Taylor. Taylor, like Hedgeman, worked with the FSA and was the Director of the Division of Reports. See Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 99.

<sup>58</sup> Letter from Chester Bowles to Jane Hoey, July 23, 1952, (SML).



After overcoming difficulties in securing her travel visa, Hedgeman spent three months in India, first as part of the social work delegation, and afterward lecturing, meeting students and studying.<sup>59</sup> In her autobiography, *The Trumpet Sounds*, Hedgeman tried to draw connections between the poverty in India and that of the American South. In doing so, she implied that both were the result of racialized oppression. She wrote that as she rode into New Delhi on her first night,

The odor of burning wood and burning fat had gripped my nostrils and in that second I was back in Mississippi thirty years before. I knew then that I would have some basic understanding of this India, for burning wood and burning fat had long since been for me symbols of poverty and eroded soil, of hunger and exploitation and of the resultant human misery.<sup>60</sup>

During her study tour, Hedgeman and Lester Granger, who headed the 80-member U.S. delegation, talked with leaders of the Ford Foundation and the embassy staff about economic support for Indian development, community projects and labor. And they met with foreign service officers Clifford Manshardt and Teg Grondahl to discuss the troubling representations of “the Negro in America” in material distributed by the United States Information Service that glossed over racial discrimination.<sup>61</sup>

Although in her autobiography Hedgeman suggested a universality to racialized oppression, in fact her class status and professional experience made it difficult for her and others from the West to make meaningful, sustained connections to poor people in

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<sup>59</sup> Letter from Don Montgomery to Chester Bowles, November 24, 1952. Bowles Papers, Box 89, F 137 (SML). See also Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 100 and *New York Amsterdam News*, January 9, 1954, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 100.

India. In her report to the Ambassador, Hedgeman acknowledged the challenges of working across cultural divides: "Here for the first time, [I] realized fully the intensity of the belief by many delegates that western social work methods are not applicable or easily adaptable to the needs of the underdeveloped areas."<sup>62</sup>

The Ambassador recognized Hedgeman's contributions to his India program. He wrote to their mutual friend, Donald Montgomery the night after her departure, "Ann Hedgeman ... lived up to all the wonderful things which you and Mary (Taylor) said about her, and it is impossible to exaggerate the contribution which she has made."<sup>63</sup>

For Bowles, having articulate African American leaders in India was important. That Hedgeman was an active liberal Democrat committed to working within the system and willing to speak positively about it in India was invaluable.

After Eisenhower took office, Hedgeman left Washington and settled back in her adopted hometown of New York City. She immediately became involved in Harlem politics and in 1954, became the first African American in Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr.'s administration. Among her responsibilities, Hedgeman served as the Mayor's advisor and importantly, as a representative to the United Nations.<sup>64</sup> She forged connections

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<sup>61</sup> "Report of Mrs. Anna Arnold Hedgeman" to Chester Bowles. Bowles Papers, Box 111, Folder 499, (SML).

<sup>62</sup> "Report of Mrs. Anna Arnold Hedgeman" to Chester Bowles. Bowles Papers, Box 111, Folder 499, (SML).

<sup>63</sup> Letter from Bowles to Montgomery, February 27, 1953. Bowles Papers, Box 89, F 137, (SML).

<sup>64</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, June 25, 1955, 3. See also Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr., Subject Files, 1954-1965, United Nations, 1955, Box 305, Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

with many who passed through the city on their way to and from the U.N. One of the contacts she made led to a trip to West Africa in 1960.

*The Search for Connection – Black Women’s Travels to Africa*

Evelyn Amarteifio was head of the Women’s Federation of Ghana. On assignment in New York City, she met with Hedgeman and was impressed by her political activism and status within the city administration. After Ghana’s independence, Amarteifio organized the first Conference of the Women of Africa and of African Descent which was held in Accra, Ghana. She called upon her former New York City contact, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, to deliver the keynote address.

Hedgeman was pleased to accept. Ghana had made history just three years earlier by gaining independence from the British. The conference brought together women from all over the world.<sup>65</sup> Historian James Meriwether noted that “as [President Kwame] Nkrumah and Ghana promoted transatlantic connections, contemporary Africa soared not only as a source of political encouragement but also of social and cultural inspiration. This process ... made Africa a cornerstone in black Americans’ self-constructions.”<sup>66</sup> Hedgeman attempted to understand her own ethnic heritage and her relationship to the continent. Her arrival in Ghana proved emotional.

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<sup>65</sup> “Dr. A. Hedgeman Leaves for Ghana,” *New York Citizen Call*, July 16, 1960, 5; Anna Arnold Hedgeman Papers, Box 8, Schomburg.

<sup>66</sup> Meriwether, 151.



“On July 13, 1960,” she wrote, “we landed at Accra. Dr. Amarteifio, accompanied by forty members of the Women’s Organization greeted me at the airport with the words, ‘Welcome home.’ It was a strangely emotional moment and there were some tears. Back in my head I was saying, ‘Is there really any memory which would make me feel of this soil?’” For Hedgeman “[t]he answer was simple and complex. I am, in a sense hard to describe, conscious of being a part of all soils.”<sup>67</sup>

Even as she struggled to understand her relationship to Africa, Hedgeman delivered her keynote address for the conference. She followed President Nkrumah to the podium and spoke to the large international group of women. She raised the issue of women in public life. “It occurs to me,” she said, “that women have always been in public life, but the men have not always known it.” To this she received enthusiastic applause. She suggested that women’s roles in the United States and in Ghana were equally undervalued, particularly their domestic work. Hedgeman went on,

[T]hrough the ages we have tended babies, taken care of the home, tried to make a place for ourselves and those we love. This, too, is public life. I said to someone here in Ghana ‘What is it that you do? Are you working?’ She said ‘No – I’m just a housewife’ and I was immediately at home because of course, in the United States, people say to me when I say ‘What are you doing?’ ‘I’m just a housewife.’... It is the housewife who carries the major responsibility for what happens to all of us. She may come in tired from her work, from the fields, come in tired from the factory in the great industrial nations, come in weary from long travel on

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<sup>67</sup> Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 135. See also Meriwether, *Proudly We Can be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 155, who cited Richard Wright’s similar, complicated response. “But I could not feel anything African about myself, and I wondered, ‘What does being *African* mean?’” See also Countee Cullen’s poem “Heritage” in which he explored the question, “What is Africa to me?”

buses and subways, but she always comes back to the necessity of building a home.<sup>68</sup>

Hedgeman acknowledged that work and family were integral parts of most women's lives. But ultimately she valorized women's domestic roles even as recognized the many responsibilities women maintained in both African countries and the United States.

In her closing remarks, Hedgeman called on "every single woman, whether she be in a factory or back in the bush somewhere" to join in the struggles for freedom and equality. She noted that "everybody cannot be in the top power structure, but every woman can be, as she takes care of her children, as she inspires them, ... as much a part of this marching movement to victory as anybody else."<sup>69</sup> Hedgeman did not call for better wages, or universal child care. She did not even argue for more women in public life. Instead she directed them to value their motherhood as part of the freedom struggle. She embraced the gendered status quo and urged respect for women's place in the traditional family. An opportunity was lost to advocate for a cross-cultural political coalition or to pursue women's advancement using the Declaration of Human Rights.

Like so many women in public life before her, Hedgeman comfortably advocated a position for other women that she herself did not hold, that of mother. She had no children, and had committed herself to activism. She was not a political progressive now, nor had she ever been. She was a Cold War liberal Democrat, fully committed to

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<sup>68</sup> "Women in Public Life" Address by Dr. Anna Arnold Hedgeman at the opening session of Conference of Women of Africa and African Descent, Accra, Ghana. July 18, 1960. Anna Arnold Hedgeman Manuscript Collection, Schomburg, Box 8A.

<sup>69</sup> "Women in Public Life" Address by Dr. Anna Arnold Hedgeman.

the as yet unfulfilled promises of American-style democracy. Despite her own position of leadership, she clearly reinforced traditional gender roles.

One of the attendees at the same conference in Ghana was Jeanne Noble, president of the Delta Sigma Theta academic and social service sorority (1958-1963).<sup>70</sup> Noble was born in Albany, Georgia, attended Howard University, and earned her Ph.D from Columbia University. While studying in New York, she had gained important organizational experience working with her mentor, Dorothy Height, who became president of the NCNW in 1957. Paula Giddings, a historian of the Deltas, suggests that “under Noble’s administration greater ties with Africa and African women were established.”<sup>71</sup>

The Delta Sigma Theta sorority reflected the growing influence that post-independence Ghana and President Nkrumah were having in the United States. The sorority carefully followed the African liberation struggles and conducted fund-raising events to help the newly freed peoples. They established a maternity wing at a hospital in Kenya and sent materials for women and children to various places across the continent.<sup>72</sup> They also sponsored a young political leader of the Tanganyika African

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<sup>70</sup> Oral Interview with Dr. Jeanne Noble, August 15, 2000, New York City.

<sup>71</sup> Paula Giddings, *In Search of Sisterhood: Delta Sigma Theta and the Challenge of the Black Sorority Movement* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1988), 241.

<sup>72</sup> Delta Bulletin, New York Alumnae Chapter, June 1961, p. 1. Delta Sigma Theta Microfiche, Schomburg.



National Union, Lucy Lameck, to “observe women’s organizations with the view of helping those in her nation toward social and economic development.”<sup>73</sup>

The sorors personalized their relationships with African women. They reached out to individual female students and suggested that “the challenge of cultural exchange on a highly individual basis will have many benefits - to us as well as to the Africans.” Understanding themselves as possible mentors, the Deltas seized what they saw as an opportunity to “spearhead what may grow into an integral part of their [African women’s] training here.”<sup>74</sup> They were moderate, middle and upper-class women who approached their consciousness-raising and good will efforts through non-governmental, non-political channels, one at a time.

Not only did the Deltas host international visitors at their meetings, but New York sorors set off to do volunteer work in Africa, as Shirley Barnes did with Operation Crossroads Africa in Togoland.<sup>75</sup> Upon her return, Barnes gave a full report to the Deltas, sharing both her personal experiences and knowledge of a world the New York women were eager to learn about. With an appetite whetted by her international experiences, Barnes went on to work for the Ford Foundation in Congo-Kinshasa in the early 1960s and, after years of public service with the State Department, became Ambassador to Madagascar under President Clinton.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Delta Bulletin, New York Alumnae Chapter, April 1961, p. 1.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> “Shirley Elizabeth Barnes, United States Ambassador to the Republic of Madagascar, Information Sheet from the U.S. Embassy in Madagascar”; Noro Razafimandimby,

Jeanne Noble returned to Africa three years after the Ghanaian Conference of the Women of Africa and of African Descent with a large Delta contingent in tow. She recalled, "When it came to our fiftieth anniversary, which was in 1963, we came up with the idea that we'll do a study tour to Africa."<sup>77</sup> The group started in Senegal, and then went to the Sudan, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and Liberia. While traveling, the sorority women had access to the highest levels of African leadership, meeting both Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya and Nnamdi Azikiwe, the President of Nigeria. Noble claimed that the sorority made easy connections with women's groups everywhere they went. Yet class differences most likely circumscribed their connections to working-class and rural women. Nonetheless, the sorority women marked their own anniversary celebration with a bridge-building cultural and educational tour.

At a time of tremendous upheaval in race relations around the world, the Delta women wanted to learn more about Africa for themselves and for those who were waging the battles for civil rights in their own communities. Like the NCNW, they were not publicly critical of American foreign policy, Cold War struggles or African liberation. Yet their connection to Africa was important to them and it continued to grow. It gave the sorority women a sense of cultural heritage, tradition, and an international awareness.

New York City women's activism in Africa was conducted throughout the Cold War era when Africa became an ideological battleground. In 1960, a year that saw seventeen African countries gain their independence, Dorothy Height, president of the NCNW, participated in a four-month African tour with the Committee on

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"Femme du Mois: Shirley Elizabeth Barnes: Un Exemple de Réussite Des Minorités" in *Revue de l'Océan Indien Madagascar (ROI)* No. 193 – Juillet 1999, pp. 16-23.

Correspondence.<sup>78</sup> Height had already made a number of trips overseas in her leadership capacity. Like Anna Arnold Hedgeman, she had traveled to India during Chester Bowles' tenure as Ambassador to teach social work and met with Indira Gandhi. And like Edith Sampson, she participated in one of George Denny's "World Town Meeting" tours in 1959 to combat anti-American sentiments in South America on the heels of Vice President Nixon's unsuccessful trip there.<sup>79</sup>

While in West Africa, Height met with numerous groups to study the training needs of women's organizations.<sup>80</sup> In order for American women to be useful to the African women's organizations, Height felt that they had to take up residence in the region. The Committee of Correspondence concurred and sent a representative to live in West Africa.

Height's experience and national prominence resulted in a consulting position with the State Department, working for Mennen Williams, Under-Secretary of State for African and former Michigan Governor.<sup>81</sup> That the Committee of Correspondence was allegedly heavily funded by the CIA was a point Dorothy Height failed to acknowledge in her oral history. If she knew about it, it obviously did not keep her from participating

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<sup>77</sup> Interview with Dr. Jeanne Noble, August 15, 2000, New York City.

<sup>78</sup> The Committee of Correspondence was started by Anna Lord Strauss, president of the League of Women Voters (1944-1950) and Rose Parsons.

<sup>79</sup> Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, Vol. 5, Dorothy Height Interview, pp. 123-139.

<sup>80</sup> The group visited Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia. According to Height, they visited the Red Cross, the YWCA, and local organizations including women's market organizations. Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, Vol. 5, Dorothy Height Interview, pp. 140-141.



in the Committee's work or taking a consulting position with the U.S. Department of State a short time after her return.<sup>82</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Although a number of historical works have documented the relationships between peoples of Africa and of African descent in the postwar period, few have focused on women. Those that do have, mainly concentrated on women who were critical of American foreign policy. Local and national leaders like Edith Sampson, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Dorothy Height, and Jeanne Noble were not progressive activists, but Cold War liberals. They did not articulate a message of universal sisterhood or global solidarity in response to African colonialism and racial discrimination in the United States. They even refused to aggressively criticize the U.S. government's role in perpetuating racism even as they were completely involved in civil rights activities.

But they felt a unique connection to women in Africa and they acted on that. They also used the United Nations to advocate for racial equality and freedom. They sponsored visits from women of many African countries. For those who lived in New York, they seized the opportunities generated by the continuous flow of visitors to the United Nations. And they got on planes themselves and traveled to Africa, Asia and Europe.

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<sup>81</sup> Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, Vol. 5, Dorothy Height Interview, 143.

<sup>82</sup> *North American Congress on Latin America, Who Rules Columbia? – Original 1968 Strike Edition* (New York: AACLA, 1970), 13.

These women were committed to a liberal vision of individual rights in the United States. They fought battles on a daily basis to end the scourge of racism and to improve the quality of life and dignity in their communities and for the larger national effort. They also demonstrated a broad understanding of gender equality that led them to actively pursue relationships with women in an international context. In this regard, they demonstrated a striking degree of ingenuity and strategic vision.

Their actions may not have led to new treaties or domestic policies. But they were important insofar as they demonstrated the extraordinary breadth of awareness and concern African American women displayed in the struggles for racial and gender equality. They used whatever tools they could to advance their goals – to bring equality, justice and human dignity to their lives, their communities and even the world.

## CHAPTER 5

### SHIRLEY CHISHOLM AND THE ANATOMY OF A POLITICAL INSURGENCY

“I will fight until I can’t fight anymore. I don’t mind the challenge,” charged Shirley Chisholm shortly after her momentous victory over James Farmer, former head of the Congress of Racial Equality.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of her 1968 election, Chisholm, the first African American woman elected to the United States Congress, declared that the people finally “felt they had found someone who wasn’t afraid to stand up and be counted.”<sup>2</sup>

Shirley Chisholm’s career offers a good case study to examine the dynamics of a grassroots insurgency and Brooklyn politics in general. It also illuminates the ways race, gender and political party affiliation are continuously negotiated to challenge those who maintain political power. Chisholm, more than any other black woman in New York, managed to strike the balance needed to crack the wall of resistance to women’s electoral participation. She also benefited from the change in political climate that had taken place by the early 1960s.

Chisholm and others in the community believed that the formal political structure could be a vehicle for change and they worked to gain access to it. They held that any sustainable change, especially for the black community, had to originate in the state.

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<sup>1</sup> “Interview with Shirley Chisholm,” New York 1968, Sc Audio C-161, (interviewer unidentified). Part of the Schomburg Center Oral History Tape Collection.

<sup>2</sup> “Interview with Shirley Chisholm,” New York 1968, Sc Audio C-160, Part IV.



This chapter also explores how effective an insurgent political club could be in trying to reallocate resources to one of the city's and the nation's poorest urban districts.

Shirley Anita St. Hill Chisholm was born in Brooklyn to parents of Caribbean descent in 1924. With the exception of six years during the Depression which she spent at her grandmother's home in Barbados, Chisholm lived most of her life in that community. In her autobiography she wrote about growing up and the influences in her life, particularly her father's passion for knowledge and politics. Charles St. Hill was an ardent Marcus Garveyite and a shop steward in the Confectionery and Bakers International Union in Brooklyn. He and his friends would gather in the family's kitchen in the evenings to talk about politics and race relations. The young St. Hill girls laid in bed at night listening. Chisholm asserted years later that her father had "instilled a pride in ourselves and our race."<sup>3</sup>

In 1936 the St. Hill family moved from Brownsville, a largely Jewish neighborhood, to Bedford-Stuyvesant, a largely black one. As the Depression wore on, her father took a job as a laborer in a burlap bag manufacturing company. At the same time, her mother was forced to take a job across town as a domestic. Shirley and her sisters became "latch-key kids."

Chisholm attended Brooklyn College from 1942 to 1946, foregoing scholarships to Oberlin and Vassar because of boarding costs. She majored in sociology but understood that there were few professional options open to black women. "I was black," she said, "and nobody needed to draw me a diagram. I knew it would be

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<sup>3</sup> Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, 14.

teaching for me.”<sup>4</sup> In college, she developed her oratorical skills in the Debate Society. At the same time, her active membership in the Harriet Tubman Society and the Political Science Society further stimulated her racial and political consciousness. With a heightened sensitivity to racism, Chisholm noted that “in college I became angry.”<sup>5</sup> She contended that her leadership skills were beginning to attract attention and one of her professors suggested that she consider entering politics.<sup>6</sup>

She attributed her difficulties in finding work after college in part to white racism. On one particular occasion she was sent by her employment agency to a job interview in Riverdale, a relatively affluent residential neighborhood in the Bronx. On paper, she met all the qualifications, but she “knew the neighborhood was not a place that would hire blacks.” When the administrator said Chisholm’s qualifications were not what they were looking for, she responded, “No sir, you’re not looking for someone with more administrative experience. You didn’t know I was black.” After her rejection, she promised herself that “If the day would ever come that I had a platform, boy white America would never forget me.”<sup>7</sup>

After college, she made an important contact that would shape her political future. A friend introduced her to Wesley McDonald “McD.” or “Mac” Holder, a former editor of the *Amsterdam News*. Holder, like many others, wanted to alter the

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<sup>4</sup> Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, 23.

<sup>5</sup> “Interview with Shirley Chisholm,” New York 1968, Sc Audio C-160.

<sup>6</sup> “Interview with Shirley Chisholm,” New York 1968, Sc Audio C-160, Part VIII.

<sup>7</sup> “Interview with Shirley Chisholm,” New York 1968, Sc Audio C-160, Part VII.

political representation in Brooklyn. He seized the opportunity to do so in the spring of 1953.

When a judicial vacancy opened with the unexpected death of Judge Edward Wynn of the Second Municipal Court (in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn), Mayor Vincent Impellitteri had an opportunity to rectify an obvious racial inequality. To date, although Harlem could boast a number of black judges in the municipal courts, Brooklyn had none. Instead, the mayor appointed Benjamin Schor, a white judge from another part of the city to fill the position. Community leaders protested. Louis Flagg Jr., a black civic leader, lawyer, and long-standing resident of the Bedford-Stuyvesant community was well-qualified and eager for the job. Schor had the mayor's backing for Wynn's seat in the fall primary.<sup>8</sup> The *Amsterdam News* charged that Schor moved into the district with an African American family during the campaign so as appear more of a local.<sup>9</sup>

Flagg had substantial backing from a growing coterie of local professionals and activists who were well aware of the power imbalances generated by racism, sexism and political intransigence. In a direct challenge to the established Democratic machine, Louis Flagg, Wesley McD. Holder, Thomas R. Jones and Shirley Chisholm formed an ad hoc committee to get the Bedford-Stuyvesant local elected in November, 1953. The Democratic party resisted Flagg's campaign at every turn. In September, the primary

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<sup>8</sup> Carlos E. Russell, "Perspectives On Power: A Black Community Looks At Itself", n.d. unpublished manuscript from the Schomburg. Interview with Wesley McD Holder, 130. Unpublished Manuscript, Union Graduate School, Robert Beecher Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts Division; *New York Amsterdam News*, March 28, 1953, B1.



race was close, but Flagg won, beating Schor by less than 300 votes.<sup>10</sup> With help from the American Labor Party, Shirley Chisholm and the other Democratic insurgents landed an important victory and Flagg became the first African American elected to the judiciary in Brooklyn.<sup>11</sup>

For a number of middle-class residents in Bedford-Stuyvesant, there were important lessons learned from Flagg's success. Brooklyn activist Ruth Goring suggested that the insurgency helped the people of "Central Brooklyn to realize that if they marshalled their forces, they could take power and they could get into political office."<sup>12</sup> The old guard was not invincible. But the fight for better political representation was only beginning. Access to the judiciary had been expanded. The legislature, however, remained largely out of reach.

Wesley Holder, the driving force behind Flagg's victory, turned the Flagg election committee into the Bedford Stuyvesant Political League (BSPL) with Shirley Chisholm's help. The League's goal was to "bring about fuller political representation of Negroes and to secure their full participation in the social and economic life of the

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<sup>9</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, March 28, 1953, B1.

<sup>10</sup> *New York Amsterdam News* March 28, 1953, B1; September 5, 1953, B1; September 12, 1953, 17; August 22, 1953, B1[17]; August 29, 1953, 17; October 10, 1953, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Holder interview with Russell, 137; *New York Amsterdam News*, January 23, 1954, B1.

<sup>12</sup> Carlos E. Russell, "Perspectives On Power: A Black Community Looks At Itself", n.d. unpublished manuscript from the Schomburg. Interview with Ruth Goring, former President of Unity Democratic Club, 159.

community.”<sup>13</sup> The Flagg committee and its offspring, the BSPL, were insurgent organizations. Chisholm, a key member of both groups proudly claimed, “We were rebels.”<sup>14</sup> Started by local community members fed up with political neglect, the Bedford-Stuyvesant League members shared commitments to housing, jobs and community improvement with the earlier grassroots groups.<sup>15</sup> Ten years of civic, economic and political pressure finally yielded a victory. Although they trailed Harlem by years, African Americans in Brooklyn were slowly making their way onto the political map.

Chisholm’s rhetorical bravado was not fully matched by her actions, however. Even as she helped orchestrate the Flagg victory with the insurgents, she attended the meetings of the Seventeenth Assembly District club, the traditional Democratic organization. The club’s leadership was all-white (mostly Irish) and had no women.<sup>16</sup> She lamented the discrimination in the club – black people sat on one side of the room, white people on the other, all waiting to be called on by the club’s leadership who sat on the dais up front. African Americans did not feel empowered by the club according to Chisholm. She wrote that “[t]hey went because they needed help.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Holder interview with Russell, 132; Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, pp. 34-35; *New York Amsterdam News*, January 2, 1954, B1; March 20, 1954, 3.

<sup>14</sup> “Interview with Shirley Chisholm,” New York 1968, Sc Audio C-161, Part XII.

<sup>15</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, August 28, 1954, 19; January 1, 1955, 17; October 29, 1955, 23; July 21, 1956, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Jill S. Pollack, *Shirley Chisholm* (New York: Franklin Watts, A First Book, 1994), pp. 23; Isobel V. Morin, *Women of the U. S. Congress* (Minneapolis: The Oliver Press, Inc. 1994), p 69; Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbought*, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbought*, 30.

Initially, she was assigned to do fundraising, a task typically relegated to women.<sup>18</sup> But she spoke out at weekly meetings, questioning Vincent Carney, the district leader, and others about trash on the streets and unfulfilled promises. She pressed them for more resources for the district. Rather than responding to her demands, she contended that the leadership tried to keep her quiet by making her part of the “in group.” They elected her to the board of directors - a position she had not pursued. “The trouble was,” Chisholm wrote in an autobiography, “I didn’t behave.”<sup>19</sup> She continued to harass speakers about community problems. Shortly afterward she got a letter thanking her for her service but that she was no longer on the board. As Chisholm described it, “I had my own early education in politics, in the toughest and most instructive school possible, New York City’s old-time clubhouses.”<sup>20</sup> The hybrid political education served her well. She was a savvy, pragmatic politician-in-the-making, and she seized the resources available to advance her professional goals even as she fought for community betterment.

Chisholm left the BSLP in 1958, but maintained her membership with the Seventeenth A.D. Club.<sup>21</sup> All the while her professional life advanced. She had started as an early education program director. By 1959 she was a consultant to the New York City Division of Day Care in the Bureau of Child Welfare, supervising ten day care

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<sup>18</sup> “Interview with Shirley Chisholm,” New York 1968, Sc Audio C-160, Part VIII.

<sup>19</sup> Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbought*, 36.

<sup>20</sup> Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbought*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> “Interview with Shirley Chisholm,” New York 1968, Sc Audio C-161 and Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, pp. 39-40.



centers. She worked with that bureau for five years.<sup>22</sup> Her absence from grassroots activism did not last long however. The community she lived in was one of the poorest in the city and needed more effective political advocates.

### *Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brief*

In 1960, Brooklyn had 2.6 million residents. It outnumbered Manhattan by nearly a million people.<sup>23</sup> The borough was in the midst of a dramatic population shift. Between 1940 and 1990, more than 1.5 million white people moved out, and more than 1.3 million people of color moved in. The shifts alone were significant for undermining community stability and economic vitality, but they became even more important as the migrations in and out took on racialized meanings. “White flight” was the term given to the phenomenon, but historian Craig Steven Wilder suggests that, “white Brooklynites were not running from people of color as much as they were chasing down government subsidies in outlying communities.”<sup>24</sup> Push and pull factors in various combinations resulted in a seismic shift.

In addition to the remarkable demographic reconfiguration, Brooklyn suffered a dramatic loss of factory jobs in the postwar era. Scholars Roger Waldinger and Craig Wilder argue that African Americans did not benefit significantly from industrial sector jobs in New York City, including those at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, the largest industry

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<sup>22</sup> Essie E. Lee, *Women in Congress* (New York: Julian Messner, 1979), 46.

<sup>23</sup> *United States Census*, 1960.

<sup>24</sup> Craig Steven Wilder, *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 212.

in the borough.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, its closing was a severe blow to Brooklyn. The privatization of military contracts undermined the Yard's ability to compete. Despite the busloads of shipyard workers who took their concerns to the Washington, Congress eliminated the budget and nearly 10,000 people lost their jobs.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, two of Brooklyn's other major industries, the sugar and brewing industries, declined.<sup>27</sup> The industrial failures added injury to a town smarting from the loss of its hometown pride, the Brooklyn Dodgers, to California in 1957.

Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn's largest neighborhood, was densely populated. A substantial majority of Brooklyn's black population lived in the district. Health and crime indicators underscored the neglect and resource starvation that the area suffered. Its infant mortality rate and juvenile delinquency were many times higher than the rest of Brooklyn and the city.

Economic indicators illustrate the disparities most clearly. The median income for New York City families in 1960 was \$6,091. The median income for Brooklyn families was \$5,816. For Brooklyn's non-white families, the figure dropped to \$4,149, and it was even that high because of the greater prevalence of two-earner families among African Americans.<sup>28</sup> The racialized sexual division of labor resulted in an even bleaker

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<sup>25</sup> Roger Waldinger, *Still the Promised City? African-Americans and New Immigrants in Postindustrial New York* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 12, 14, 63, 106-107; Wilder, *Covenant of Color*, pp. 160, 167.

<sup>26</sup> *New York Times*, June 22, 1964, 16; June 25, 1964, 35; November 25, 1964, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Wilder, *Covenant of Color*, 213.

<sup>28</sup> *United States Census*, 1960, Table 86. The median income for New York State was \$5,407, Table 65.

picture. The individual median income for non-white men was \$3,458, for non-white women, \$2,074.<sup>29</sup> Total unemployment among African Americans was also uneven. Black men's unemployment rate was 11.6 percent and black women's was 5.9 percent.

<sup>30</sup> Women of color might have had less trouble finding work than black men, but as a group, they brought home less income per capita than just about any other workers in the city.

District residents fought the problems as best they could. The city's financial commitments to one of the nation's poorest areas were inadequate to deal with the problems. In 1966, Mayor John Lindsay turned to the Federal government for aid to help redevelop the borough. Bedford-Stuyvesant's unemployment rate was 100% above the city's average.<sup>31</sup> The promises of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 did little to immediately alleviate the problems urban Northerners faced.

### *Raising Consciousness, Taking Action - Political Insurgents in Bedford-Stuyvesant*

Harlem's African American political leadership had expanded significantly in the fifteen years after World War II. In contrast, the predominantly black neighborhoods of

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<sup>29</sup> *United States Census*, 1960, Table 134. Note: The table did not break down the figures between African American, Puerto Rican, and other "non-white" people.

<sup>30</sup> "Bedford-Stuyvesant Youth In Action Report 1965," Chapter 2, pp. 16, 25. Robert Wagner Papers, Box 272, Folder 3179, Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

<sup>31</sup> *New York Times*, August 24, 1966, 36.



Brooklyn, especially Bedford-Stuyvesant where seventy-four percent of the residents were African American, lagged woefully behind in terms of political advancement.<sup>32</sup>

In 1960 Shirley Chisholm and Thomas R. Jones, both veterans of the Flagg campaign, joined with a handful of others to form the Unity Democratic Club (UDC). The club's goal was to take over the Seventeenth Assembly District and put the white Democratic machine out of business. The machine "bosses" had not only been intransigent about addressing systemic racial discrimination, but they had actively contributed to it. The UDC's early leaders joined the effort because of this entrenched resistance and their personal experiences with racism.

Tom Jones, the Unity Democratic Club's founder, had moved to Bedford-Stuyvesant with his family in 1930. Jones recalled going into Child's Restaurant on Nostrand Avenue, where "[t]hey broke the glasses and threw them at my head... I wasn't allowed to come in."<sup>33</sup> After risking his life in Europe during World War II, the Brooklynite said that he and fellow African American servicemen "were determined to have a better life...and to take [their] proper places politically" when they got home.<sup>34</sup>

For others like Ruth Goring and Jocelyn Cooper, it was as much the poor conditions in the community and the anger over the intentional political neglect, as the

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<sup>32</sup> Nathan Kantrowitz, *Negro and Puerto Rican Populations in New York City in the Twentieth Century*, p. 3 and Map Table 1950. See also "Bedford-Stuyvesant Youth In Action Report 1965". According to the report based on the 1960 census, the population of Bedford-Stuyvesant was 284,342 of which 74% were Negro, 11% were Puerto Rican. From Robert Wagner Papers, Box 272, Folder 3179, Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

<sup>33</sup> Carlos E. Russell, "Perspectives On Power: A Black Community Looks At Itself", n.d. unpublished manuscript from the Schomburg. Interview with Thomas R. Jones, 78.

actual lack of black leaders, that drove them to the UDC. Goring had lived in Bedford-Stuyvesant since the 1940s. During an interview with Carlos Russell, a Brooklyn researcher, she reminisced, "I remember going to a meeting one Sunday afternoon and ending up in organized politics, much to my surprise."<sup>35</sup> After she had served as the UDC's president, an *Amsterdam News* reporter inquired as to why she entered politics in the first place. She responded, "Walk through the streets of Bedford-Stuyvesant and see why. Look at our youth, the unemployment, the young adults and the elderly and see why. Look at the political structure. They gave us nothing."<sup>36</sup> She channeled her anger into the Unity Democratic Club, no longer able to "just sit by and watch the community go to pot."

Goring blamed assemblyman and district leader Sam Berman for the abysmal conditions in the district.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, she felt that the white ethnic groups that controlled the Democratic party in Brooklyn intentionally kept African Americans out of power. She explained that they had "cut out the one Black district and given it to Bertram Baker [the first African American in the State Assembly from Brooklyn] and that District was supposed to contain the Blacks." "But," she went on, "we were aware that our people were moving throughout Brooklyn and were disenfranchised by this specific gerrymander. Anytime you made a bid for political power, or political input, they would say, 'well you've got the Sixth [Assembly District], what more do you

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<sup>34</sup> Jones interview with Carlos Russell, 47.

<sup>35</sup> Goring interview with Carlos Russell, 158.

<sup>36</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 14, 1964, 29.

want?”<sup>38</sup> Goring joined the reform organization to unseat Berman, both a symbolic and real obstacle to political advancement. If access to the state could be improved, she believed that African Americans would benefit from the spoils of political power. It was not an unreasonable assumption in a city that historically saw white politicians share the benefits of patronage widely in their own ethnic groups. In a district where racism significantly undermined the chance to compete for power, the opportunity to launch a serious challenge to the establishment promised progress.

Jocelyn Cooper expressed sentiments similar to Ruth Goring's as she reflected on her introduction to community activism and politics. Born during the 1930s and raised in Jersey City, she made her way to Brooklyn and married Andrew (Andy) Cooper, a Brooklyn native from a middle-class, civil servant's family. The Cooper's family lawyer, Tom Jones, invited the couple to attend a Unity meeting. Jocelyn accepted the offer. "I knew the things that I saw around were puzzling to me... We had no idea about politics," Cooper admitted. "Once I got into the group, the discussion was 'How to make Bed-Sty a better place to live?'"<sup>39</sup> When asked during an interview if she understood her local activism in a context of national civil rights struggles, Cooper said no, "[w]e never talked about civil rights... We talked about Bed-Sty as our community."<sup>40</sup>

In the poorest New York City neighborhoods, many people focused on their immediate concerns. The South felt far away and unrelated to the issues of dirty and

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<sup>37</sup> *New York Times*, November 10, 1964, 22. Note: Sam Berman took over the district leadership from Vincent Carney in 1960.

<sup>38</sup> Goring interview with Carlos Russell, 158.

<sup>39</sup> My interviews with Jocelyn Cooper, February 17, 2000 and March 9, 2000.



unsafe streets, poor quality food in stores, unemployment and run-down housing. Such local problems propelled Jocelyn Cooper into action. She decided, "I needed to do something about my community, and that's what motivated me."<sup>41</sup> The frustration level reached a boiling point for people like Ruth Goring and Jocelyn Cooper. When the opportunity presented itself to become involved in community betterment, both women seized it and put their energies into the young organization.

### *Building a Movement One Voter at a Time*

Unity was considered a progressive or more politically radical club by some of its members because its founder, Tom Jones, had been active in the American Labor Party and a member of the National Lawyers Guild. But in reality it was a reform organization, part of the Committee for Democratic Voters, a city-wide reform organization which Eleanor Roosevelt campaigned for on her swings through New York.<sup>42</sup>

The club shared a common trait with organizations like the Interracial Assembly of the 1940s that Ada B. Jackson had led. Although the organization did not draw many of the working poor into its ranks - members most often hailed from the middle class - it was racially integrated and women held leadership positions.<sup>43</sup> Tom Jones saw the

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Jocelyn Cooper, February 17, 2000.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Jocelyn Cooper, February 17, 2000.

<sup>42</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, June 4, 1960, 20; *New York Amsterdam News*, September 1, 1962, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Bedford-Stuyvesant Youth in Action Report, p. 25. Robert Wagner Jr. Papers; My interview with Andy Cooper, February 9, 2000.

interracial membership and mission of the club as a strength. “We had an amazing combination of people – black and white – who came together for the first time under black leadership,” he recalled. “And this of course shook up the politicians all over the state, because if white people could accept black leadership, there was no telling how far this campaign could reach.”<sup>44</sup>

The effort to dislodge the old system was led by an interracial and mixed-sex group of activists. African American women like Shirley Chisholm, Ruth Goring, and Jocelyn Cooper were important leaders in the grassroots political education efforts in Brooklyn, just as the well-known Septima Clark, trailblazer in the citizenship education movement, had been in the South.<sup>45</sup>

Ruth Goring, the UDC president, embodied the club’s commitment to gender equality. She opposed the regular club’s old-boy network with its “back rooms” and closed meetings. Instead, the UDC was open every night of the week. Goring stressed in her interview with Russell, that “meetings were truly open...and everyone who wanted to, had an opportunity to participate in the decision-making.”<sup>46</sup> For too long, racism and cronyism shut African Americans out of the political decision-making process. The Unity Democratic Club was a welcome break from the past.

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<sup>44</sup> Jones interview with Russell, 54.

<sup>45</sup> See Grace Jordan McFadden, “Septima P. Clark and the Struggle for Human Rights,” in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers, 1941-1965*, edited by Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 85-97.

<sup>46</sup> Goring interview with Russell, 160.

Before it could woo voters, Unity Democratic Club had to get people registered to vote and interested in the political process.<sup>47</sup> Shirley Chisholm, Ruth Goring, and Jocelyn Cooper pounded the pavement and knocked on doors across the district in an effort to undo the all-white, all-male Seventeenth A.D. regular club. Chisholm recounted that “I walked these streets until I almost went crazy.”<sup>48</sup> Jocelyn Cooper emphasized the importance of interpersonal contact in the political education process, “[b]y climbing those steps and ringing those bells, inevitably people lived on the top floor, and in order to get them, you’ve got to climb the stairs... It doesn’t work unless you’re actually face-to-face. When they think that you have an interest in asking them, they respond.”<sup>49</sup>

A 1965 report by the Bedford-Stuyvesant Youth in Action committee underscored the level of community frustration and distrust. It noted that,

*the civic government, the police, the recreation and sanitation departments, the Board of Education, the Housing Authority – all of these institutions are seen and felt by the poor as being alien to their needs, exploitive of their pocketbooks which already are bare, an affront to their sense of dignity, and barren of opportunity for movement away from their lowly status.*<sup>50</sup>

The political insurgents faced a daunting challenge to undo the deep level of disillusionment that generations of racial discrimination and intentional political neglect had generated. Politicians and city administrators were both part of the oppressive

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<sup>47</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, March 26, 1960, 19; *New York Times*, October 6, 1963, 1; October 14, 1963, 1.

<sup>48</sup> “Interview with Shirley Chisholm,” New York 1968, Sc Audio C-161, Part XIV.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Jocelyn Cooper, February 17, 2000.



system and potential allies; and grassroots activists tried to tip the balance from one to the other.

The UDC educated the electorate about the formal political process, its workings and the ways it directly affected the lives of Bedford-Stuyvesant's black residents. "We did an awful lot of political education on the role of politics in the life of the community, from the cradle to the grave. We were educating our own," Ruth Goring noted. The club led aggressive voter registration campaigns, held programs on election inspectors, called for registration by mail and demanded that the attorney general place a lawyer in the community on election day in anticipation of problems.<sup>51</sup>

Andy Cooper, another UDC member, described the process of bringing people into the political system. He and his partner, Pat Carter, spent Saturday mornings in front of grocery stores distributing information about voter registration procedures. Not only did they encourage people to register, they also recruited people to attend weekly meetings. They taught people about politics on a local level - who was a district leader and an assemblyman, and what were they supposed to do. Cooper said in an interview that he would encourage residents to assert their individual political rights, and collectively, their political power. "First," he said, "you ask people who are in office to do something for you... and when they don't respond, you work against them. You

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<sup>50</sup> "Bedford-Stuyvesant Youth In Action Report 1965," Chapter 5, p. 3. From Robert Wagner Papers, Box 272, Folder 3179, Municipal Archives of the City of New York. (emphasis in the original)

<sup>51</sup> Goring interview with Russell, 160.

vote them out of office... You may not win the first time around, but you can scare the hell out of them.”<sup>52</sup>

The UDC's political platform was grounded in two particularly important issues to African American's in Brooklyn: jobs and political access. Employment discrimination had plagued African American workers in New York City throughout the twentieth century. Protests and acts of resistance were commonplace, but most African Americans had difficulty getting work in Brooklyn's factories, on construction sites, and in stores and restaurants, despite their steady patronage and heavy demographic majority.<sup>53</sup>

The UDC joined with members of the Brooklyn chapter of CORE and with church ministers to fight “Jim Crow treatment by community merchants.”<sup>54</sup> Tom Jones recounted that in 1962, “We struck the Ebinger Bakery because it had three stores in the black community and wouldn't hire a single black man or woman to do anything.”<sup>55</sup> Picketers carried signs that read “This is a Community, Not a Plantation” and “You Grab the Gold-Take the Pay from the Community Far Away.”<sup>56</sup> Despite Ebinger's promise to hire more black workers, four months later the problem persisted. Of 150 sales clerks,

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<sup>52</sup> My interview with Andy Cooper, February 17, 2000.

<sup>53</sup> Wilder, *A Covenant with Color*, pp. 167-169, 233-234; Waldinger, *Still the Promised City?*, pp. 12, 30-31, 106-107; Martha Biondi, “The Struggle For Black Equality in New York City, 1945-1955,” Diss., Columbia University, 1997, Chapter 1.

<sup>54</sup> *New York Times*, April 1, 1962, 61 and August 5, 1962, 57.

<sup>55</sup> Jones interview with Russell, 50.

<sup>56</sup> *New York Times*, April 1, 1962, 1.

there were only two full-time African American employees.<sup>57</sup> Historians August Meier and Elliott Rudwick suggest in their book on the Congress of Racial Equality, that the Ebinger protestors “adopted techniques that seemed radical at the time... Some went limp and had to be carried by the police,” for example.<sup>58</sup> When three men and four women were arrested for disorderly conduct, Unity’s Tom Jones defended them.<sup>59</sup> The aggressive tactics finally worked. Ebinger Bakery committed thirteen jobs to African Americans in response to the protests.

The earlier black leader of job protests, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. of Harlem, never ventured across the East River, nor did he lend his name or resources to help the Brooklyn picketers. While Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant were part of the same city, their political efforts remained largely independent.<sup>60</sup> There was little cooperation between black leaders of these communities. None of the Unity members made mention of Harlem, its leaders, or the issues of racial discrimination in anything but the most local terms.

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<sup>57</sup> *New York Times*, August 5, 1962, 57.

<sup>58</sup> August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1943-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 192-193.

<sup>59</sup> *New York Times*, August 12, 1962, 82.

<sup>60</sup> My interview with Andy and Jocelyn Cooper, March 9, 2000. Rev. Milton Galamison’s movement to boycott of the New York City public schools was one exception. Galamison was president of the Brooklyn chapter of NAACP through 1959, and was pastor of the Siloam Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn. See Lisa Yvette Waller, “Holding Back the Dawn: Milton A. Galamison and the Fight for School Integration in New York City, A Northern Civil Rights Struggle, 1948-1968.” Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1998. See also Clarence Taylor, *The Black Churches of Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).



In 1962, the Unity Democratic Club launched a frontal attack on the regular political machine. Tom Jones ran for assemblyman and district leader and Ruth Goring ran as the district co-leader. Jones had run unsuccessfully in 1960 as well, but this time Unity was well-organized and very strong. The traditional Democratic machine realized its vulnerability. They were forced into action by changing political realities rather than by any kind of ideological commitment to racial equality. Fearing defeat if they continued to run white candidates in the heavily African American community, district leader Sam Berman and his cronies made a strategic substitution shortly before the primary. Berman came off the ballot for the assembly seat, the public face of the political machine, and they put Wesley "Mac" Holder in his place. Holder had a decade earlier challenged the white-dominated political machine. By 1962, he had become an integral part of it.

At the same time, Berman maintained his candidacy for district leader, the position of power. Tom Jones suggested that the switch was "a desperate attempt to buy off the Negro vote and save Berman's powerful district leadership."<sup>61</sup> The *New York Times* pointed out the underlying racial motivation, stating, "[i]n recent years the once predominantly white population of the district has been largely replaced by Negroes."<sup>62</sup> As cynical and strategic as the move was, it did not work. Thomas R. Jones defeated Mac Holder for the assembly and Sam Berman for the Seventeenth

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<sup>61</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, August 18, 1962, 22.

<sup>62</sup> *New York Times*, August 14, 1962, 23.

Assembly District leadership in the September primary.<sup>63</sup> The UDC had struck a decisive blow.

In the November election, Jones faced off against two black female candidates. The Republicans had frequently run black women and men for public office. But in a city as thoroughly dominated by the Democratic party as New York, their efforts were futile. Jones defeated the women on the Republican party and Independent party tickets.<sup>64</sup> He and Ruth Goring were in charge. Brooklyn finally had its second African American state assemblyman and district leader, nearly fifteen years after Bertram Baker made his successful bid for the office against Maude Richardson. The racism embedded in the system, reinforced by generations of exclusionary political maneuvering, began to show signs of weakening as a result of local pressure and the changing national civil rights context.

With Jones's victory over an African American man in the primary and two African American women in the general election, the race issue was effectively neutralized, even as it remained central to the concerns of candidates and voters. Jones claimed that his victory was "a symbol of the community's revolt and the determination

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<sup>63</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, September 1, 1962, 22; *New York Times*, September 7, 1962, 17; *New York Amsterdam News*, September 15, 1962, B1. Jones beat Stan Berman by 2,686 votes to 2,465 and he beat Wesley Holder for Assemblyman by 3,043 votes to 2,654.

<sup>64</sup> *New York Times*, November 8, 1962, 25; *New York Amsterdam News*, November 10, 1962, 1. Jones beat his opponents 10,584 votes to 3,643 for Maddox, the Republican candidate, and 916 votes for Eversley, the Liberal.

of Negroes and Puerto Ricans to share with all others the responsibilities of American citizenship.”<sup>65</sup>

In the pecking order of priorities, the candidate's race was clearly important; that the Democrats finally started to field black candidates like Bertram Baker in 1948 and Bessie Buchanan in 1954 illustrates that point. But race was not the sole determinant of the election outcome. There were plenty of unsuccessful black candidates, including Maude Richardson, Ada Jackson and Pauli Murray who ran on Republican, American Labor Party and Liberal tickets respectively who could attest to that. Party affiliation was more important to voters. After 1936, when black New Yorkers made their switch to the Democratic party, nothing dislodged that loyalty.<sup>66</sup> Only when two black Democrats ran against each other, as in the case of Jones and Holder, did other issues - - such as the candidates' platforms, their relationship to the white power structure and even their gender - seem to factor into voters' decisions.

Despite UDC's success, racism and cronyism continued to shape the way political spoils were distributed in the city. Mayor Robert Wagner Jr. denied Unity what he gave white-led clubs. Ruth Goring explained the rules of local politics. “Usually,” she said,

the patronage goes with the leadership... Tom [Jones] and I met with Wagner... He said as district leaders, ‘you will be part of the process.’ Even though we were sitting there nodding, we knew it was not going to

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<sup>65</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 10, 1962, 23.

<sup>66</sup> See Nancy Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*.



happen, because Tom and I have been Black all of our lives and we knew how the political structures deal with Blacks.<sup>67</sup>

Goring was right. The political structures did not yield any real benefits for the African American community. Within a short time, the victory proved frustratingly hollow. Jones explained years later how his political power had been “whittled down and bled away.” He alleged,

When I won...the politicians who gave out the jobs...withheld from me the jobs and other embellishments of office. I was starved out...what they did was appoint my co-leader, Ruth Goring, to a job in the Borough President's office without telling me that they were going to, so that she owed her job to them and not to me.<sup>68</sup>

The Jones-Goring victory was just a first step for the UDC. African American communities had much further to go before elected office yielded any direct political or economic benefits. Jones' fight for change was genuine, but his expectations seemed almost naive. He came to realize what Shirley Chisholm perhaps already knew – that in order to get anything done, one had to stay connected to the old power structure.

*Born to Lead - Shirley Chisholm and the Campaign for the State Assembly*

Shirley Chisholm boasted in an interview that “from the time I was two my

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<sup>67</sup> Goring interview with Russell, 166. See also Walter G. Farr, Jr. et. al. in *Decentralizing City Government*. According to the authors, “The City's governing scheme leave to government officials many discretionary decisions, especially the filling of certain jobs and the selection of firms to receive certain contracts...Party officials still have a say in those decisions...In that way service to a party can still lead to preferment for a City job or contract.” 21.

<sup>68</sup> Jones interview with Russell, pp. 58-60. See also *New York Times*, November 10, 1964, 22.

mother said I was born to lead.”<sup>69</sup> In 1964, she was ready to claim her self-defined destiny. When Tom Jones gave up his assembly seat for a judicial appointment after serving one term in office, Chisholm wanted it. She discovered that the Unity Democratic Club was initially reluctant to run a female candidate, but she held her ground, believing herself the rightful heir to Jones’s seat.

She faced some gendered resistance from potential voters, like the man who asked her if she had fixed her husband’s breakfast before campaigning. According to the candidate’s own account, she replied by highlighting her long history of community activism.<sup>70</sup> She felt she had earned the right to govern and said as much to hecklers. Calm and confident, Chisholm rebutted gender-based discrimination and focused on her political activism instead. She declared in an interview, “I swamped them because you have to talk about the issues. I am a fighter and stand up to be counted.”<sup>71</sup>

Chisholm managed to turn the gender issue on its head much like Bessie Buchanan had ten years earlier. She realized the political resource she had in black women. There were nearly 5,000 more women registered to vote in the Seventeenth Assembly District than men.<sup>72</sup> She directed her appeal to the African American women

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<sup>69</sup> “Interview with Shirley Chisholm,” New York 1968, Sc Audio C-160.

<sup>70</sup> Chisholm, 53.

<sup>71</sup> “Interview with Shirley Chisholm,” New York 1968, Sc Audio C-161.

<sup>72</sup> In 1964 in the Seventeenth A.D. in Brooklyn, there were 16,471 women registered among the three main parties, Democrats, Republicans, and Liberals. There were 11,569 men. *1964 Annual Report of the Board of Elections of the City of New York*, Municipal Archives, New York, Table IX, 47.

of her district, urging them to “elect me to dramatize the problems as black women.”<sup>73</sup> As she went into the housing projects in search of women’s support, Chisholm insisted later that she disliked making claims as a woman: “I think the time has come in America - it is not a question of whether you are a man or woman, but whether you have the attributes – sincere, honest leadership.”<sup>74</sup>

Despite her claims to the contrary, Chisholm used her race and sex strategically, turning her two biggest potential liabilities into important assets. Brooklyn clubwomen responded to her call for support. Key Women of America was a home-grown New York organization, founded in 1954 by Bertha Nelms Harris. By its own definition, it was a civic organization committed to children, family services, community needs and world concerns.<sup>75</sup> Shirley Chisholm served as the Brooklyn branch president in the mid-1960s and drew on the organization for political support in both her run for State Assembly in 1964 and for Congress in 1968. Constance Rose, an officer in the Key Women, explained during an interview that, “We all got out and pitched for her. We went with petitions and everything. We [Key Women] were actually her backbone.”<sup>76</sup>

Even as she cut a new path to the State House, Chisholm’s civic activism drew strength from traditional women’s activities. During her presidency of the Key Women’s Brooklyn branch, the women set up sewing classes and speech classes. They hosted a

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<sup>73</sup> “Interview with Shirley Chisholm,” New York 1968, Sc Audio C-161.

<sup>74</sup> “Interview with Shirley Chisholm,” New York 1968, Sc Audio C-161.

<sup>75</sup> Key Women Manuscript Collection, Organization History, Edited by Otha Washington, December 1, 1982.

<sup>76</sup> My interview with Constance Rose, April 17, 2000.



garden party for the Home of the Aged for Colored People, gave a benefit fashion show for the scholarship fund, and volunteered at the Kings County Pediatric Hospital.<sup>77</sup> Key Women was reminiscent of black women's clubs of the past that focused on respect and uplift. Thus it was not a feminist organization, but a very conventional women's organization, that helped launch Chisholm's formal political career in 1964.<sup>78</sup>

Some questioned her ability to lead based on her sex, but many others were comfortable with women's public leadership, as they had demonstrated with Ada Jackson, Maude Richardson and Pauli Murray in the 1940s. Shirley Chisholm succeeded where other Brooklyn women had failed, however, by exploiting the electoral structure. She was a savvy politician who honed her skills over a fifteen year period in political clubhouses as much as in community groups. She knew how to play up the strengths of her race and her sex. But she also knew how critically she needed Democratic party support and she worked to gain it.

The Unity candidate won her first election, beating her Democratic opponent, Harold Brady, in the June 1964 primary by a significant margin.<sup>79</sup> When election day arrived in November, Shirley Chisholm entered elected office with a smashing victory. In a three-way contest, she won with 18,151 votes to Republican candidate Charles Lewis's 1,893. The Liberal party candidate, Simon Golar, finished a distant third with

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<sup>77</sup> Key Women Meeting Minutes, February 15, 1964 and February 2, 1965, Key Women Manuscript Collection, Schomburg.

<sup>78</sup> See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* and Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load*.

<sup>79</sup> *New York Times*, June 3, 1964, 32. Chisholm had 4,290 votes to Brady's 1,729.

922 votes.<sup>80</sup> Chisholm went to Albany as a member of the largest black contingent ever elected to the New York State legislature. Six black assemblymen and two state senators took their seats in the state house, hardly a revolution in representative politics, but it was an improvement.<sup>81</sup>

The Key Women reflected on Chisholm's victory in their inaugural newsletter. They understood it as a significant event, not just for the candidate but also for the race. The headline read, "We salute a Lady of Color – Shirley Chisholm – Assemblyman of the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly District, Kings County." The article on Chisholm gushed with excitement and pride, "This is a year for dreams to come true...Dr. Martin Luther King receives the Nobel Peace prize and Shirley becomes our representative in Albany, New York."<sup>82</sup> Chisholm had all the skill, training and experience she needed to do the job and the organization expected great things from her.

### *Trying to Legislate for Change - Assemblywoman Shirley Chisholm*

Assemblywoman Shirley Chisholm claimed during an interview in 1968, "I want my people to have a just and equal share. If you give us part of the pie, you won't hear

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<sup>80</sup> *New York Times*, November 5, 1964, 23.

<sup>81</sup> Pollack, 32. Bessie Buchanan and Constance Baker Motley were the first two African-American women in New York State's legislature. Buchanan served in the Assembly from 1954-1962 and Constance Baker Motley served in the New York State Senate from 1964-1965.

<sup>82</sup> The Key Women Newsletter, January 1965, Vol. 1, No. 1, Key Women Manuscript Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

from me.”<sup>83</sup> During her four years in the New York State Assembly she had fought to get her constituents just that – a just and equal share. A fairly active legislator, she introduced a number of progressive bills that reflected the problems in her district.

Many of these concerned civil rights. One, which she proposed two years in a row, required city police to complete a course on civil rights. Also introduced a number of times were bills to eliminate discrimination in banking, investment and insurance practices. She advocated unemployment insurance for agricultural workers and hospital employees, and she fought for a minimum wage law. For the poor, especially constituents like hers in Bedford-Stuyvesant, she advocated more affordable public housing and an education bill for a program called SEEK, which would enable men and women from disadvantaged backgrounds to go to college.<sup>84</sup>

Although not yet an outspoken feminist, Chisholm proposed a number of bills to benefit women. These included legislation for “day care centers for children whose mothers are working for their support or where fathers and mothers must both work or in families receiving public assistance,” unemployment insurance for personal or

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<sup>83</sup> Audio C-161.

<sup>84</sup> For legislation for a civil rights course for city police, see: Assembly Bill # 2553, *New York State Legislative Record Index*, (NYSLRI) 1965 and Assembly Bill #745, *NYSLRI*, 1966. For legislation to eliminate discrimination in business practices, see: Assembly Bill #2552 and 2563, *NYSLRI*, 1965; Assembly Bill #745, *NYSLRI*, 1966; Assembly Bill #1253, *NYSLRI*, 1967. For unemployment insurance for agriculture workers, see Assembly Bill #2561, *NYSLRI*, 1965. For unemployment insurance for hospital employees, see Assembly Bill #3080, *NYSLRI*, 1966. For minimum wage legislation, see Assembly Bill #2588, *NYSLRI*, 1968. For public housing legislation, see Assembly Bill #5538, *NYSLRI*, 1967. For the SEEK education bill, see Assembly Bill #3601, *NYSLRI*, 1965.



domestic workers, and seniority protection for teachers who took maternity leave.<sup>85</sup>

There were many similarities between her legislative proposals and Bessie Buchanan's, the first black woman in the State Assembly. And Chisholm often faced similar resistance on many of the progressive items. But she did make important headway.

Her proposed program for low-income students to attend college, SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge), became law. So did the unemployment insurance bill for domestic workers, most of whom were poor women of color. And she prevailed in a third important piece of legislation that assured pregnant schoolteachers would not be fired or lose seniority when they came back to work.

As a lawmaker, Shirley Chisholm tried to accomplish two goals that were frequently in tension with each other. She wanted her constituents to see her as an independent people's advocate, but she also wanted to be an effective politician. In order to navigate legislation through the assembly, Chisholm had to make alliances and perhaps compromises as well. In her four years in office, she proved herself an able legislator, more successful than Bessie Buchanan had been.

Although Chisholm had relative success maneuvering in legislative channels, a task that required political support, she understood herself more as a political renegade. It was central to her identity and even emerged in the title of her first autobiography, *Unbought and Unbossed*. In an interview she gave in 1968 and in press reports, she did her best to craft this image. She stated boldly that, "[M]y strength came from the little

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<sup>85</sup> For day care centers, see Assembly Bill #1932, *NYSLRI*, 1965; Assembly Bill #1250, *NYSLRI*, 1967. For unemployment insurance for domestic workers, see Assembly Bill #2558, *NYSLRI*, 1965. For seniority protection for teachers, see Assembly Bill #3603, *NYSLRI*, 1965.

people on the streets, I'm not connected to the big boys. I like to be right on the streets – take my opponent outside and let people analyze.”<sup>86</sup> Although some closest to her in Unity and the Key Women would later challenge her claims of independence, her constituents were clearly content.

Due to a series of reapportionments, Chisholm had to run for her assembly seat three times in four years, and she always won. She interpreted her victories as endorsements “of her actions in the State Legislature and in the whole civil rights front.” To an *Amsterdam News* reporter Chisholm said, “I really feel that so long as I fight for the people I have nothing to worry about.”<sup>87</sup> She remained dedicated to improving Bedford-Stuyvesant. At the same time, she was equally committed to and successful in advancing her own career, although she never spoke about her ambitions in personal terms. Black women like Chisholm were a rare entity in the political arena and they were cautious about appearing personally motivated for fear of being stereotyped, undermined or dismissed.<sup>88</sup>

### *Fighting Shirley Chisholm – Unbought and Unbossed*

In 1964, the United States Supreme Court issued a decision which required that Congressional Districts be “substantially equal in population.” The decision had particular relevance for Brooklyn, whose districts were wildly uneven. Activists in

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with Shirley Chisholm, S Audio C-160.

<sup>87</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, November 12, 1966, 51.

<sup>88</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Second Ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 76-77.

Bedford-Stuyvesant claimed they were intentionally drawn so as to prevent an African American's election to Congress. Andy Cooper spearheaded UDC's legal battle to redraw the area's Congressional districts. Upon review, the Federal judicial panel sided with the plaintiffs; Bedford-Stuyvesant would finally have its own congressional representative. Ruth Goring noted that, "We got the first Black Congressperson, because ... [of] work done by the Club ... at a point in history when the time was right for that kind of suit."<sup>89</sup>

The creation of the twelfth congressional district in 1968 was a significant victory for the UDC and also the Bedford-Stuyvesant community. The political climate had clearly changed in twenty years since Ada B. Jackson had made her unsuccessful bid for Congress. In the wake of the civil rights movement, race riots and the War on Poverty, their claims of discrimination fell on more receptive ears.<sup>90</sup>

Before the twelfth congressional district had even been formally created, an ad hoc group, the Citizens' Committee for a Negro Congressman, formed in Brooklyn to evaluate potential Democratic candidates. It held open meetings so that anyone who wanted to be considered for the seat had a chance to speak. The Citizens' Committee

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<sup>89</sup> Goring's interview with Russell, 167. On the Congressional and Supreme Court deliberations on the need for redistricting, see: *New York Times*, June 18, 1964, 24; November 19, 1961, E2; November 26, 1961, E8; March 17, 1965, 1. "Bedford-Stuyvesant Is Called a Victim of Gerrymandering," *New York Times*, June 24, 1966, 33. On federal court case brought by Andrew Cooper, see *260 F.Supp. 207*, Andrew Cooper et al., Plaintiffs, v. James M. Power, Thomas Mallee, Maurice J. O'Rourke, and J. J. Duberstein, Commissioners of Election constituting the Board of Elections of the City of New York et al., Defendants. Aug. 9, 1966. On legal deliberations and decision on redistricting see: *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 30, 1967, 1 and *New York Times*, August 11, 1966, 20; May 11, 1967, 1.

<sup>90</sup> *New York Times*, February 24, 1968, 28.



was chaired by Rev. Milton Galamison of Siloam Presbyterian Church and former president of Brooklyn's NAACP chapter, and Ruth Goring, former president of the Unity Democratic Club. The committee interviewed nearly a dozen people to determine whom they would support. As early as January 1968, the *Pittsburgh Courier* suggested that the committee was a "draft movement for Mrs. Chisholm," who, the paper argued, had "gained a wide reputation for independence and ha[d] successfully challenged the party bosses at the polls."<sup>91</sup>

The overwhelming gender inequality in politics motivated women in the New York State Democratic party. Bernice Brown from Brooklyn was a member of the women's Democratic caucus in Albany. The group argued that more women were needed in electoral politics and they pushed for Chisholm. "Women worked together," Brown explained, "We were making sure we got some females in there because everything was male... Shirley Chisholm was the best we had."<sup>92</sup> The women's caucus seized the opportunity to advance women's political position. Gender equality was a long way off, but Chisholm's candidacy was another important step.

Bedford-Stuyvesant politicians jockeyed for position on the Democratic ballot. Eager to get her campaign off the ground, Chisholm "announced her intention to run for Congress before the district had been formally created," according to the *New York Times*.<sup>93</sup> Shortly after that, Mac Holder and Shirley Chisholm patched up a decade-long disagreement and the "Dean" of Brooklyn politics offered to run Chisholm's campaign.

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<sup>91</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier* [New York Ed.], January 6, 1968, pp. 1, 16.

<sup>92</sup> My interview with Bernice Brown, May 3, 2000.

He told her, “You’re the easiest product to sell and I’m going to organize the campaign and sell you.”<sup>94</sup>

State Senator William C. Thompson and Dollie Robinson, a former State Labor Department official, entered the Democratic primary as well. Thompson was the Brooklyn Democratic machine’s choice, and Dollie Robinson had veteran Assemblyman Bertram Baker’s backing.<sup>95</sup> They all relished the idea of joining Adam Clayton Powell, the only African American from New York, in Congress.

The three Democratic hopefuls took to the streets to win over potential voters. Chisholm claimed, “Willie Thompson was so sure he would win with the organization behind him that he was up at Cape Cod vacationing” while she was campaigning.<sup>96</sup> The outcome of the June primary proved Thompson’s confidence unjustified. Chisholm maintained her winning streak, becoming the Democratic challenger for the November election.<sup>97</sup>

Voter turnout for the primary was notably low. In the new Twelfth Congressional District, the total vote was 12,000 compared with 43,000 votes in the Thirteenth, 21,000 votes in the Fourteenth and 26,000 votes in the Fifteenth. The *New York Times* remarked, “The Negro vote was light, in keeping with tradition. The vote in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant Congressional races was between 25 and 50 percent of

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<sup>93</sup> *New York Times*, February 26, 1968, 29.

<sup>94</sup> Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, 68.

<sup>95</sup> *New York Times*, June 22, 1968, 19; Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>96</sup> Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, 70.

the turnout in predominantly white communities.”<sup>98</sup> Even Chisholm acknowledged “the very small turnout” in her autobiography, *Unbought and Unbossed*, but did not propose an explanation. It seemed that the promise of political representation in Congress was not sufficient to lead black voters to the polls.

Regardless of the low turnout, Shirley Chisholm turned her full attention to her nationally known opponent, James Farmer. Farmer, the former head of the Congress of Racial Equality, had submitted his name on the Liberal Party ticket in March 1968, less than two weeks after Chisholm had entered the race. In May, the GOP asked him to run on their party line as well and Farmer consented.<sup>99</sup> Farmer’s campaign strategy centered less on his extensive and impressive civil rights record than on a highly gendered appeal to voters. His campaign managers “used bongo players to drum up a crowd for the candidate’s street meetings. The young men who handed out his leaflets often wore dashikis - the African-style shirt that was becoming popular among the young militants.”<sup>100</sup> In the wake of the Moynihan report and the Black Power movement, Farmer preached the need for a “strong male image” and “a man’s voice in Washington.” He counted on gender trumping party identity.

But Wesley Holder was unconcerned. He saw Chisholm’s local status as an assemblywoman, her party affiliation and her gender as significant strengths which could

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<sup>97</sup> Chisholm won 5,431 votes to Thompson’s 4,634 and Robinson’s 1,751. *New York Times*, June 20, 1968, 40.

<sup>98</sup> *New York Times*, June 22, 1968, 19.

<sup>99</sup> *New York Times*, March 9, 1968, 17; May 20, 1968, 34.

<sup>100</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Shirley Chisholm: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1970), 107.



readily counter Farmer's appeals to masculinity. Chisholm herself felt good about her chances in the general election. She had the UDC's and the Citizens' Committee's backing. Her state assembly district was right in the center of the new congressional district. And she had an army of women willing to help her.

In her campaign Chisholm again called on women in the community to help her win, just as she had in 1964. "It was not my original strategy to organize womanpower to elect me... But when someone tries to use my sex against me I delight in being able to turn the tables on him," she wrote in her autobiography.<sup>101</sup> She explained to Susan Brownmiller of the *New York Times* that she did not want to run an anti-male campaign. She argued, however, "We have to help black men, but not at the expense of our own personalities as women. The black man has to step forward but that doesn't mean the black woman has to step back."<sup>102</sup> Chisholm counted on women's organizing skills to assist her. "They run the PTA, they are the backbone of the social groups and civic clubs... so the organization was already there. All I had to do was get its help," she stated.<sup>103</sup> Brownmiller also noted in her *New York Times* feature on Chisholm that Bedford-Stuyvesant women knew James Farmer had a white wife. Race and gender issues blended together inextricably for the black women of the district. Whether or not this was a central element in their voting, it touched a sensitive nerve.

Chisholm declared that she "campaign[ed] the hard way... Out on the street corners with the people, in the housing projects, in parks, you are under fire constantly." Her

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<sup>101</sup> Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, 75.

<sup>102</sup> *New York Times*, April 13, 1969, 86.

famous slogan ‘Fighting Shirley Chisholm – Unbought and Unbossed’ captured the spirit she wanted to project. When she faced off against Farmer in a series of debates, Chisholm declared that he counted on his image to win him support: “I’m sure that he expected the contrast between his muscular, male assurance and poise and his opponent’s little schoolteacher appearance would do him a lot of good.”<sup>104</sup>

Indeed, news articles never failed to mention her size. The *Amsterdam News* called her a “tiny yet torrid lawmaker” and the *New York Times* mentioned that she “looked slight at 96 pounds.”<sup>105</sup> Journalists gave into conventional gender stereotypes by focusing Chisholm’s appearance. But because her political persona dramatically contradicted her physical stature, they felt the need to highlight both – with her bold personality the obvious oddity. That she was a woman who weighed under one hundred pounds was often contrasted to her hard-hitting style.

Neither Farmer’s masculine image nor his national reputation helped him in the election. He ran on the Republican-Liberal ticket against a local, established Democrat with four years in the State Assembly and twenty years of community activism. Yet the *New York Amsterdam News* described the victory as a boxing match: “Mrs. Chisholm figuratively and literally a fly-weight in the Congressional ring, soundly walloped her heavyweight opponent, the nationally known James Farmer... The seasoned lady legislator had obviously learned the art of self-defense very well.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, 75.

<sup>104</sup> Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, pp. 69, 77.

<sup>105</sup> *Amsterdam News*, July 12, 1969, 25; *New York Times*, November 6, 1968, 25.

<sup>106</sup> *Amsterdam News*, November 9, 1968, 1.

Chisholm beat Farmer by more than a two to one margin. Her fluency in Spanish even helped her carry the Puerto Rican section of the district.<sup>107</sup> Years later in an interview, Bernice Brown, former UDC president, claimed that she knew Chisholm would win because “Unity was so strong that *it never ran a candidate that it didn’t win. Never.*” She explained that Unity “worked very closely with the county committee. Mead Esposito the county commissioner and Thomas Fortune [Shirley Chisholm’s financial backer and successor in the assembly] were almost like brothers.” Brown exposed the mechanisms of power – the same mechanisms that Tom Jones, Ruth Goring and even Shirley Chisholm herself fought against through their founding of the UDC. “If you got favoritism with the county committee then you got favoritism all the way through with your candidate,” Brown asserted. “The organization behind the candidates is really the key.”<sup>108</sup> And this was Chisholm’s strength.

Chisholm tried to combat the accusations about her ties to the political machine. She offered a counter narrative that captured the spirit of women’s grassroots organizing:

[Her] doorbell rang one night. Standing on the front stoop was an elderly Negro woman. ‘Mrs. Chisholm,’ the lady said, ‘my friends and I know what you’ve been doing for us up there in Albany. We want you to run for Congress from this neighborhood. We collected this money and we want to give it to you for a campaign contribution.’<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Shirley Chisholm won with 34,885 votes or 66.5% to Farmer’s 13,777 votes or 26.3%. *Congressional Quarterly’s Guide to U.S. Elections*, 1261. Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, 77.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Bernice Brown, May 3, 2000 (her emphasis).

<sup>109</sup> Brownmiller, *Shirley Chisholm*, 86.



Many women supported Shirley Chisholm, but this particular version of her story is difficult to verify. She told it to enhance her “unbought and unbosserd” image. To local constituents who worried about Chisholm’s relationship to the Brooklyn Democratic machine, it suggested an alternative motivation that dovetailed with the independent persona she had cultivated in the state assembly. To the national audience, the story captured the romantic ideal of grassroots democracy and situated Chisholm as the ultimate servant of the people.

Chisholm’s story grounded her legitimacy in the African American community, not the white, male New York City clubhouse structure. Her image as an independent voice of the people depended on her manipulation of her political portrait. She insisted that she had no political ambition. But, even before she stepped foot in the House of Representatives, Chisholm had gained a significant amount of political party experience. She was no novice, and her actions, if not her words, belied her image. Politics had been, and still was “a man’s world.” To break into it, Chisholm, a black woman, employed an alternative strategy that struck a sympathetic chord with local and national audiences.

According to Chisholm biographer James Haskins, the victorious candidate was realistic in her expectations and knew the political rules. He quoted her as saying, “Even if [a Congressional representative] is not black and not a member of the smallest faction in the House, the left-liberal one, a freshman member is not going to get many - if any - laws passed. He has no clout. No one cares what he does.”<sup>110</sup> Chisholm set off for

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<sup>110</sup> James Haskins, *Fighting Shirley Chisholm* (New York: The Dial Press, 1975), 141.

Washington excited about making history but well aware of her limitations, or perhaps intentionally creating them.

### *Assessing Shirley Chisholm*

Neither her early biographers nor the local press, including the *New York Amsterdam News*, were particularly critical of Chisholm. With the passage of time, however, a number of Bedford-Stuyvesant residents have felt compelled to challenge the Congresswoman's highly sympathetic portrait.

Many of her former clubhouse colleagues noted that Chisholm immediately left behind the grassroots base that helped elect her to Congress. For example, the Key Women of Brooklyn had planned a bus ride to the capital to see her installed. But the trip was cancelled "due to the inability of Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm to receive us."<sup>111</sup> There was a hint of bitterness in Bernice Brown's recollection even thirty years later, "[O]nce she went to Congress, she never came back and we were very upset about that. She never disowned us but she never found time."<sup>112</sup>

Constance Rose, another Key Woman member, said in an interview that "working with Mrs. Chisholm, was very exciting... You could not sit back and be lackluster about anything that she was doing... I loved her. She was fantastic."<sup>113</sup> Thinking back about what Chisholm did for other women or the community, however, Rose decided that Chisholm was not really concerned about lifting others as she rose in

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<sup>111</sup> Key Women Minutes, February 1, 1969, Schomburg.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Bernice Brown, May 3, 2000.

the political ranks. Whereas Constance Baker Motley “gave the courage for other women to seek office,” Rose remarked, “Mrs. Chisholm was her own trailblazer...she did her own thing.”<sup>114</sup> Thirty years of history may have shaded her judgment, but the Key Women’s 1969 newsletter, which noted Chisholm’s “inability...to receive us,” foreshadowed Shirley Chisholm’s breaking ties with the club.

As a new legislator, one who was forging a path for black women, Chisholm truly may not have had time to meet with her base of support. More likely, the group’s usefulness had run its course and she turned her sights to the huge task of getting settled and making connections. Rather than celebrate a collective victory, Chisholm abandoned the organization and the members never forgot.

Vernell Albury, another Bedford-Stuyvesant activist, thought back across the decades and also gave Chisholm mixed reviews during an interview. To her, Chisholm was a positive catalyst for change. Her symbolism was important. Albury said, as an African American woman, Chisholm “set the pace. She did very well. She, Barbara Jordan and Maxine Waters set an example of black leaders standing up for the people.”<sup>115</sup> But Albury was critical of Chisholm’s apparent dependence on her political manager Mac Holder, the leading Brooklyn politico. He “called the shots and she abided by them. There were things Shirley Chisholm wouldn’t take part of unless he said it was

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<sup>113</sup> My interview with Constance Rose, April 17, 2000.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Constance Rose, April 17, 2000.

<sup>115</sup> My interview with Vernell Albury, February 19, 2000.



okay,” she recalled.<sup>116</sup> Even though she felt Chisholm had “the tools” for the job, Albury noted carefully that the Congresswoman frequently avoided “touchy situations.”

The insurgents who fought for the creation of the congressional district and who helped Chisholm win had expected something in return for their work. When things turned out differently, many suggested that the “unbought and unbossed” politician was actually highly managed and too self-centered. In reality, she was a regular politician, tending to her own political career even as she tried to do something for her constituents. That her fellow Bedford-Stuyvesant associates held her in such disregard suggests more about the expectations of insurgents than it says about politicians. The UDC and the Key Women felt a distinct ownership in the political process. But when the politician whom they helped launch abandoned the grassroots spirit that inspired them in the first place, there was a particularly sharp sense of betrayal.

### *Conclusion*

Between 1960 and 1968, activists from Bedford-Stuyvesant tried to shape their community through the Democratic party’s political structure. Motivated by the lack of services, resources, jobs, housing and good schools, women and men acted together to form an insurgent organization to challenge the regular club’s lock on power. Within a few short years their list of accomplishments was impressive. They had dislodged the entrenched clubhouse and taken over the Seventeenth Assembly District; they launched a successful legal crusade for a congressional district; and they sent one of their own members, Shirley Chisholm, to Congress.

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<sup>116</sup> Interview with Albury, February 19, 2000.

But the gains the Unity Democratic Club made have to be weighed against the limits of its capacity to bring about real change. Tom Jones beat Sam Berman, but his electoral victory did not translate into real political or economic power. In fact, he could not even place his district co-leader Ruth Goring in a city job. Moreover, within eight years of its founding, Unity lost its reform commitment. By 1968, the head of the UDC, Thomas Fortune, was as “close as brothers” with the county Democratic leader Meade Esposito.

With substantial help from Unity and other local groups like the Key Women, Shirley Chisholm overcame some of the barriers facing women and minorities who sought elected office. She proved to be a capable legislator at the state level and earned more than twice the legislative victories in four years that Bessie Buchanan had in eight. At the same time, she was limited in her capacity to address significantly her constituents’ economic needs. Bedford-Stuyvesant was already a poor district when she took office. She and others in the state house were unable to stem its further slide into deep poverty. In addition, the fact that the voter turnout in the newly created district “was among the lowest in the city” in 1968 suggested that Chisholm had much more work to do to convince the community that electoral politics could be a useful way to tip the scales of inequality.<sup>117</sup>

Chisholm’s local cronies were critical of her performance as a legislator. But the person they sent to Washington was as ambitious and politically savvy as most members in Congress. Shirley Chisholm just had less experience and fewer networks. The mismatch in high expectations from the local insurgency group and Chisholm’s

motivations and limitations resulted in disappointments and bitterness. Chisholm, however, spent very little time looking back. Instead she set her sights on the tasks at hand in Congress.

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<sup>117</sup> *New York Times*, April 13, 1969, 86.



## CHAPTER 6

### AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN, CIVIL RIGHTS AND FEMINISM IN THE 1960S

When the ninety-first Congress assembled in January, 1969, the Democratic caucus gathered to approve the committee assignments for the new session. Shirley Chisholm, the freshman from Brooklyn, found her assignment on the Rural Development and Forestry subcommittee of the Agricultural Committee unacceptable and she stood up to protest. “Every time I rose, two or three men jumped up,” she recounted. “Men were smiling and nudging each other as I stood there trying to get the floor. After six or seven attempts, I walked down an aisle to the ‘well,’ the open space between the front row of seats and the Speaker’s dais, and stood there. I was half afraid and half enjoying the situation.

“For what purpose is the gentlewoman from New York standing in the well?”

Wilbur Mills, chair of the Ways and Means Committee asked.

“I’d been trying to get recognized for half an hour, Mr. Chairman,” she said, “but evidently you were unable to see me, so I came down to the well. I would just like to tell the caucus why I vehemently reject my committee assignment.” Chisholm wrote in her autobiography, *Unbought and Unbossed*, that several members in the chamber spoke to her sympathetically afterward, implying that she had made a huge mistake. Another stated bluntly, “You’ve committed political suicide.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shirley Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), pp. 83-84.

Chisholm had grounds for complaint. She represented Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights, Brooklyn, two of the poorest urban communities in the nation. Her assignment on the Rural Development and Forestry subcommittee seemed thoroughly inappropriate.<sup>2</sup> She remarked later, “I think it would be hard to imagine an assignment that is less relevant to my background or to the needs of the predominantly Black and Puerto Rican people who elected me, many of whom are unemployed, hungry and badly housed.”<sup>3</sup> After her protest, Chisholm was reassigned to the Veterans Affairs Committee.<sup>4</sup>

Word of her action on the Hill made it back to New York in no time, and the local audience loved it. A headline in the *New York Amsterdam News* read, “Shirley is a 5-Alarm.” The article portrayed Chisholm as a political renegade and an independent fighter. Daphne Sheppard, the *Amsterdam News* reporter, went so far as to call Chisholm a heroine. Conveying a sense of urgency and loyalty to her constituents, the new legislator asserted, “I am a woman of action, in action... I know the independence I

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<sup>2</sup> Congressional House lore suggests Chisholm’s Agricultural Committee assignment was made because she offended Walter Little, an African American man on Congressman Wilbur Mill’s staff, when he offered her assistance. Mills was chair of the House Ways and Means and responsible for committee assignments. See Senate Oral History Project, Jesse R. Nichols, Government Documents Clerk and Librarian, Senate Committee on Finance, 1937-1971, Interview with Senate Historian Donald Ritchie, April 12, 1994, p. 83. Reference: [http://www.senate.gov/learning/learn\\_history\\_oralhist\\_nichols4.html](http://www.senate.gov/learning/learn_history_oralhist_nichols4.html).

<sup>3</sup> “Statement by Representative Shirley Chisholm,” Container 2, Shirley Chisholm Papers, Rutgers University Special Collections.

<sup>4</sup> During the 91<sup>st</sup> Congress, Shirley Chisholm served on the Veterans’ Affairs Committee. She left that in 1971 to serve on the Education and Labor Committee. In 1975, she moved to the Rules Committee where she remained until her retirement from Congress in 1982. See Garrison Nelson, *Committees in the United States Congress, 1947-1992*, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1993).

exhibit is not acceptable to the professional politicians, but is perfectly acceptable to the people of the community who elected me.”<sup>5</sup> Chisholm made her intentions clear to the hometown. While winning the hearts of the people with her defiance and independence, she also inadvertently indicated why she would likely be an ineffective legislator.

Shirley Chisholm was one of a growing number of African American women who succeeded in moving beyond local-level political circles. She, Jeanne Noble, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Pauli Murray and Dorothy Height and others who had gained experience in New York City’s block associations, women’s organizations and Democratic party politics made their way into the national debates on civil rights and increasingly on women’s rights as well. These women had well-established organizational and political networks that provided essential support for their efforts. Moreover, those who advanced from block coalitions and city-level posts to national forums were frequently, although not exclusively, privileged by their middle-class status.<sup>6</sup> Over time, they achieved high-level positions in government that until that time only Mary McLeod Bethune had reached.

Standing at the crossroads, African American female leaders pursued a politics of inclusion through the administrative, legislative and electoral branches of the government at the national level. They fought to end many of the social problems that the Great

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<sup>5</sup> Daphne Sheppard, *New York Amsterdam News*, February 8, 1969, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Fanie Lou Hamer, the leader of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party is one obvious exception although there are many others. See Mamie E. Locke, “Is This America?: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party,” in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. by Vicki L. Crawford, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 27-37; Vicki Crawford, “African American Women



Society promised to alleviate, especially racial inequality and poverty. Importantly, they were also members of the first federal-level review of women's position in American society. As participants in the President's Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW), African American women contributed unique perspectives on how race and gender discrimination intersected to relegate black women to the bottom of the economic and social ladder.

Their participation on the President's Commission was but one of the many ways African American women demonstrated their commitment to women's equality as well as racial equality throughout the 1960s. They were founding members and leaders of national women's organizations including the National Organization for Women, the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws, and the National Women's Political Caucus. As a result, black women's awareness of gender discrimination was not only sharpened, but they became increasingly willing to speak publicly about it and to use political forums to address it.

With progressively more empowered voices in the social and political debates of the time, these women endeavored to weave together strands of liberalism that included a new advocacy of women's equality with the PCSW, a legislative commitment to racial equality with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and an administrative promise to alleviate poverty through the War on Poverty.

As the decade began, the question was whether African American women, new arrivals into the inner circles of power, would be able to forge effective coalitions.

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in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party," in *Sisters in the Struggle*, ed. by Collier-Thomas and Franklin, Chapter 8.

Building solidarity across gender, race and class divisions was difficult enough. Their greater challenge was to sustain those coalitions in order to bring about meaningful social, economic, and political change.

### *State-Sponsored Coalition-Building*

In December 1961, President John F. Kennedy established the President's Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW). In his official pronouncement, Kennedy directed the commission to review the status of women – a broadly defined task that sent America's liberal elite into the workplace, the home, and the community to assess women's place in American society. The creation of the commission indicated a subtle but potentially important shift in the federal government's position on women.

Kennedy directed the commission to recommend “services which will enable women to continue their role as wives and mothers while making a maximum contribution to the world around them.”<sup>7</sup> The Executive Order inscribed the nation's

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<sup>7</sup> Executive Order 10980 Establishing the President's Commission on the Status of Women, *American Women: Report of the President's Commission on the Status of Women, 1963*, 76. One of the sharpest criticisms of the commission's final report, *American Women*, at the time it was issued and in subsequent scholarly literature was its inability or unwillingness to address the inconsistency of advocating women's freedom to choose their role in society, including active participation in the workforce, and the desire for women to work in the house full-time as mothers and housekeepers. See: Cynthia Harrison, *On Account of Sex: The Politics of Women's Issues, 1945-1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 138-141, Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Right Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 166-174; Blanche Linden-Ward and Carol Hurd Green, *American Women in the 1960s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), pp. 3-8; Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle Books, Inc., 1971), pp. 18-24; Jo Freeman, “The Origins of the Women's Liberation Movement,” in *American Journal of Sociology Quarterly*, 1973,

ambiguity about women's roles in society. Clearly, the President and the commission believed woman's first function was wife and mother. The traditional definition of gender went unchallenged. Yet, the commission dedicated the bulk of its resources to examining women's political rights and their experiences in the workplace. Based on its findings, it advocated the elimination of sexual discrimination in the labor force and in the law. And it went beyond the public sphere to evaluate women's status in the home and community, and their access to education.

The President's Commission on the Status of Women was in every way a top-down, elite structure. It was officially headed by Eleanor Roosevelt and counted twenty-six members, fifteen women and eleven men. It included five members of the President's cabinet, congressional representatives, academics, labor union officials, and national women's organization leaders. There was only one African American woman, Dorothy Height, among the twenty-six commission members.

The PCSW met eight times over the course of two years. Most members participated in one of the seven committees, which held meetings independent of the commission. In addition to the seven committees, the commission sponsored four consultations which addressed specific areas of concern: New Patterns in Volunteer Work; Private Employment Opportunities; Portrayal of Women by the Mass Media; and Problems of Negro Women. Over one hundred individuals, representing women's organizations, the media, academia, business, labor, law, and government participated in the committees and consultations. Thus, the commission built a vital network as it



tapped resources for much-needed data on American women. It also shared its findings with women's organizations that would ultimately help implement its proposals.<sup>8</sup>

The commission was important, Dorothy Height argued, because women needed to recognize "the places within the local community where policies are made that affect their lives."<sup>9</sup> It presented a unique opportunity for women to evaluate their own situations and experiences. One of the commission's greatest contributions was the compilation of data that, for the first time in one source, examined women's subordinated status in most facets of society.

Besides Dorothy Height, only two other prominent African American women participated in the committee work, Jeanne Noble and Pauli Murray. Noble, Height's protégé and president of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority, was on the Committee on Federal Employment. The committee addressed the sexual discrimination women faced in the civil service. They found pervasive negative attitudes toward women which created hostile work environments. And women were routinely passed over for promotions. Based on the commission's recommendations, the President issued a

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<sup>8</sup> For Esther Peterson's effort to include a broad representation of women's organizations, see February 19, 1962 Meeting Summary, in folder "Correspondence, notes re: February 19, 1962 meeting," Box PCSW #1, Esther Peterson papers, Schlesinger Library (SL); PCSW papers in folder, "Correspondence December 1961-March 1962" Box 1, John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL).

<sup>9</sup> Transcript of PCSW meeting, April 9, 1962, p. 188. Box 4, Folder 4, PCSW Papers, JFKL.

directive requiring equal consideration of men and women for promotions based solely on merit, not sex.<sup>10</sup>

Pauli Murray, a civil rights activist and lawyer, was a member of the Committee on Civil and Political Rights. The committee addressed a broad array of legal and political concerns. It challenged the way laws were applied differently to men and women “in regard to political rights, property rights and family relations.”<sup>11</sup> The committee exposed dramatic examples of sexual discrimination in the judicial structures of a number of states. For example, in Mississippi, Alabama, and South Carolina, women could not serve on state juries, and in Texas, they had to get the court’s permission to start up a business.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, this committee took on the controversy over the Equal Rights Amendment. As historians Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor have argued, the PCSW members did not support the ERA (with the exception of Marguerite Rawalt).<sup>13</sup> Pauli Murray drafted the proposal to pursue women’s equality on the basis of the fifth and

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<sup>10</sup> *American Women*, pp. 32-33, 78. See also “Report to the President by Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt - July, 1962” that demonstrates how quickly some changes were made after the Commission recommended them. John Macy, head of the Civil Service commission was a member of the PCSW. Box 1, PCSW Papers, JFKL.

<sup>11</sup> Marguerite Rawalt, co-chair of the Committee on Civil and Political Rights to the Commission, Transcript of PCSW, June 16-17, 1962 meeting, p. 195, Box 4, Folder 5, PCSW Papers, JFKL.

<sup>12</sup> Transcript of PCSW meeting June 16-17, 1962 meeting, p. 195, Box 4, Folder 5, PCSW Papers, JFKL; *American Women*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> Rupp and Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums*, pp. 167-171.

fourteenth amendments of the U.S. Constitution, rather than through an Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>14</sup>

Dorothy Height chaired the Consultation on Problems of Negro Women. Ruth Whitehead Whaley, Secretary of the New York City Board of Estimates and former candidate for City Council, served on the committee with Height and twenty others. The group started with the acknowledgement that “race discrimination permeates the whole life of the Negro...and that approaches to the problems of the Negro woman should be based on this premise.”<sup>15</sup> Participants discussed black women in relation to the family, particularly the tendency for black families to be matriarchal; the community, especially the importance of integrating them into local policy-making boards; and the workplace. Despite the focus on black women, one consistent determination was that black men needed better job opportunities in order for black women’s economic situations to be improved.<sup>16</sup>

Consultation participants recognized the particular problems black women faced, namely racialized gender discrimination, but their recommendations did little to challenge the deep roots of the issue. Instead, they focused on supporting black women in the workplace through child care and training programs. Job training was proposed as a

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<sup>14</sup> *American Women*, pp. 45, 52. See also Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, pp. 348-353.

<sup>15</sup> “Report of Consultation on Problems of Negro Women,” April 19, 1963. Box 3, Folder 13, PCSW Papers, JFKL. For a fuller discussion on the Consultation on Problems of Negro Women, see Alice Kessler Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 226-228.



way to support low-skilled women, especially domestic workers. Shortly after the completion of the President's commission, Congresswoman Edith Green, a commission member, integrated the idea of women's job training into the Job Corps, one of the central programs in President Johnson's War on Poverty.

At the same time, Ruth Whaley maintained that job training was not necessarily the key to solving all black women's employment problems. Employers consistently discriminated against black women, and she suggested a training program for them instead. College educated black women did not need more training. They were skilled and eager to work. What they needed was "an open door," Whaley insisted.<sup>17</sup>

Black women's participation on the commission was important for a number of reasons. First it brought them right to the center of the debate about women's roles in American society. It gave them a platform to address the double burdens of discrimination that they faced in the work place and the community. Their contributions informed both President Kennedy's and later President Johnson's liberal agendas. In addition, they challenged early second-wave feminists to think more broadly about the category "woman" and brought needed attention to the fact that black women faced different and often more complicated forms of gender discrimination than white women. And significantly, Height, Noble, Murray, and Whaley were given a new opportunity to focus on and talk about the status of women and gender discrimination in ways that their prior activism did not.

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<sup>16</sup> Transcript of the "Consultation on Minority Groups," April 19, 1963, *passim*. Box 4, Folder 7, PCSW Papers, JFKL.

Moreover, Dorothy Height as NCNW president, capitalized on the opportunity to build relationships with other national women's organizations. She fostered connections with Viola Hymes of the National Council of Jewish Women, Margaret Mealey of the National Council of Catholic Women and Cynthia Wedel of the National Council of the Churches of Christ. Long an advocate for racial equality and women's advancement, Height reached out to her PCSW colleagues and encouraged their participation in the civil rights movement.<sup>18</sup>

### *Black Women and the Civil Rights Movement*

A. Philip Randolph called on Anna Arnold Hedgeman, his colleague from the Negro American Labor Council and former partner in the Fair Employment Practices commission fight of the 1940s to help initiate a march on Washington for job opportunities. In the fall of 1962, Hedgeman readily responded.<sup>19</sup> She was a seasoned civil rights veteran with extensive administrative experience and she welcomed the opportunity to take on a project with broad reach and national significance.

She worked closely with Randolph laying the groundwork for the march. He had originally planned the event for October 1963. But by the early summer, Randolph had merged his march idea with Martin Luther King's and an August date was set. The

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<sup>17</sup> Transcript of the "Consultation on Minority Groups," April 19, 1963, pp. 38-39. Box 4, Folder 7, PCSW Papers, JFKL.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of women's religious organization activism around women's rights, see Susan M. Hartmann, *The Other Feminists: Activists in the Liberal Establishment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), Chapter 4.

collaboration and the event itself bore Hedgeman's imprint which the *Baltimore Afro-American* recognized when it referred to her as "a major architect" of the March.<sup>20</sup>

In her autobiography, Hedgeman reflected on the march and on the organizing effort, and leveled two criticisms. She challenged the most memorable line of King's "I Have a Dream" speech: "In the face of all of the men and women of the past who have dreamed in vain, I wished very much that Martin had said, 'We have a dream.'"<sup>21</sup> She felt that the collective experiences of all who had struggled for and dreamed of equality were sadly obscured when the civil rights leader spoke those famous words.

Hedgeman's second criticism focused more on the organizers and the meetings leading to the event rather than on King or the march itself. Her complaint stemmed from a deep-seated resentment over African American women's second-class treatment by black men in the civil rights leadership. She was unhappy to find herself the only woman on the nine-member administrative committee.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, with all African American women had done in the pursuit of racial equality, she felt they deserved a voice at the event. She and Dorothy Height, who as president of the NCNW had been meeting

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<sup>19</sup> Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 167, 169; Black Women Oral History Project, Anna Arnold Hedgeman Interview, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, 180.

<sup>20</sup> "Dr. Hedgeman experienced in problems of the cities," *The Afro-American*, Week of March 22, 1969, Anna Arnold Hedgeman Manuscript Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Box 8A. On the merging of Randolph's and King's march ideas see Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 169-170.

<sup>21</sup> Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 189; Black Women Oral History Project, Anna Arnold Hedgeman Interview, pp. 188-189.

<sup>22</sup> *New York Times*, August 15, 1965, 56. See also *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, August 24, 1963, *Herald Tribune*, August 28, 1963; "The Woman Behind the March," *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, August 24, 1963, Hedgeman Clipping File,



with male leaders of the civil rights organizations of over a year, insisted that women be recognized for their tremendous contributions to the movement. But the men rejected their demands. Hedgeman had to fight even to get Rosa Parks acknowledged.<sup>23</sup>

Hedgeman aired her complaints more publicly than most African American women at the time. In an interview with the New York *World-Telegram and Sun* she pointed out that “[w]omen ... don’t always get front-line notice, but they’re there and their force is felt.” She went on: “I’m no feminist. But I’m for women... Right along with Negroes, women are discriminated against just for being what they are. I honestly think women are the most discriminated against of all the minorities.” Hedgeman noted sardonically, “I get it on both counts – woman AND Negro.”<sup>24</sup> Her personal frustrations mirrored the larger reality.

Scholars are increasingly recognizing the critical role African American women have played in the civil rights movement at the grassroots level.<sup>25</sup> At the same time,

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Municipal Reference and Research Center, New York City Municipal Archives. See also Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, Vol. 5, Dorothy Height Interview, 173.

<sup>23</sup> Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 178-180; Black Women Oral History Project, Anna Arnold Hedgeman Interview, pp. 187-188. See Dorothy I. Height, “‘We Wanted the Voice of a Woman to be Heard’: Black Women and the 1963 March on Washington,” in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, edited by Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (New York: New York University Press, 2001), pp. 86, 87.

<sup>24</sup> “The Woman Behind the March” *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, August 24, 1963, Hedgeman Clipping File, Municipal Reference and Research Center, New York City Municipal Archives.

<sup>25</sup> See Vicki L. Crawford et al. editors, *Women in the Civil Rights Movement*; Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); David J. Garrow, ed., *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987, 1996); Kimberly

although there were individual exceptions like Ella Baker, black women were largely kept out of leadership positions. For a woman like Hedgeman who had given over forty years to the pursuits of human rights, this dismissive treatment was particularly stinging. Worn down by the endless struggles against racial and sexual discrimination, Hedgeman observed, “women, white or black ... are discriminated against on sight, without recognition of our qualifications or experience. I’m anxious to see women join the human race.”<sup>26</sup>

Pauli Murray, a former committee member of the PCSW, spoke out even more boldly. She wrote a critical essay entitled, “The Negro Woman in the Quest for Equality,” which was published in June 1964 and later delivered as an address to an NCNW leadership conference. In it she argued: “What emerges most clearly from events of the past several months is the tendency to assign women to a secondary, ornamental or ‘honoree’ role instead of the partnership role in the civil rights movement which they have earned by their courage, intelligence and dedication.” She was blunt and forceful in describing how she and other African American women felt. She said it was “bitterly humiliating for Negro women on August 28 to see themselves accorded little more than token recognition in the historic March on Washington.” She highlighted women’s exclusion from the speakers’ list and the delegation that went to the White

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Springer ed. with preface by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women’s Contemporary Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, eds., *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> “Muscling In on the March to D.C.,” *Herald Tribune*, August 28, 1963, Hedgeman Clipping File, Municipal Reference and Research Center, New York City Municipal Archives.



House to meet with President Kennedy. Murray reminded her audiences that the men had been told of the women's desire to participate and the importance of recognizing their contributions, but they were ignored. "This omission was deliberate," she contended. And finally, Murray remarked that there had been "little or no public discussion of the problems, aspirations and role of the Negro woman" in the nation's major media.<sup>27</sup> Their voice and their contributions to the movement were largely obscured.

Hedgeman, Murray and Height resented the lack of women's representation in the civil rights leadership. They gave voice to the growing unhappiness African American women felt about their marginalization in black organizations, and they did so by availing themselves of the feminist rhetoric that was gaining currency in the wake of the PCSW and the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Despite their gender-based frustrations, however, all of the women remained committed foremost to racial equality and continued their activism. Dorothy Height and Anna Arnold Hedgeman mobilized women and church groups to advance the civil rights agendas.

Immediately after the March on Washington, Dorothy Height gathered a group of women together to evaluate civil rights priorities and to strategize how women could work on them. She had found it difficult to get the civil rights leaders "to accept the fact that the conditions affecting children, affecting youth, and affecting women," including

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<sup>27</sup> Pauli Murray, "Jim Crow and Jane Crow," in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, edited by Gerda Lerner (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 596. Murray's article was originally published "The Negro Woman in the Quest for Equality," *The Acorn*, publication of Lambda Kappa Mu Sorority, Inc., June 1964 and it was delivered as an address see typescript speech delivered at the National Council of



child care and jobs for women, “were all a part of civil rights.” She was encouraged by the different response she got when she raised the issues with the women she had called together. “They saw the relationship between decent housing, schooling, and child care, to employment, and employment to job opportunities,” she remarked in an interview.<sup>28</sup>

A short time later, Height received a call from James Forman, a SNCC organizer. African Americans in Selma, Alabama, faced massive resistance to their voter registration efforts and Forman turned to Dorothy Height and the NCNW for help. After what Height described as a stressful and dangerous trip, she called a meeting of women from the NCNW, the YWCA, Church Women United, the National Council of Jewish Women and the National Council of Catholic Women to address the situation in the South. She had just been working with women from these organizations on the President’s Commission on the Status of Women and now she enjoined them to participate in the struggle for racial equality.<sup>29</sup>

The coalition Height built became known as Women’s Inter-Organizational Committee or WIC. During the founding meeting in Atlanta in the fall of 1963, white women and black women from cities like Selma met for the first time. “They were so thrilled to get to know each other,” Height recalled in her interview with Polly Cowan. “When we got to the conclusion of [the meeting] there was a feeling of solidarity in the

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Negro Women’s Leadership Conference, November 14, 1963, cited in Height, “We Wanted the Voice of a Woman to Be Heard,” 91.

<sup>28</sup> Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, Vol. 5, Dorothy Height Interview, 173.

<sup>29</sup> See Hartmann, *The Other Feminists*, 93.

group.”<sup>30</sup> Ten years after its founding, WICS was still active in helping young women in poverty, and had added two Mexican-American groups to the coalition.<sup>31</sup>

### *Putting the Liberal Agenda in Place*

While Height used her organizational connections to fight for civil rights and women’s rights, Anna Arnold Hedgeman used her political talents. In 1964, Hedgeman went full tilt into the battle to get the civil rights bill passed. As assistant director of the Committee on Race Relations for the National Council of Churches (NCC), she coordinated the lobbying effort to get the stalled bill out of the Senate. She wrote to Oscar Lee, associate director of the NCC about her political strategy. Years of experience had taught her that the only hope of moving the President or Congress on race issues was through dramatic pressure. She organized to bring “hundreds of people from across the nation to Washington at the time of the expected Senatorial filibuster, and solicited “letters to Congressmen asking them to continue to sign the discharge petition.”<sup>32</sup> The pressure worked.

The Senate finally discharged the bill and the Civil Rights Act became law in July of 1964. Despite the legislative milestone, Hedgeman’s response was restrained. She felt the Civil Rights Act offered little more than the Fair Employment Practices Commission that she and Randolph had fought for after World War II. For her, the

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<sup>30</sup> Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, Vol. 5, Dorothy Height Interview, 182.

<sup>31</sup> Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, Vol. 5, Dorothy Height Interview, 184.

<sup>32</sup> Memo from Anna Hedgeman to Oscar Lee, January 22, 1964. Anna Arnold Hedgeman Manuscript Collection, Box 1.

victory was tainted by the fact that “[i]t took us twenty years to get fair employment practices.”<sup>33</sup>

Even before President Johnson signed the civil rights bill into law, he had activated another part of his liberal political program. He intended to use the full resources of the government to eradicate poverty in America. Although President Kennedy had originally formulated an aggressive antipoverty agenda, it was Johnson that gave it shape and put it into practice. In his 1964 State of the Union address, the President committed his administration to an “unconditional war on poverty.”<sup>34</sup> Johnson called on Sargent Shriver, the head of the popular Peace Corps program to design and launch it.

Johnson and Shriver had conceived of the Job Corps, a key part of the antipoverty program in the Office of Economic Opportunity, as a program for men.<sup>35</sup> It was designed to give participants job training rather than jobs, and they were free to leave the program at any time. Congresswoman Edith Green of Oregon, who had been on the President’s Commission on the Status of Women, fought to have women included.<sup>36</sup> She pressed her point with administration witnesses during the

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<sup>33</sup> Black Women Oral History Project, Anna Arnold Hedgeman Interview, 191.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 80; Christopher Weeks, *Job Corps: Dollars and Dropouts* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 59.

<sup>35</sup> “Poverty – Message from the President of the United States (H. Doc. No. 243) *Congressional Record*, March 16, 1964, p. 5287. See also *New York Times*, March 17, 1964, pp. 1, 2.

<sup>36</sup> *House Education and Labor Committee, Subcommittee on the War on Poverty Hearings, Vol. 2083*, March 17, 1964, pp. 64-65; March 18, pp. 114-115; April 8, pp.



Congressional hearings, and “by the first week of hearings she had an ironbound commitment to open up the Job Corps to women,” wrote Christopher Weeks, one of Shriver’s assistants.<sup>37</sup>

Once women were added to the Job Corps, President Johnson evaluated possible candidates to establish the program. He had met Jeanne Noble in 1963 during the Delta Sigma Theta’s fiftieth anniversary celebrations and he asked her to set it up. In an interview, Noble recalled the exchange,

President Johnson called me and asked me to come down and see him. He said, ‘You thought I had forgotten about the Deltas, didn’t you.’ And I said to myself, ‘Hmm, Lord, yes I did.’ But he hadn’t. He remembered all those ladies because he had probably never in his life been in a room with just thousands of highly educated black women.<sup>38</sup>

The favorable impression Noble made on the President opened doors for her at the highest levels of government. After consultation with her friend Edith Green, Noble agreed to head up the Women’s Job Corps, much to Johnson’s delight and Shriver’s chagrin.<sup>39</sup>

In thinking about the program, Noble complained to Shriver that “the real problem here is the respectability factor.” She believed that “no mother really wants her daughter to go into something called the job corps,” and she claims to have told him as much. As a way to break down anticipated resistance, she proposed that they give the contract for recruitment to a coalition of women’s organizations. “And he told me it was

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367-368; April 15, p. 819; April 28, 1964, p. 1525. University of Massachusetts, Government Documents Microfiche Collection.

<sup>37</sup> Weeks, pp. 91-92.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Noble.

the dumbest idea he had ever heard of. He did not want all of those women running around in tennis shoes in his job corps,” she recalled.<sup>40</sup> But Noble ultimately had her way. When asked about women in the Federal program, Shriver introduced Noble’s suggestion as his own idea in front of a national audience. Noble recounted her reaction:

I looked at the television set, and there he [Shriver] was on one of the Sunday morning shows. They put the question to him, “Well, who’s going to let anybody go to a job corps? Women in the job corps, that’s ridiculous.” He opened up his big mouth and said, “Oh, I’m going to give the contract to an organization called WICS. It consists of seven women’s organizations.” He got into a corner and that’s what he said.<sup>41</sup>

WICS or Women In Community Service, the successor to WIC, was the inter-faith, inter-racial coalition that Dorothy Height formed from the groups she had worked with on the PCSW and in the aftermath of the March on Washington. Dorothy Height explained in an interview that “when the poverty program was initiated, and the Women’s Job Corps was set up – the task force (headed by Noble) recommended that in order to get a wide diversity of young women into the Job Corps, the same coalition be asked to do it.”<sup>42</sup>

Having won her first battle, Noble faced the daunting task of setting up a Federal program. She relied heavily on what she knew best, her huge network of women’s organizations. From 1960 to 1963 Noble served on the Defense Advisory Commission

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Noble.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Noble.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Noble.

<sup>42</sup> Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, Vol. 5, Dorothy Height Interview, pp. 180-181. Note: After the group was approached for the Job Corps contract, it changed its name to Women in Community Service and kept the same initials WICS.

on Women in the Services (DACOWITS), which had been established to oversee the handling of women's interests while they served in the military.<sup>43</sup> Impressed with what the military women were doing, Noble tapped them and her academic contacts to run the Women's Job Corps. Major June Henry, with whom Noble had worked on the DACOWITS, was brought in as a project manager for the OEO,<sup>44</sup> and Dr. Bennetta B. Washington, who had taught at N.Y.U. with Noble, was named Director of the Women's Training Centers of the Job Corps.<sup>45</sup> Next, with Shriver's blessing, she gave WICS the contract for recruitment and training.

The volunteer organizations immediately began recruiting young women from all across the country. Their reach was impressive – the WICS organizations counted 16,726 local units among them. As the *Norfolk Journal & Guide* noted, “27 million women volunteers joined in the war on poverty with the completion of agreements between the U.S. Office of Equal Opportunity and Women in Community Service.”<sup>46</sup> The women's organizations had already turned their energies from the PCSW to civil rights, and now they directed their attention to the federal antipoverty program.

Historically, black women had had few opportunities to choose the kinds of paid work they did and they were routinely relegated to low-paying jobs. The combined

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<sup>43</sup> *Journal & Guide* (Norfolk), April 30, 1960, 1; *Industrial Statesman*, June 1960, No. 3., 7; *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 19, 1960, 16. Note: The Secretary of Defense established DACOWITS in 1951.

<sup>44</sup> *New York Times*, July 11, 1965, 48.

<sup>45</sup> See *New York Times*, December 17, 1964, 30.



effect of racial and sex discrimination placed them at the bottom of the economic ladder. Jeanne Noble knew this and designed the program “to develop basic educational skills, homemaking skills and marketable skills, such as those of nurses’ aides or secretaries.”<sup>47</sup>

The WICS’s recruiting efforts included home visits to “under-privileged young women.” They wanted to meet with the parents of prospective enrollees to allay any concerns parents had about sending their daughters to work in a Federal program. The preoccupation with respectability that informed these home visits echoed a maternalist ideology of a bygone era. Progressive Era women’s organizations had long ago institutionalized a gendered, racialized and class-based ideology that legitimated the practice of going into the private sphere in the name of a public program. Prospective Job Corps men did not receive visits, nor did someone try to convince them that a federal jobs program was respectable.<sup>48</sup>

Congresswoman Green remained vigilant about monitoring women’s status in the Job Corps compared with men’s. She criticized the way the program discriminated against women by design, emphasizing that men outnumbered women by more than ten

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<sup>46</sup> “Women Volunteers Join in the War on Poverty,” *Journal & Guide* (Norfolk), February 6, 1965, 5. On WICS see Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, Vol. 5, Dorothy Height Interview, 183.

<sup>47</sup> Marjorie Hunter, “Shriver Hopeful on Poverty Plans,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1964, 16. See also, Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York : Vintage Books, 1995), *passim*; Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 7, 62-63, 333; Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 277.

<sup>48</sup> On maternalist ideology during the Progressive Era and the New Deal see: Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, pp. 467-470 and Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, pp. 269, 272, 274-276, 293-299. On the recruitment of men in the Job Corps, see: Weeks, *Job Corps*.

to one even though there were relatively equal numbers eligible.<sup>49</sup> Shriver conceded that the program was unbalanced and promised to increase women's enrollment. At the same time, he complained that "we don't have enough money" to fund the women's program better.<sup>50</sup> He never explained, however, why the men's and women's Job Corps divisions were treated so unequally.

Gendered, racist and class-based assumptions about poor women's behavior shadowed the program from its inception.<sup>51</sup> The first Women's Job Corps center opened in St. Petersburg, Florida. It was one of the few centers not managed by the women's organizations. Immediately after it opened, it became a lightning rod for vitriol from legislators and angry community members alike.<sup>52</sup>

The site of the first Women's Center, a former hotel in a mostly senior citizens' community, was admittedly a poor choice. Community residents were up in arms almost immediately, targeting their hostilities at the Job Corps' trainees in residence more than

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<sup>49</sup> *New York Times*, March 1, 1966, 23.

<sup>50</sup> *New York Times*, April 18, 1966, 15.

<sup>51</sup> *New York Times*, March 17, 1964, 1. See also Statement by Congresswoman Edith Green of Oregon, *Congressional Record*, August 7, 1964, p. 18576. Green stated that "in the committee report it was emphasized – that at least one-third of the Job Corps positions would be made available to girls." Women were included in the House Bill 11377 (Economic Opportunity Act of 1964) see *Congressional Record*, July 21, 1964, p. 16415.

<sup>52</sup> See statements by Senator Frank Lausche, a conservative Democrat from Ohio, *Congressional Record*, April 1, 1965, p. 6546 and Republican Representative Samuel Devine of Ohio *Congressional Record*, July 9, 1965, p. 16287. For examples of Women's Job Corps Centers run by WICS, see *New York Times*, February 13, 1965, 17. "Alpha Kappa Alpha national sorority will operate the Cleveland center for 325 women. The YWCA will operate the Los Angeles center for 250 women." See also *New York*

the program itself. They criticized the women's behavior, claiming they drank too much, and their dress, declaring their skirts were too short. Moreover, residents complained that "the 250 girls in the center were not properly disciplined and their boy friends created a noisy nuisance."<sup>53</sup> The Pinellas County School Board, the center's manager, asked for release from its contract just three months after its start. A *New York Times* article suggested that the main objection to the center was "its integrated staff and an integrated student body," of which more than half was African American.<sup>54</sup>

Bennetta Washington, the head of the Women's Job Corps, came to the young women's defense. She argued that "the girls could not continue to grow and learn in an environment where 'it is going to be continually implied that they are immoral.'"<sup>55</sup> St Petersburg Police Chief Harold N. Smith agreed, saying that "[m]ost of the girls seem interested in their work, not in causing trouble."<sup>56</sup> The *New York Times's* assertion that most of the hostility was racially driven seemed justified.

The Women's Job Corps faced many internal and external problems. Noble and Shriver were at odds almost immediately, but Noble also acknowledged that the women were not trained to administer a large government program; WICS had been formed to lend grassroots support to a social movement. Although WICS stayed involved with the

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*Times*, March 29, 1965, 19 regarding National Council of Jewish Women's activity in Job Corps, September 7, 1966, 36.

<sup>53</sup> *New York Times*, July 25, 1965, 41.

<sup>54</sup> *New York Times*, July 11, 1965, 48.

<sup>55</sup> *New York Times*, July 29, 1966, 18.

<sup>56</sup> *New York Times*, July 11, 1965, 48.



Job Corps for a few years, the program was eventually turned over to private corporations.

Given the chance to coordinate a government program, Jeanne Noble turned to women's voluntary organizations, knowing where to find huge armies of support. Her effort differed significantly from men's in one particularly important way. Men too turned to their contacts when constructing a program, but when men like Shriver networked, they were usually already ensconced in public and private-sector centers of power. Experience, access, and tradition all worked to men's benefit both as leaders and as participants in the War on Poverty programs.

Noble's capacity to influence the Women's Job Corps was highly circumscribed. Even if Noble had wanted to propose other ways to think about women's work, it would have been all but impossible to implement something drastically different given the original conception of the Job Corps. After all, it had been a challenge even to get women included in the program.

Over 300,000 hopeful men and women signed up for the Job Corps before it was launched.<sup>57</sup> In reality, the program was ill equipped to deal with the enthusiastic response or the problems that arose. Johnson's War on Poverty, whatever its good intentions, was "poorly executed" and "did little for the working poor and for women in the expanding service sector," as historian Jill Quadagno has stated.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, one of its positive outcomes was the interracial relationships built "between white and Negro volunteer women, especially in the deep South," as one of the WICS women wrote. She

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<sup>57</sup> *New York Times*, April 18, 1966, 15; August 16, 1967, 76.

noted that “avenues of communication are open and opportunities for meaningful dialogue are being made possible... Women of both races are working side by side sharing the problems and joys of this valuable project.”<sup>59</sup>

### *The National Organization for Women*

Even as African American women endeavored to participate in such public policy-making, they also understood the need for outside pressure to force political and social change – this time, on behalf of women’s rights. The PCSW had stimulated the creation of state-level commissions on the status of women. These met annually in the years following the Presidential commission to address issues related to women and to assess the progress made on advancing the goals of the original PCSW. During the third annual meeting, a number of women who were frustrated with the limitations of the state commissions, formed a non-governmental organization, the National Organization for Women (NOW), to aggressively challenge women’s inequality. Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Pauli Murray and Shirley Chisholm, were among NOW’s earliest members, and all of them assumed leadership positions.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Quadagno, 14.

<sup>59</sup> *New York Times*, August 16, 1967, 76.

<sup>60</sup> For a full discussion on the creation of NOW, see Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, Chapter 30; Rupp and Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums*, 179-186; Harrison, *On Account of Sex*, Chapter 10; Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 69, 78-81. For African American women’s participation in NOW, see Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, pp. 303-304.

Hedgeman was on NOW's Board of Directors. Women around the country saw her as a strong advocate and sought her advice. For example, Dorothy Hill from Pennsylvania wrote in June 1967 because "I read of your [Hedgeman's] concern regarding equal rights for women."<sup>61</sup> Hill explained her predicament. A teacher of eleven years, she was granted a year's sabbatical to pursue a graduate degree. During that time she had a baby, and because of that her leave was revoked and she lost her teaching position. She turned to Hedgeman for guidance.<sup>62</sup>

Hedgeman stayed with NOW for nearly two years, but she came to question its strategy and vision. Critical of liberal feminism's primary goal, Hedgeman remarked that women "have accepted that pattern which men have developed, and tried to get into it." Having clearly traveled in her views on women's equality in the public sphere since her 1960 speech in Ghana, she instead advocated "a liberation program which should be thought of in terms of both men and women." She envisioned a system free of the gendered and racialized power dynamics that shaped the current economic and political systems. But with NOW, she worried aloud that "[w]e've set up a whole new competition."<sup>63</sup>

Hedgeman had worked in mixed-sex, single-sex, all-black, and interracial organizations. In her opinion, NOW's exclusive focus on women precluded the

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<sup>61</sup> Letter from Dorothy Hill to Anna Arnold Hedgeman, June 1967, Anna Arnold Hedgeman Manuscript Collection, Box 7.

<sup>62</sup> Letter from Jean Faust to Marlene Sanders, June 9, 1967, Box 4, Folder 8, National Organization for Women, New York City Chapter, Tamiment Library, New York University.

<sup>63</sup> Black Women Oral History Project, Anna Arnold Hedgeman Interview, 21.



possibility of building meaningful coalitions with mixed-sex civil rights groups and others. In 1968 Hedgeman resigned from the board, convinced that the organization would not truly free women or men.<sup>64</sup>

*Different From the Rest – Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm*

An integral contributor to the President's commission, the civil rights movement and the War on Poverty, Jeanne Noble fought to improve women's social, political and economic conditions. Despite her years of effort and a demonstrated commitment to coalition-building, Noble's accomplishments were ambiguous at best. Anna Arnold Hedgeman helped organize the March on Washington, assisted with the lobbying effort for the Civil Rights Act, and served on NOW's board. But she continuously struggled with the exclusionary nature of activist groups. The civil rights movement leadership marginalized very experienced black women who had a great deal to contribute, and the National Organization for Women maintained a relatively narrow vision that avoided challenging the existing conceptions of racialized gender roles.

Shirley Chisholm, on the other hand, emerged from a different political and organizational background. She had not been a member of the NCNW and did not participate in national civil rights debates. Instead she had led a local branch of the Key Women, a comparatively small women's organization. In many ways, she was a conventional politician who honed her political skills as much in New York's political machine as much as she did in the insurgent Unity Democratic Club. She did not have

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<sup>64</sup> See letter from Anna Arnold Hedgeman to Thelma Isaacs, Anna Arnold Hedgeman Manuscript Collection, Box 6.

the same networks within the African American leadership that Hedgeman, Noble or Height had. However, she managed to blaze a new trail for African American women – straight into the halls of Congress. On the eve of her election, the question was whether Shirley Chisholm’s unprecedented electoral victory would translate into real power for the constituencies she spoke for, or if it would prove as limited as Noble’s and Hedgeman’s accomplishments were.

The new representative from Bedford-Stuyvesant was a master at using the press to make bold statements and to strengthen her image. Although she acknowledged that new legislators had very little political power, she found alternative ways to make her presence known. Immediately after she was elected, Chisholm told the *New York Times* that, as a freshman legislator, she was “supposed to be seen and not heard. But,” she went on, “I have no intention of being quiet.”<sup>65</sup>

The press responded enthusiastically. As Susan Brownmiller of the *Times* noted in her feature article on Chisholm, “she is good copy for political reports across the United States, for European journalists, member of the Negro press, the women’s pages, the college press, and Washington’s regular Capitol Hill corps, and TV and radio.”<sup>66</sup> At the outset Chisholm set the tone of her national political career and crafted a way for her constituents and the rest of the nation to think about her.

The Brooklyn legislator was more than capable of garnering favorable attention, but her biggest challenge was to convert that public support to political power in

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<sup>65</sup> Edith Evans Asbury, “Freshman in Congress Won’t Be Quiet,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1968, 25.

Congress. The doors may have opened to the bold New Yorker, but she faced an uphill struggle to secure the progressive legislation she advocated, particularly given the changing political climate. Without a national group like WICS backing her from the outside, and with a very small cohort of African American men in Congress, Chisholm found that the national legislative arena was a difficult one in which to effect change. But that did not keep her from trying.

In her first few months in Congress, Shirley Chisholm established both her style and her legislative agenda. She was an articulate and passionate speaker – the debating skills she had developed in college served her well. Her legislative program exhibited a progressive vision that went beyond most of her liberal colleagues. She was unafraid to advocate the primacy of Federal authority over state governments in policy making and spending. Many elements of her agenda echoed progressive ideas of the New Deal. But there was an important distinction. She placed the elimination of racial and sexual discrimination, and the expansion of rights for African Americans, women and the poor, at the center of her legislative program.

The domestic bills she co-sponsored included increased support for workers' rights to unionize, the elimination of all forms of discrimination, full employment and educational opportunity, health insurance for domestic workers, federal funds for housing, significant welfare reform, equal rights for women, and a repeal of abortion laws. And she was equally clear about her foreign policy agenda, which called for the immediate cessation of the war in Vietnam, a repeal of the draft, amnesty for draft

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<sup>66</sup> Susan Brownmiller, "This is Fighting Shirley Chisholm," *New York Times Magazine*, April 13, 1969, p. 32+.



resisters, and a dramatic curtailment of Federal spending on the military.<sup>67</sup> Her vision was bold and activist. Her capacity to shepherd it through Congress was another matter altogether.

On March 12, 1969, Shirley Chisholm gave a speech on the floor of the House entitled, “On Keeping One’s Promise: A Decent Home for Every American.” She accused legislators of raising people’s hopes with new legislation like the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968, but failing to make good on promises with adequate funding. The appropriations committee had “unmercifully” slashed “nearly every program in the act,” she charged. As an urban legislator, she tried to sway her colleagues by decrying “degrading slum conditions” where “two [and] three children often sleep in one bed, [and where] rats still prowl the rundown tenement houses.” Proposing nearly one billion dollars for urban housing, she urged her colleagues to put muscle into the anti-poverty campaign.<sup>68</sup> In northern cities like New York, promises embedded in the War on Poverty and civil rights legislation remained largely unfulfilled.

Less than a month later, Chisholm questioned her Congressional colleagues about their spending priorities. Addressing the House as “a teacher and a woman” and justifying her arguments on those grounds, she attacked the Nixon administration and Congress for expending huge amounts of money on “unnecessary and impractical weapons” when children in the nation’s capital “get nothing.” She upbraided the

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<sup>67</sup> *Congressional Record*, January 14, 1969 – July 28, 1969 see pages: 654, 1629, 2862, 6160, 6161, 6270, 7765, 8593, 10,788, 12725, 12958, 13259, 13340, 13341, 13380, 13806, 15351, 15995, 20687, 20939.

<sup>68</sup> *Congressional Record*, Extensions of Remarks, Honorable Shirley Chisholm, March 12, 1969, pp. 6270-6271.

Congressmen, “We Americans have come to feel that it is our mission to make the world free. We believe that we are the good guys, everywhere, in Vietnam, in Latin America, wherever we go.”<sup>69</sup> Chisholm argued against the entire U.S. interventionist program.

In the same speech, she challenged both the ideological basis and unbalanced outcomes of America’s domestic and foreign policies. “Unless we ... defeat the enemies of poverty and racism in our own country and make our talk of equality and opportunity ring true, we are exposed as hypocrites in the eyes of the world when we talk about making other people free.” She condemned the existing spending priorities, maintaining, “At this time, gentlemen, the business of America is war and it is time for a change.” She promised to vote “No” on every bill that funded the Department of Defense until “the monstrous waste and shocking profits in the defense budget have been eliminated.”<sup>70</sup>

The *Amsterdam News* gave a great deal of attention to Chisholm’s dramatic political rhetoric. And the hometown audience clearly enjoyed it. The paper paid Chisholm a high tribute and bestowed upon her Martin Luther King, Jr.’s mantle of leadership in the wake of his assassination.<sup>71</sup> Her capacity to garner attention helped her to become a national figure. That the *Amsterdam News* would confer such an accolade on Chisholm - a woman - suggests that her sex was not a significant liability, at least not to a New York audience accustomed to activist women.

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<sup>69</sup> *Congressional Record*, March 26, 1969, p. 7765.

<sup>70</sup> *Congressional Record*, March 26, 1969, p. 7765.

<sup>71</sup> Simon Anekwe, “At Home or In Congress, Mrs. Chisholm Is A Worker,” *Amsterdam News*, August 30, 1969, 2.

In 1963, the PCSW had argued for universal childcare.<sup>72</sup> Almost a decade later, Chisholm and New York Congresswoman Bella Abzug gave the idea a dramatic boost when they collaborated on legislation for a comprehensive child development program. Chisholm and Abzug advocated twenty-four-hour childcare centers, a proposition that recognized women who worked night shifts. Their legislation was vital for working-class mothers, but they also argued that all women, regardless of class distinctions, deserved access to childcare.<sup>73</sup> This point was particularly important because as policy historians Sonya Michel and Jill Quadagno have argued, when publicly funded childcare was linked exclusively to AFDC recipients, it became a coercive measure to force poor women to work. It did nothing to comprehensively expand women's employment or childcare options.<sup>74</sup> Although Chisholm's and Abzug's version was defeated, another version passed in Congress, but was vetoed by President Nixon.<sup>75</sup>

Chisholm had been an advocate for domestic workers while she was in the New York State Assembly, and she took up their cause again in the House. Joined by D.C. delegate Walter Fauntroy and Assistant Secretary of Labor Esther Peterson, Chisholm addressed a crowd of 600 women at the First National Conference of Household Workers in 1972. Fauntroy proposed an amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act to

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<sup>72</sup> Report of the Committee on Home and Community, p. 1, Box 9, Folder: Committee on Home and Community, PCSW Papers, JFKL.

<sup>73</sup> Eleanor Blau, "Mrs. Abzug Backs Child-Care Plan: Mrs. Chisholm, Sutton Also Favor 24-Hour Centers," *New York Times*, February 23, 1971, 27.

<sup>74</sup> Sonya Michel, "Childcare and Welfare (In)Justice," in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring 1998), 45; Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, 13.



benefit domestic workers. Chisholm took the idea to Congress and fought to extend minimum wage benefits to nearly six million new workers including domestic workers.<sup>76</sup> It took two years, but victory came in 1974 when the minimum wage increase was approved.

In the spring of 1969, the Bedford-Stuyvesant representative spoke out on two issues of particular importance in the women's movement. She took up the baton of the past generation - the nearly fifty-year crusade led by Alice Paul of the National Woman's Party - and advocated the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).<sup>77</sup> Vice-president of the New York City chapter of the National Organization for Women, Chisholm became a leader in the fight. But she did so in the arena she felt most comfortable in, namely Congress, whereas she participated only sporadically in NOW's New York activities.<sup>78</sup>

She addressed the House of Representatives about the system of prejudice that kept women in subordinated positions. Appealing especially to legislators who had supported civil rights legislation, Chisholm drew parallels between racial discrimination and sexual discrimination. In an address to Congress in 1969, she asserted,

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<sup>75</sup> Rudolf Englebarts, *Women in the United States Congress, 1917-1972* (Littleton, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited Inc., 1974), 107.

<sup>76</sup> Marlene Cimon, "Extending Minimum Wage to Domestic Workers," *Washington Post*, May 14, 1972, K 20. On Chisholm's legislative effort, see *Congressional Record* 1973, pp. 13846, 13847, 13856, 13857.

<sup>77</sup> Rupp and Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums*.

<sup>78</sup> NOW Address List, Box 4, Folder 8; NOW-New York City Officers for 1968, Box 4, Folder 10, National Organization for Women, New York City Chapter Records, 1966-1984, Tamiment Library, New York University.

As a black person, I am no stranger to race prejudice. But the truth is that in the political world I have been far oftener discriminated against because I am a woman than because I am black...Prejudice against women is still acceptable. There is very little understanding yet of the immorality involved in double pay scales and the classification of most of the better jobs 'for men only.'<sup>79</sup>

Chisholm wove women's rights and economic justice together. She argued for a guarantee of fair pay, safe working conditions, protection against sickness and layoffs, and provision for dignified, comfortable retirement. "Men and women," she said "need these things equally." Her Congressional speech suggested the potential for coalition-building between advocates for women's rights and worker's rights.

Chisholm went on, attacking the standing argument against the ERA, that losing protective labor laws would hurt women. Although Title VII of the Civil Rights Act had significantly weakened these laws, she wanted the ERA to eradicate them completely. Chisholm argued, "That one sex needs protection more than the other is a male supremacist myth as ridiculous and unworthy of respect as the white supremacist myths that society is trying to cure itself of at this time."<sup>80</sup> In 1972, Congress agreed, passing the constitutional amendment and sending it to the states for ratification.

Interestingly, Chisholm herself had proposed protective labor legislation in the New York State Assembly only two years earlier. Her reversal indicated a strategic

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<sup>79</sup> *Congressional Record*, May 21, 1969, p. 13380.

<sup>80</sup> *Congressional Record*, May 21, 1969, pp. 13380-81.

effort to build alliances with women's organizations. As a result of her leadership in NOW, she may also have been moving toward a feminist position of her own.<sup>81</sup>

At the same time, Chisholm took on an even more controversial women's issue, women's rights to abortion. The Brooklyn Congresswoman became the honorary president of the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL) in 1969.<sup>82</sup> She saw the organization's creation as "a turning point in the struggle against this country's cruel, inhuman and archaic abortion laws." She argued that "every woman must be guaranteed - as her inalienable right - the freedom to choose whether or not she will bear children."<sup>83</sup>

By virtue of her public stance alone, she challenged the conventional thinking on black women's resistance to abortion. "There is a deep and angry suspicion among many blacks that even birth control clinics are a plot by the white power structure to keep down the numbers of blacks," she asserted. "But I do not know any black or Puerto Rican women who feel that way. To label family planning and legal abortion programs "genocide" is male rhetoric, for male ears."<sup>84</sup> Although there was concern

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<sup>81</sup> On Chisholm's proposal for protective labor legislation see *New York State Legislative Record Index*, 1967, #1248 p. A118.

<sup>82</sup> See National Abortion Rights Action League, (NARAL) Records Collection, Carton 1. Note: NARAL was initially called the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws and was changed in 1973. NARAL Collection, Box 1, Folder: By Laws, October 25, 1973, SL.

<sup>83</sup> September 29, 1969, Statement at a Press Conference in New York by Congresswoman Chisholm, Black and Third World Women Law Microfilm, Schomburg.

<sup>84</sup> Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, 114.



about the racist uses of birth control and abortion among African Americans, women in these communities definitely sought them out when they needed them.<sup>85</sup>

Because of her unique position in Congress, Chisholm's public stance, particularly on such a contentious issue, drew a great deal of attention. Major print and television media covered a press conference she gave in September 1969.<sup>86</sup> At the event, Chisholm explained,

NARAL's moral responsibility is to get women the finest medical consultation on abortion by licensed physicians at a moderate price. We consider it a national disgrace that these referral services have been forced to operate in a twilight zone.<sup>87</sup>

The Congresswoman acknowledged that her public support of abortion touched off a heavy flow of mail to her Washington office. To her surprise, the responses were overwhelmingly favorable.

Chisholm proposed abortion legislation in Congress in December 1969.

"Compulsory pregnancy costs money," Chisholm argued. She substantiated her point by

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<sup>85</sup> See Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), pp. 11, 45. See also "Black Women and Abortion" Statement by Maryanne Weathers, Black and Third World Women's Alliance, Boston, Mass. Weathers wrote, "The subject of abortion has finally come to the practical attention of the Black community. By practical we mean viewing abortion or terminated pregnancy as a functional alternative to an otherwise disastrous situation." See also: Memo from New England Women's Coalition to New England Women's Groups, February 7, 1971. The Black and Third World Women's Alliance was part of a New England Women's Coalition that called for "Free Abortion on Demand, Repeal of Criminal Abortion Laws and Free Birth Control Information." Both documents from Patricia Gold Manuscript Collection, 430, Box 51, SL.

<sup>86</sup> NARAL Press Conference Report, Box 1, Folder 18, NARAL 1969-, MC 313, SL.

<sup>87</sup> September 29, 1969, Congresswoman Chisholm's Statement, Press Conference, New York, Black and Third World Women Law Microfilm, Schomburg.

providing the number of “illegitimate children” on AFDC to her colleagues. She went on, “Think about it gentlemen, the total amount paid out for these children is about \$48 million a year and unmarried mothers are the ones who find it most difficult to get off public assistance rolls.”<sup>88</sup> A strategic politician, Chisholm knew her audience and played to its interests. Economic justification, not an appeal for women’s rights, was the only way into this debate with her overwhelmingly male audience. She also urged the New York State legislature to repeal its abortion laws, asserting that “there is no reason at all for the State to enter into this medical decision-making process.”<sup>89</sup> There were limits to the government’s authority in her opinion, and women’s bodies were one of them.

Chisholm was not only a pragmatic and outspoken legislator, but she also collaborated with other black leaders and with feminists to form special interest pressure groups. In 1970, Chisholm and the few other African Americans in the House of Representatives formed a working group. A year later, it was officially recognized as the Congressional Black Caucus. Federal enforcement of civil rights laws had been weak, and the representatives felt their collective strength could be more effective than individual efforts. The thirteen black representatives in Congress, all Democrats, endeavored to bolster political power by building a national network.<sup>90</sup>

Chisholm lent her support to a number of women’s organizations as well. In addition to being an officer in NOW- New York City and the honorary president of

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<sup>88</sup> *Congressional Record*, Extensions of Remarks, 91/1 December 11, 1969, p. 38592.

<sup>89</sup> Dear Legislator letter from Shirley Chisholm, Congresswoman and Honorary President, NARAL, March 1970, Box 2, Folder 30, NARAL Collection, SL.

<sup>90</sup> *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, June 24, 1972, p. 1523.

NARAL, she was also on the board of the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL), which had been started in 1968 to combat sex discrimination in employment, education and de facto tax inequities. Although more of a figurehead than an activist in these organizations, Shirley Chisholm's name on the letterhead was symbolically important, particularly to members of the mainly white, middle-class feminist organizations. Her participation in the organizations' leadership suggested a universality to the movement that was in practice yet unrealized. But it also indicated to black women, skeptical of the women's movement, that these organizations were an avenue to consider for activism. Her involvement with these groups also benefited her politically insofar as it enabled her to claim the feminist label at a time when the women's movement gained its greatest momentum.

In July 1971, Chisholm collaborated with other nationally prominent women, including Bella Abzug, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem to found the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC). The organization was created specifically to "maximize representation of women and sympathetic men in local, state and federal elections."<sup>91</sup> It also fought to eliminate sexism, racism, violence and poverty, and urged the immediate withdrawal from Vietnam – all issues Chisholm had been advocating in Congress. They worked successfully with others to get the ERA passed in Congress. But the limits of the NWPC's influence were clear. While it was instrumental in more than doubling the proportions of female representatives at the Democratic and Republican party conventions between 1968 and 1972, it did little to increase the number

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<sup>91</sup> Maren Lockwood Carden, *The New Feminist Movement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1974), 139.



of women in Congress.<sup>92</sup> The realm of formal politics was a bastion of entrenched male power and it seemed difficult to crack open in any significant way.

Chisholm raised an important issue that white, middle-class women had not addressed during the NWPC's early days. Mindful of black women's double oppression, she aired her concerns about racism. She advised the mostly white group that, "Black women want to be part of the women's movement, but we are also part of another movement - the liberation of our own people."<sup>93</sup> Chisholm tried to build a coalition out of her relationship to the women's movement and her position as an African American leader. The alliance, she insisted, could be very powerful politically. Historian Paula Giddings argued that "[h]istory had offered little comfort to Black women," and they had grounds to distrust the women's movement.<sup>94</sup> The challenge Chisholm faced to bridge gaps created by distinct class and race experiences was difficult in the NWPC. It proved impossible later in her career.

The ninety-third Congress convened in 1973 with no more women than the ninety-second had - fourteen in all. This number was lower than it had been throughout much of the 1950s. Despite its organized efforts, the women's movement had not succeeded in altering the gender balance in Congress. And even though Shirley Chisholm was a national figure, her prominence and vocal advocacy for more women in politics did not yield significant legislative results, nor did it usher in a sea change in the

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Eileen Shanahan, "Women Organize for Political Power," *New York Times*, July 11, 1971, 1.

<sup>94</sup> Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 308.

number of women elected to office. However, she was joined in Congress by two more African American women, Barbara Jordan of Texas and Yvonne Brathwaite Burke of California.

### *Chisholm's Presidential Campaign*

When the 1972 election season got underway, national black leaders strategized about the potential influence of the black electorate and they pondered fielding an African American candidate for president. The group included Jesse Jackson, Cleveland Mayor Carl Stokes, Congressman John Conyers, Representative Julian Bond and a number of others. Women were missing for the most part just as they had been in the leadership of the March on Washington, although Barbara Jordan and Coretta Scott King attended some of the strategy meetings. Chisholm, already a national figure in her own right, wrote that "I was not asked to participate and I did not intrude."<sup>95</sup> The group also tried to hammer out a "black agenda." They were unsuccessful on all counts. According to political scientist Robert Smith, ideological, institutional and individual personality conflicts plagued post civil-rights era black politics.<sup>96</sup>

Shirley Chisholm, who remained on the outside of this circle, did not wait for anyone to give her the green light. She decided to run for President and did so without consulting senior Democrats or the predominantly male black leadership. In *The Good Fight*, her autobiography about her presidential campaign, Chisholm charged that

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<sup>95</sup> Shirley Chisholm, *The Good Fight* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 25.

<sup>96</sup> Robert C. Smith, *We Have No Leaders: African Americans in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: State University of New York, 1996), 54.

African Americans and other minorities “have invariably acted on the lesser-evil principle and supported the white candidate who seemed most liberal, most sympathetic.”<sup>97</sup> Her campaign sought another option.

Chisholm found the new black leadership relatively unsupportive of her bid for the presidency. Rather than making overtures of accommodation to them to put together a united front, she kept to herself. This decision deprived her of an important source of support, and especially during her presidential campaign, Chisholm was reminded of the steep price she paid for often going it alone.

When she declared her candidacy she promised to tap “the energies and abilities of countless new groups of Americans - Women, Blacks, Browns, Indians, Orientals, and Youth,” who she claimed had been “boxed out of the opportunities to participate equally and enthusiastically in building a strong and just society.”<sup>98</sup> She suggested that her candidacy would change that. Her platform promised an activist federal government like she had been attempting in Congress during her past three years. Her platform called for an elimination of poverty, more “justice in America,” a commitment to the environment, a new housing program, and much more.<sup>99</sup>

Chisholm’s campaign suffered from a lack of experienced management. The professional she hired to run her campaign, Gerald Robinson, quit after just one month,

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<sup>97</sup> Chisholm, *The Good Fight*, pp. 24-25; *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, June 24, 1972, p. 1526.

<sup>98</sup> “Statement of Candidacy for the Office of President of the United States by the Honorable Shirley Chisholm,” January 25, 1972. Container 3, Shirley Chisholm Papers, Rutgers Special Collections.



disillusioned with “the confused mess of squabbling groups he had to work with.” Instead, the individual state primary campaigns were organized by disparate but enthusiastic grassroots supporters. A few were initiated by young college students like Marion Humphreys, a Princeton student who led the effort in New Jersey, and Rob Gottlieb, a Cornell student who helped the Florida campaign. Women across the country organized local efforts, including State Representative Gwen Cherry in Florida and members of the Berkeley chapter of NOW in California, but there was no coordinated strategy.

The Black Panther Party endorsed her candidacy and called on “every black, poor and progressive person in the country to help elect her.” Some supporters wanted Chisholm to disavow the Panther’s endorsement, but she responded, “the Black Panthers are citizens of the United States and they have a right to endorse whomever they decide to endorse.”<sup>100</sup> Rejecting the advice of the political pragmatists, Chisholm determined to maintain her own agenda.

In her autobiography, Chisholm talked about the difficulty of bringing white female activists and campaign workers from the black community together on the campaign. Because she had no national campaign manager, volunteers ended up in “direct power struggles” with each other. Racial and sexual tensions plagued her campaign in just about every state she ran in. Assessing the contentious dynamics in her autobiography, Chisholm wrote:

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<sup>99</sup> “Shirley Chisholm Speaks Out: Presidential Campaign Position Papers No. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8” Container 1-2, Shirley Chisholm Papers, Rutgers University Special Collection.

The conflict between blacks and white women appeared to be a competition over which group was going to own me and my candidacy...[I]t has been generally true that the women's movement has been a white middle-class phenomenon; black women share many of the same concerns as white ones,...but they have different priorities from white women. Blacks are still concerned with survival, while whites can afford the luxury of being concerned with improvement...But white and black women could work together on economic issues, like job discrimination, where their needs are the same. The women's movement, generally speaking, has not made such issues paramount.<sup>101</sup>

Despite her left-liberal agenda, Chisholm was unable to attract serious attention from antipoverty activists, feminists, civil rights advocates or young people. The effort to build a coalition failed for many reasons, not least of which was her own quixotic approach to the campaign. Nevertheless Chisholm won enough delegates to participate in the Democratic National Convention in Miami.

More frustrating to Chisholm than the trouble of keeping peace across the color line was the tepid support she received from the women's organizations she had helped create. Bella Abzug, fellow New Yorker and co-chair of the NWPC, along with the rest of the national board, "confined themselves to 'encouraging' Representative Chisholm's Presidential candidacy."<sup>102</sup> Although some individual women or local chapters of organizations endorsed Chisholm, the leaders were unwilling to take what would have been a radical step and throw their support behind her whole-heartedly. The NWPC

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<sup>100</sup> "Black Panther Party For Shirley Chisholm," *Washington Post*, April 28, 1972, A4; Chisholm, *The Good Fight*, 107.

<sup>101</sup> Chisholm, *The Good Fight*, pp. 106, 108.

<sup>102</sup> Laurie Johnston, "Women's Caucus Has New Rallying Cry: 'Make Policy, Not Coffee,'" *New York Times*, February 6, 1972, 60.

decided to back George McGovern in the Democratic primary, unwilling to make the symbolic statement.

Chisholm tried to minimize her disappointment with the women's organizations, but the Presidential campaign had clearly taken its toll. "I'm tired of in-fighting. I haven't got time to keep up with it all," she told the *New York Times*.<sup>103</sup> But in reality, she was disheartened by the lack of support she received from African American and women's groups alike. Black men, she felt, were not really ready to support black women in politics. The price for the divisiveness between African American men and women was "a tremendous hindrance to the progress of the race," she maintained. Sounding bitter and hurt, she told a visitor to her Brooklyn office in 1973, "I want Black politicians to leave me alone...I have been in this business for 18 years and I'm now reverting to being a loner...My responsibility will always be to the people."<sup>104</sup> In reality Chisholm was as much a source of divisiveness as any black political leader. But she refused to accept her share of the responsibility. Instead, the former presidential candidate took her story to the public by writing *The Good Fight* so that she could fashion the narrative the way she wanted people to remember it. The title is misleading, suggesting a movement that never existed.

Chisholm spoke about being "the people's candidate" and a consensus-builder. Her bid for the presidency could have been an opportunity to put her words into practice. But she did not reach out systematically to African Americans, women, and the poor. Moreover she did not have the same broad foundation of organizational support

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.



that Dorothy Height and Jeanne Noble had with WICS, whose organizations counted millions of members. NOW and the new feminist organizations were small in comparison. And even if Chisholm had the ability to build coalitions as Dorothy Height and Jeanne Noble did, it is hard to imagine that they could have held together for this kind of radical political change. Could she have served as a unifying force for women and African Americans? Were struggles for equality enough to unite white women and people of color in support of Chisholm? Her candidacy suggested that at least in 1972, they could not.

### *Back to Congress*

Although disappointed by the lack of support from the black community during her presidential campaign, Chisholm returned to the House of Representatives in 1972, winning her seat back with 87.9% of the vote. She continued to fight for welfare reform, an extension of minimum-wage coverage, job development and public service employment, and adequate childcare programs. And she battled, albeit unsuccessfully, to save the Office of Economic Opportunity. The liberal Democrat from Bedford-Stuyvesant was back to take up the fight in Congress. Throughout the 1970s, Chisholm's constituents rewarded her by returning her to office each election with over 80% of the vote.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Penda Saxby, "I want to be Left Alone," *CORE*, Vol. 3, 1973 Summer, pp. 18-20.

<sup>105</sup> *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, March 10, 1973, p. 536; *Congressional Record*, 93rd Congress, Session 1, February 22, 1973, p. 5070; Austin Scott, "Caucus Delivers 'True State of the Union' Blacks Assail Nixon's Budget," *Washington Post*, February 1, 1973, A1; *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, February 10, 1973, p.

At the 1973 National Women's Political Caucus convention in Houston, Texas, Chisholm addressed the crowd, unafraid to speak about contentious issues. She urged the women gathered there to "extend the movement beyond the white middle class to the black and Mexican-American women who suffer double discriminations." She pointed out that, "The use of the word 'Ms.' is not a burning issue to them. They are more concerned about extension of the minimum wage...about welfare reform. They are not only women, but women of color and they are subject to more discrimination than whites."<sup>106</sup> Chisholm underscored the different gendered relationships in black households compared with the white, middle-class norm. African American women viewed anything considered anti-male with skepticism because of the delicate economic situation. "For the most part black and Mexican-American women have been able to get better jobs than their husbands," she explained.<sup>107</sup> As historian Elsa Barkley Brown suggests, white middle class women needed to "acknowledge the way in which race shaped their lives."<sup>108</sup> Chisholm understood the significant role race played in women's experiences, both black and white, and she attempted to redress those differences at the women's caucus.

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320; March 3, 1973, pp. 477-478; June 16, 1973, p. 1508, 1511; *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, March 26, 1971, p. 667; March 10, 1973, p. 536; March 19, 1977, p. 496; April 25, 1981, p. 722.

<sup>106</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 10, 1973 from Black and Third World Women Law Microfilm, Schomburg Center.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown, "'What Has Happened Here': The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics," in *"We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible": A Reader in Black Women's History*, edited by Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King, and Linda Reed (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1995), 43.

In the mid-1970s, the Congressional legislators from New York watched in frustration as New York City deteriorated under economic pressures. A critical article in the *New York Times* suggested that the city's Congressional delegation was "big, but politically toothless." Referring to Washington's lack of support, Chisholm said defensively, "they don't understand our fantastic cost of living. They don't understand how our tax base has been eroded by the flight to the suburbs."<sup>109</sup> Chisholm sounded like a different person in 1975 than she did in 1969. The woman who stood down the Speaker of the House her first month in Congress was rendered nearly ineffective against the Republican leadership and the weak economy. The *Amsterdam News* reported that Chisholm was "sick and tired of being blamed for everything that happens in her constituency."<sup>110</sup> This did not sound like "fighting Shirley Chisholm." Throughout the late 1970s, Chisholm continued her legislative struggles, but she was clearly frustrated by the Left's inability to move forward in a politically hostile climate. After serving one term under President Reagan, she finally retired from Congress.

Chisholm's victory in Congress and her entry into the presidential race suggested that African American women's political stature had altered significantly in twenty-five years. They went from holding no elected positions in New York City to running for President. But the meaning of such change is unclear. Symbolically, Chisholm's accomplishments were important. She inspired African American women in New York

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<sup>109</sup> Maurice Carroll, "City's Congressmen Unable to Obtain Help from Washington in Fiscal Crisis," *New York Times*, July 30, 1975, 38.

<sup>110</sup> George Todd, "Don't Blame Me - Shirley Chisholm," *Amsterdam News* January 31, 1976, B1.



City and around the nation to become politically active.<sup>111</sup> Melody Murphy from Kentucky, for example, wrote Chisholm, “What a marvelous trailblazer and inspiration you are to thousands of women from all over the country. Many of us hold you as an ideal and a role model.”<sup>112</sup> Chisholm was also a very popular speaker and by the early 1970s, she was receiving the highest honoraria of any member of Congress. However, despite gaining insider status and becoming a national symbol, she remained a relatively ineffective legislator, particularly in the face of rising conservatism.

### *Conclusion*

By the late 1960s, African American women had made their way into mainstream national politics. With increasing frequency, they were considered for government appointments and elected office. Presidential appointee Jeanne Noble and Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm illustrate the advances black women made into the state structure.

In those positions, however, Noble and Chisholm were thwarted from achieving substantive change. Their posts yielded little in the way of resources for the predominantly black communities like Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant. Shirley Chisholm may have been a “5-Alarm” to her New York constituents, but she was unable to secure any significant resources for Brooklyn. The economic and political benefits of state-based power mostly continued to elude even African American political elites. The

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<sup>111</sup> “Negro Women Set Meeting on Politics,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1969.

<sup>112</sup> Letter from Melody Murphy to Shirley Chisholm, August 19, 1983, Box 2, Container 3, Shirley Chisholm Papers, Rutgers Special Collections.

branches of formal politics were able to absorb the new participants with little effect. As an instrument of change, the state proved markedly inflexible.

At the same time, these women made the successful leap from local politics and social movement activism into the national government, which indicates the window of opportunity that 1960s liberalism opened up. Noble, Height, Hedgeman, Murray and Chisholm worked at an historical moment when the politics of feminism, civil rights, and liberalism converged. Uniquely positioned in the political culture, Hedgeman, Noble and Chisholm embodied the nexus of these political movements. They tried continuously to build coalitions out of those strands in order to bring about meaningful social and political change. Jeanne Noble's experience in the Job Corps and Shirley Chisholm's run for President demonstrate, however, that the liberalism of the 1960s opened a moment of possibility, but a true coalition for social change never materialized.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

The state remained both an important ally and a significant obstacle for black women in New York City seeking to bring about meaningful political, social and economic change. Between 1944 and 1972, they could count some important gains, including government appointments and elected office at the city, state and national levels. They were also consultants for the U.S. Department of State and served as cultural and political ambassadors at home and abroad. At the same time, the social and political changes that transpired in this time period were absolutely essential for enabling black women to turn long-standing interest in formal politics into electoral victories and political recognition.

African American women have a long history of providing services and resources for their communities when the state failed in its responsibilities. In addition, they have always been politically active, advocating for suffrage and participating in party politics as early and as aggressively as political parties would allow. But it took the dramatic experiences of the Great Depression and World War II to create a moment of opportunity that women like Maude Richardson, Ada Jackson, Ruth Whaley, Pauli Murray and Anna Hedgeman immediately seized. As activists in community, labor, and black organizations, they were politicized even before the war. When large numbers of men were called into service, they turned their political energies to the opportunities



opened up in government. Already engaged at the grassroots level, they saw the state as yet another way to pursue economic and social justice for African Americans.

It took more than just the absence of men in political clubhouses for black women to gain access to formal politics, however. As Maude Richardson's, Ada Jackson's and Pauli Murray's losses and Bessie Buchanan's and Shirley Chisholm's electoral victories suggest, it was a combination of personality, gender, race and political party support that enabled black women to win office in New York City. In a city so dominated by one party, namely the Democrats, their support or lack of it determined a candidate's success, especially in the case of black women. But the Democratic party did not come to support black women as candidates readily. It required a serious challenge from Richardson, a Republican, before they realized the importance of both gender and race considerations to voters. Only when black women outnumbered black men on voter registration lists in a number of Manhattan and Brooklyn districts and made themselves an important constituency, did Democrats finally respond. In 1954 they ran Bessie Buchanan in Harlem and she won.

Cold War fears about the effective use of the nation's human resources in the fight against communism, along with pressure from women's labor activists spurred President Kennedy to initiate the President's Commission. By 1961, the year it was created, the civil rights movement had made a significant mark on the nation's collective consciousness about racial inequality. Nationally prominent African American women were increasingly called upon to participate in federal-level debates -- about race relations, about women's status in society, and about poverty. The combination of women's activism and pressure on the state, as well as the changing national climate that

their pressure helped bring about, facilitated this significant change. By the end of the 1960s, the nation witnessed history as Shirley Chisholm took her seat in the United States House of Representatives.

No simple assessment can be made about black women's capacity to bring about political, economic and social change vis-à-vis the state. Electoral politics did not prove to be the most effective form of activism, although the women who won elected office could count some modest accomplishments. The advancements in women's and racial equality happened more effectively through other means, particularly through outside pressures including grassroots activism and the courts. Set against the backdrop of the national civil rights movement and the women's movement, these struggles for equality found inspiration in resistance traditions of the past, but clearly capitalized on the changing social norms of the present.

Although they were not able to implement broad changes once they were inside the state structures – in Mayor Wagner's cabinet, in the State Assembly, on the President's Commission, administrating the Women's Job Corps, and in Congress – women did have some success in advocating for their communities. They drew strength and support from their local networks and women's organizations. They brought issues of racial discrimination and gender inequality into the state houses and Congress, and forced the members of those bodies, almost all of whom were white men, to hear them out and to consider their arguments. In at least some cases they succeeded in securing legislative victories. African Americans and women clearly gained some political status and to a lesser extent economic and educational opportunities as a result of the social

movements and political activism led by such black women as Hedgeman, Height, Murray, Noble and Chisholm.

At the same time, the limitations on their ability to bring about significant changes, to redirect resources and power including government money, jobs, and political positions, were real. Sociologist Elisabeth Clemens has written about “the culturally embedded equation of the political with masculinity.”<sup>1</sup> The traditions of the state were gendered in ways that precluded women from organizing effective coalitions inside formal political structures. For black women, these limitations were even more substantial because of the insidious workings of racial discrimination, combined with gender discrimination. Class privilege, advanced degrees, and national prominence was enough by the 1960s to gain some of the women in this study recognition and a place at the table, but it was not enough to give them real or sustained power that they could distribute to others.

The history of black women’s political activism between the end of World War II and the early 1970s offers some rather sobering lessons for political activism in more current times. It was nearly impossible for women like Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Jeanne Noble and Shirley Chisholm to build coalitions that linked African Americans’ concerns with those of the feminist movement even in the heyday of 1960s liberalism. Dorothy Height built an important inter-racial women’s network after the PCSW and successfully directed its energies to the struggles in the South. Jeanne Noble tapped that network

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth S. Clemens, “Organizational Repertoires and Institutional Change: Women’s Groups and the Transformation of American Politics, 1890-1920,” in *Civic Engagement in American Democracy* eds. Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 91.



when she joined President Johnson's War on Poverty. But that coalition of women, and the other organizations that came after it, including the National Organization for Women and the National Women's Political Caucus, failed to establish a platform that represented black women's most urgent concerns.

The price of that failure to build broad, sustained coalitions was felt during the Reagan administration and through the Clinton administration, when much of the nation welcomed "the end of welfare as we know it" and another significant piece of the New Deal was abandoned. It meant that when the federal government began its dramatic erosion of even a minimal social safety net, there was no broad-based coalition strong enough to stop or even slow it.

Shirley Chisholm's presidential campaign exposed the conflicts between African Americans and white feminists over social priorities and strategies. She noted that to a large extent, the organized women's movement was a white middle-class phenomenon. While black women were concerned about many of the same issues white women were, they maintained different priorities. African American were "still concerned with survival," Chisholm argued. But white women could "afford the luxury of being concerned with improvement."<sup>2</sup> Her legislative agenda and her campaign could have served as a unifying platform. But when she ran for President, African Americans, women, the poor and working class, and those against the Vietnam War, all constituencies her platform spoke to, failed to rally to her side.

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<sup>2</sup> Shirley Chisholm, *The Good Fight*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), pp. 106, 108.

Moreover the story recounted here demonstrates that political insider status is not enough for African American women to bring about significant and lasting change. It was necessary for women to organize and put pressure on the state from the outside as well. Anna Arnold Hedgeman left Mayor Robert Wagner Jr.'s administration disheartened by his lack of commitment to African Americans in New York City. Her classification of his administration as "cynical, unimaginative, ineffectual and bumbling"<sup>3</sup> captured the depths of her frustration. During the peak years of the civil rights movement, Hedgeman worked outside of formal politics, organizing the March on Washington and lobbying to get the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed in Congress. She understood the need to mobilize support to apply pressure on the state externally. The realization she came to then is still valid today. Coordinated efforts from non-governmental organizations, allied with those on the inside, offer the best chance to bring about change for those to whom the political system is still not fully responsive.

The difference between local and national politics – Shirley Chisholm's relative success in the New York State Assembly compared with her lack of success in Congress suggests that for women, particularly African American women, the capacity to activate constituencies and to influence political coalitions inside the legislatures becomes increasingly difficult as the centers of power become greater. Elective politics was and still is the bastion of men. Women have not yet fully succeeded in maximizing their political influence in the administrative and legislative arenas, particularly at the national level.

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<sup>3</sup> *New York Times*, August 15, 1965, 56.

In reflecting back on her run for the Presidency in 1972, Shirley Chisholm noted thoughtfully that the country was not ready for an African American or a woman to run, and definitely not someone who was both black and female. But she held out hope and said, “Someday...but not yet. Someday the country will be ready.”<sup>4</sup> That a black woman could run for the highest political office in the nation and make it to the Democratic convention indicates that some important changes had transpired in the social and political landscapes between the end of World War II and the early 1970s. But the fact that the hope Chisholm articulated in 1972 sounds perhaps even more wistful today than it did thirty years ago indicates just how much further women and African Americans have to go before the political system is fully responsive and truly representative.

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<sup>4</sup> Chisholm, *The Good Fight*, 2.



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