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The Status Of Women Of Color In The American Political System: 2008
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Twenty-four years ago, as first author, I drafted the initial sections of the collaborative paper, "Moving Mountains, Past, Present and Future: The Role of Women of Color in the American Political System." Published by the National Institute for Women of Color (NIWC) with a Ford Foundation grant, it was the first of a series of four *Brown Papers*. I was a board member of NIWC, employed at the time as Affirmative Action Officer, University of Nevada Reno (UNR). I served on the NIWC board for 11 years. I lasted at UNR for 2 years, before moving on to Penn State University as Affirmative Action Officer. Before UNR, I was director of Science Supportive Services at Washington State University. After Penn State, I directed the California State University, Sacramento, Multi-Cultural Center. Each role or position was marked by hard work, routinely 60 to 80 hours a week or more, which yielded many achievements and much more education and experience in every position. Yet, while male subordinates and collaborative colleagues commonly received high praise for carrying out my concepts and directives in programs, strategies and activities of my design and development, there has been an ongoing and persistent reluctance to credit me with the successes of the offices, programs, staff, fund raising, or innovations. Many have taken credit for my work. Most significantly, my experience is not unique. Rather it is a common experience of women of color, not only in educational institutions from K-12 to the university, but in the nonprofit, business, corporate, government and community sectors.

The consequences of these circumstances is to minimize and belittle the achievements and contributions of women of color, to demand our perpetual sacrifice to the good of others with no share of benefit to ourselves, to denigrate efforts to improve conditions for ourselves and our sisters of color, to insist that we see the successes of white women and men of color as our own and not to "nitpick" by insisting that we have the same benefits of citizenship and revolutionary change in fact and not simply in symbols. From childhood, we are taught to be satisfied with only symbolic and token inclusion of women of color, even when those tokens are self-serving and do nothing to share information, resources or contacts with the masses of us. In 2008, women of

color are still being told to wait even to be mentioned until after the election. We are told not to make waves that might hurt the chances of a White woman or Black man despite their refusal to address us or our issues directly. We are told to have hope of changes for the better with no basis for such hope since we are being told the same things we have heard for more than 200 years.. In some instances we are subjected to hostility and discourtesy simply for mentioning that there is an intersection of racism and sexism which impacts us in unique ways. Worst of all, the injury and deaths resulting from our social, emotional, physical, psychological experiences are ignored as though we do not exist. We are still coping with the *Myth of The Superwoman* described by Michele Wallace 34 years ago. We are every bit as invisible as Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

"Moving Mountains," was developed by a group of us with the view that the American political system was not limited to electoral politics but encompassed all of the actions and behaviors associated with the interactions of people in the country and their ability to participate in society with just and equitable benefits. Consequently, we collectively discussed the path to equity in a democracy with analysis of whether women of color could overcome the great resistance to our full participation and our forced invisibility maintained by "barriers of laws, institutions, systematized behaviors and proliferation of fallacious beliefs." Although this paper was written 30 years after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, a long and disappointing time period for the implementation of the Supreme Court decision against school segregation, many of us—women of color—had come to believe that we could make substantive changes in society through the identification of core values of our communities with which we could survive while eliminating barriers. This optimistic analysis persuaded us that we could change the directions of rather than reform society. Though observing that our participation in social and political movements was portrayed minimally, we remained convinced that "the path to equity in a democracy is through the political system. Thus, the ability of women of color to achieve that goal is affected by their participation in and influence on the direction of political institutions in our society."

It is worth recalling that 1984, when "Moving Mountains" was written, was the year in which Ronald Reagan was elected to his second term and noting that as this current essay is being written only 2 months remain until this year's presidential election and end of the final term of George W. Bush. The view of the 1984 Brown paper writers was that we had just lived through the worst political backlash to progressive accomplishments since the 1950s. In 2008, the backlash seems even greater, with an accompanying, widespread denial that our oppression and that of others still exists. Many of the under-40, fed by propagandistic media have come to believe that discrimination and other social problems were ended by the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Those who insist on discussing issues related to racism, sexism, class-ism and other issues are unpopular and are shunned for raising issues that others refuse to talk about, let alone address with action. These include issues of women and people of color. However, over time it has become clear that the underclasses of white women experiencing sexism and men of color experiencing racism are not the *bottom* class.

At the bottom, in every conceivable way, substantially below all other groups, are women of color. Perhaps most tragically to those who live at this intersection of oppressions is the reality that those who are most needed and expected to be our allies, white females and men of color, are often oppressors too. So it is, that in the current political season, with all the emphasis on diversity of every kind, that no political party and no candidate, except Cynthia McKinney, uses the words women of color on their websites unless they are "loving cheerleaders". No discussions of issues

of women of color are allowed. (To those who may argue that the presence of Justice 4 All Includes Women of Color among the events on Barack Obama's site contradicts this, it does not. We are not permitted to be in the groups on the site and access to us has been restricted in some way, just as editorial changes and insertions have been made without our ability to remove them. We have been informed in writing that we are "objectionable" despite more than 18 months of supportive efforts, including having people donate to the campaign.) Even worse, attempts by women of color to point out our issues are countered with hostility, as if we are traitors both to white women and men of color if we identify a uniquely negative experience as the consequence of dealing with both racism and sexism. It was precisely this kind of attitude that led Sojourner Truth to give her 1851 "Ain't I a woman" speech and which led to Stokely Carmichael's infamous remark in 1964 that "the best position of women in the civil rights movement is prone." With this background, it is worth examining aspects of the status of women of color then (1984) and now (2008).

In 1984, few women of color were elected to national offices; none to the Senate. And now, in 2008, there is no woman of color in the US Senate. As of 2008, less than 40 women of color have ever been elected to Congress. Only 4 Asians have ever been elected to the House of Representatives—3 from Hawaii; one from California; all Japanese Americans. No Asian American woman of any other group has ever been in Congress—either house. Between 1976 and 1977, there were 5 women of color in the US House of Representatives. Only one of them was re-elected. She was the only woman of color in Congress from 1978 to 1982; then one more was elected. This means only 6 women of color served in the House of Representatives from 1976 to 1982. From 1982 to 2008, twenty-six years, there have been 31 or 32. All struggled with those who should have been their allies. Up to 1984, only 7 women (8 if the Ambassador to the UN is counted) had ever been appointed to a Cabinet position. Only 1 woman of color was among them. This is in the history of the country! State and local representation is not better as a whole than federal representation for women of color. In 2008, under 2% of legislatures in the country, including Congress, are women of color. Though it has been forgotten, Patsy Mink, as well as Shirley Chisholm, made a try for the presidency in 1972. Charlotta Bass, Angela Davis, and LaDonna Harris were vice presidential candidates on the Progressive, Communist and Citizens Party tickets.

Most political power of women of color has not been in elective power but in organizations they establish to address labor or community concerns. These have been women's groups, like Mana (Mexican American Women National Association) or the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs which have generally been single ethnic group in their focus. Native American Indian women, however, because of tribal governments, have grown more and more visible there and have important experience in elective politics within Indian Nations that other women of color do not have to the same degree.

Political experiences and dilemmas are only one aspect of the circumstances of women of color which merit examination. Another is our humanity. Who are we? What are our lives like? The answers can be varied but have some common threads. We are members of a society focused on appearance, surface beauty, that excludes us from the start because the standard in use begins with straight blond hair, blue eyes and thin, pre-pubescent bodies. Women of color are more likely to have brown or hazel eyes, hair colors ranging from light brown to black, and bodies with larger breasts and hips than the flat-chested, hipless models presented in the media as the ideal. From birth we are indoctrinated with propaganda that says we are ugly and unworthy of attention, respect, and inclusion. This is not new. At the end of legal slavery in the US, as abolitionists, including African American men, and Suffragettes, white women,

worked to expand voting rights, these groups agreed to exclude Black women from having voting rights..

Images of us, in television, film, print media and in popular culture, if they portray us at all, show us as ignorant, dirty, unethical, criminal, addicts, whores & prostitutes, desperate, angry, uneducated, subservient, welfare abusers, over-emotional, unreasonable, crazy and again as ugly. These are the overwhelming majority of images presented of women of color with no equivalent counterbalance of images of hard worker, intelligent, success against the odds, survival in spite of the challenges, celibate, educational achiever, creative, maintainer of religious, family and cultural traditions, nor of the extraordinary abuses we have endured at the hands of white men, white women and men of color. And, we are castigated whenever we mention these realities. The outpouring of hostility toward Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* by men who attacked it while admitting they had not and would never read it. Similar, earlier attacks on Michele Wallace for *Black Macho and The Myth of The Superwoman* for pointing out that common commentary about Black women as tough survivors was a mechanism to trivialize or ignore the dire circumstances in which we are not surviving but are being destroyed without social notice and without understanding ourselves what is happening.

How many people who read Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* recognise that the young, black woman character, who earns a college education but still can only get a job as a maid for a rich, white woman, is fiction taken from life. I was one of the thousands of such young women who worked as slave labor for \$10 a week and a sofa to sleep on in the basement recreation room without any privacy for work as a live-in maid, in order to be able to attend Cheney State College (now University) in Pennsylvania. The colleges and universities were the employment offices and screening mechanisms for the elite to exploit us. In 1962 and before, young women of color were not given sports scholarships or even on campus janitorships. There is a world of difference between having a job to which one goes for a few hours and a live-in experience in which one is demeaned around the clock. Since there was no public transportation to Broomall, Pennsylvania where I was enslaved, and since my "employers" would not transport me to Cheyney, the Dean of Women who made these arrangement also arranged for a faculty member to give me a ride to campus. However, this African American faculty member, who through the years has earned a national reputation for civil rights research and writing, would not pick me up where I stayed or go out of his way other than to stop a moment on the highway and allow me to get in. I was never informed regarding whether he was paid to give me a ride. So I had to walk, about a mile, from where I stayed to wait for him on the highway. I had to be there before he went by. He would not wait for me. On the return trip, I had to wait in the parking lot and be ready for his departure. This was during the winter in November, December, January and February, in rain and snow and ice. Only through the regular letters received from a lifelong, heroin-addicted friend, whose extraordinary intellectual brilliance was destroyed in an era when African American men in science and medicine whose aspirations were outside the box, did I survive. Despite his addiction, "Georgie" inspired my studies and aroused my intellectual curiosity, from Will Durant's book, *The Story of Philosophy*, including our much discussed essay, "The Death of Socrates," to lengthy discussions about the reaction to giftedness, to genius among African Americans and other people of color. I was fortunate. Most women of color do not have a "Georgie" friend (male or female) in their lives, which accounts for the high rates of suicides among many of our most gifted. How are women of color expected to survive when generally excluded from all of the reward systems? We are not rewarded for personal sacrifice, nor for education, experience, skill or talent. No matter what progress has been achieved thus far, we remain on the bottom.

In her introductory remarks to Paula Giddings's book, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, Toni Morrison writes " . . .she had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may well have invented herself." This is the characteristic, hidden experience of women of color then and now. In *When and Where I Enter*, Paula Giddings testifies to the "profound influence of African American women on race and women's movements throughout American history" powerfully portraying "how black women have transcended racist and sexist attitudes—often confronting white feminists and black male leaders alike . . . "

Giddings documents experiences of women of color from "the open disregard for the rights of slave women to examples of today's more covert racism and sexism in civil rights and women's organizations." In 2008, this struggle continues unabated.

Women of color who oppose racist tactics in current presidential politics, such as those of groups like the National Organization for Women; who counter racist smear campaigns across the country; encourage donations to the Obama campaign have been excluded from current access to the same political campaign being supported. By contrast, those white women's groups who participated in or looked the other way during the distribution of racist materials against Obama have had a private meeting with the candidate. Women of color, on the other hand, have been told to be "patient" and have some "trust" that we will be looked after later, even if we must remain unrecognized now. We must bear some responsibility for this. We have spent centuries of striving to work with those we perceived to be people of conscience, only to be shut out with secret deals among our "allies." We must stop being willing to give in advance to those who habitually leave us out and work more effectively in our own interests.

We must stop accepting on faith the promises of those and their organizations which have never provided equity and justice for women of color. We need to face the failures of the organizations of every kind which continue to give us nothing but lip service. Look back at the films and photos of the 1960s and 1970's, when women of color marched and were injured and died and lost opportunities to complete their education side by side with men. Yet, today, as then, when time comes for rewards, however measured, we are forgotten. Our books are unpurchased and unpromoted. Our research is denigrated. We are painted with new stereotypes. Notwithstanding mountains of work, we remain largely unknown. Alice Walker is known for *The Color Purple*, but what about her other work? Against these odds and this resistance, across the country and around the world, the body of research and scholarship by and about women of color has grown exponentially. We have all the facts and documentation needed. It is time to act collectively, speaking up and speaking out and insisting on our inclusion or refusing our support without concurrent reciprocity. No more give now and be left with unfulfilled promises later. Just as the Democratic Congress implemented a pay as you go process for their work, so women of color must establish an include us as you go process for our interactions with any and all individuals and groups.

The ability of women of color to maintain pay-go relationships will depend on our ability to continue our own research, scholarship, teaching in our communities and pressuring for our inclusion everywhere. This means strong emphasis on communication through our own media. With the advent of the Internet have come opportunities for independent media. As noted by Kimberlie Kranich, Associate and member of the Board of Directors of the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press. " One of the most significant aspects of the Women's Media Movement is the existence of women of color periodicals by women of color in the United States. . . . any communication about the

breadth of women's issues is inseparable from an analysis of racist, classist, and imperialistic oppression, periodicals produced by women of color add a perspective not found anywhere else. To make more visible women of color periodicals is to make more visible the specific contributions, concerns, and insights of women of color that will transform the world into a more humane place." Kranich further states "An examination of 30 U.S. periodicals by women of color revealed that there is no issue that is not of concern to these women. . . . rape, political prisoners, homelessness, low-income housing, sexual harassment, unemployment, technology, single parenting, peace, women of color's history, men of color as allies, abortion, genocide, sterilization abuse, health, infant mortality, domestic violence, U.N. Decade for Women, racism in the courts, in the police force and in white women, imperialism, class-ism, education, political office, U.S. intervention abroad, prostitution and international women. There is no possible way to read these periodicals and not have a new idea, a new insight and a new challenge to action." Efforts to document the achievements and contributions of women of color are not new. They have always included collections of names of individuals supportive of women of color as nominees for high level political appointments, for studies of health needs of women of color, and more recently for Women of Color Day commemorations on March 1 of each year.

Those interested in learning more of the landmark work of the National Institute for Women of Color should refer to:

The Brown Papers. 1984-1985. Washington, DC. An issues series from the perspective of women who are Black, Hispanic, Asian American, American Indian, Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander. The four issues are: "*Moving Mountains--Past, Present & Future: The Role of Women of Color in the American Political System*," by Suzanne Brooks, Aileen Hernandez, Marta P. Cotera and Victoria Siu.

"*The Economic Status of American Indian Women: A Navajo Study*," by Susan Williams, Jenice View, and Lourdes Miranda.

"*Managing Intercultural Value Systems: An Asian/Pacific Perspective*," by Jo Sachiko Uehara, Joanne Sanae Yamauchi, Elizabeth Higginbotham and Ruth Zambrana.

"*Overcoming Cultural Barriers to Adequate Health Practices*," by Marta Sotomayor, Byllye Avery, and Caroline J. Chang.

In addition to historical perspectives on issues, it is important that examination of current statistics on women of color be examined with mention of the specific concerns of women of color that have endured centuries of hidden neglect and oppression and are worsening.

- Women of color have the highest suicide rates.
- Women of color have the highest death rates from curable diseases.
- Women of color have the greatest likelihood of death from heart disease
- Women of color with HIV/Aids are increasing at the fastest rates
- Women of color in prisons are increasing at the fastest rates
- Women of color, in terms of median annual earnings for full-time, year-round

work—earn less than all their male counterparts and far less than white men and women. African American, Native American, and Hispanic women earn least.

- African American women have the greatest work effort among women. Nearly two in three (63.1 percent) are in the labor force. Their participation in the labor force is four to six percentage points higher than every other group of women.
- Native American women and African American women are the most likely to be poor
- The largest gaps in poverty status between women and men are seen among African Americans and Hispanics. African American women are less likely to live above poverty than African American men by 7.9 percentage points and Hispanic women are less likely to live above poverty than Hispanic men by 6.7 percentage points
- Women of color are much more likely than white women to have less than a high school education or a high school education only. In starkest contrast, for example, nearly a quarter of Hispanic women have not completed high school (24.8 percent) compared with only 4.1 percent of white women.

In response to the call of the Obama campaign for community participation in the development of his platform, some of us responded and forwarded platform recommendations drafted July 21, 2008, transmitted July 23, 2008, along with our offer to discuss the recommendations and implementation strategies upon request. Following are excerpts from those recommendations:

CAMPAIGN STRATEGY CONCERNS

We are concerned about information that has been communicated from Obama campaign staff in Sacramento and Chicago that the Obama campaign will not expend any of the millions of dollars in campaign funds raised in any California campaign efforts—that California has been written off. As citizens of the most populous state in the nation, this campaign strategy has the effect of discouraging grassroots and young voters, especially first time voters, because it conveys the impression that our votes don't matter. California is a state in which only 40% of the population is white; 60% is made up of people of color. We represent the diversity of the country. We cannot help but view this dismissal of our importance to this election as a repudiation of the significance and impact of people of color on the direction of the nation. We urge Senator Obama to reconsider this strategy

We have repeatedly called for greater representation of people of color among the paid staff of the Obama campaign—a strategy which has been used effectively in California by politicians such as Willie Brown and Diane Watson, but is now resisted. There is a growing disconnect with grassroots leadership who are in regular contact with and are most respected by the masses of grassroots and young voters of color. Instead, too often there is an exclusionary reliance on “traditional” minority or civil rights organizations that do not always have contemporary representative memberships nor viable leadership and are rooted to the past. Frequently, these “traditional” groups are out of touch technologically and thus are unable to communicate to young voters of color who have access to text messaging and emailing.

There is also a lack of understanding of the continued need for direct campaign interactions with rural, small town and urban enclaves of people of color who are

responsive to those who care enough to engage and interact with them. We have repeatedly called for campaigns to invest in multicultural, multilingual touring groups which can go out to these communities and communicate political positions on issues of importance. To discount these voters, to make no effort to encourage their votes, is to communicate the notion that we will continue to be marginalized in the future or to be subjected to continued patronization of receiving what others think we deserve. To continue this kind of relationship of masses of people with their government is to maintain such people as a fringe without a voice.

SELECTED PLATFORM RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ADMINISTRATIVE POLICIES

a. Affirm, as a matter of national policy, the existence of the oppression, marginalization, discrimination and forced invisibility of women of color in the United States. Establish a publicly accessible, interactive online library, modeled after Wikipedia, in which research articles and bibliographies on the experience of women of color, along with strategies and concepts for interventions and programs, can be accumulated. Affirm, as a matter of national policy, the existence of institutionalized racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination and oppression. Exercise leadership to eliminate all institutional inequalities among US citizens.

b. Provide access to capital to small businesses, women, minority and veteran-owned businesses, and specifically identified women of color businesses which have not been fairly included in the established categories. Increase the representation of women of color with documented backgrounds as advocates for women of color, the grassroots and other disadvantaged citizens among SBA executives, administrators, program directors and staff. Engage the services of the US Department of Education to train leaders of other federal agencies in working with all segments of the nation in implementing programs and services so that federal agencies reflect the nation in terms of employees and recipients of services.

2. CIVIL RIGHTS/ JUSTICE

a. Secure the passage and sign the Civil Rights Tax Relief Act which will correct two current inequities in tax-code treatment of settlements and awards received by victims of employment-rights violations. Under current law, those who suffer non-economic damages as a result of unfair employment practices pay taxes; those who suffer non-economic damages as a result of physical injuries (such as car accidents), do not. This is a bill to amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to exclude from gross income amounts received on account of claims based on certain unlawful discrimination and to allow income averaging for backpay and frontpay awards received on account of such claims, and for other purposes.

b. Within the first six months after inauguration, restore the Legal Services Corporation with the ability to provide affordable legal representation to plaintiffs in civil rights cases, including racism, sexism and all legally prohibited forms of discrimination and inequity on a parallel with the provision of legal representation in criminal cases. It must be recognized and acknowledged that few citizen plaintiffs have the resources to secure legal representation in most cases. Therefore, ability to pay has become the determiner of legal representation in most cases, depriving women of color

overwhelmingly of the means of redressing grievances because women of color are the poorest citizens of the nation. Establish a system of identifying government agencies which habitually discriminate so that appropriate executive actions can be promptly undertaken. Insure that the Legal Services Corporation, including the lawyers and all staff and administrators, are drawn from all the racial, ethnic, and national origin populations, as well as women including women of color and men and from a broad array of age cohorts by requiring transparent, equitable employment practices with no cronyism nor other conflicts of interest permitted.

c. Utilize the National Labor Relations Board and other union and community organizations to address discrimination. Develop a review process in partnership with labor unions to evaluate whether union leadership reflects union membership for women, women of color and minority group members.

3. ARTS

a. Develop a more inclusive program of changing the global community and nation through the arts. Provide an emphasis on women/women of color in music-jazz, for example, where opportunities for women musicians have been minimal and for women of color relegated to the lowest paying-except for a notable few. However, focusing on the few never results in equity for the many. It is conceivable that the commercial value of jazz and other music genres would be improved by the inclusion of more women, including women singers, in primary roles, rather than as canaries in a mine. In addition, the artistry of women has continued to be dominated by misogyny, an oppressive condition to which men are not subjected. Development of women-focused music, art & dance festivals and major support for women artists while writing, composing, painting or developing new choreography are being developed.

b. Funding through the National Council of the Arts, National Council for the Humanities, Smithsonian Institution and other agencies that provide funding and other resources to enable women/women of color focused artist tours and women/women of color arts historical preservation. Encouraging corporate sponsors to support women of color in the arts, especially preserving the history of arts of women of color and the development of new artistic directions by women of color. Review of the allocation of funds and resources to women of color in the arts. Review of the membership of boards and commissions associated with the determination of awards to artists and statistical analysis of the opportunities provided to women of color artists in comparison with artists of other groups of women and men. Publicly reporting inequities and calling for the development of corrective actions and strategies.

c. In concert with artist organizations, musician and other related unions, lawyers for the arts and other champions of artists, implement a major study of the health patterns and life challenges affecting professional artists, for example the destructiveness of osteoporosis on ballerinas, incidence of substance addictions, HIV/Aids, unique health and health insurance issues, retirement issues, impact of a cash economy on many artists who have no contributions to social security, and other issues of poverty, and mental health. Development of accessible show business/entertainment/arts/sports business education to facilitate benefits to the majority of individuals which is

generally overlooked with the ongoing focus on a few highly paid individuals. Development of strategies for acquisition, replacement and insurance for equipment and to secure continuing education in changing art conditions and arts related technology.

d. Recognition and acknowledgement of unique arts practices of women of color, for example, African hair braiding, which is an art form as well as a hair care practice, and the ancient art of hula and the making of poi which are unique Hawaiian cultural traditions. Assuring the inclusion of these and other unique arts of women of color as art forms and not simply preparations for tourists.

4. EDUCATION

a. Appoint a multi-cultural team of seasoned male and female educational professionals who have the respect of parents and grassroots advocates to conduct a Comprehensive Educational Review of the No Child Left Behind program, and concurrently order a compliance review of the same program to determine if civil rights laws were adhered to by the schools and agencies involved in the program

b. Order a meeting of compliance officers representing all federal agencies capable of compliance reviews, complemented by multicultural men and women from educational and community advocacy organizations to review the record of compliance reviews throughout the country by state, institutions, federal agencies, outcomes and follow up when discrimination has been found during the last 25 years. Budget and staffing statistics and patterns of increase and decrease are to be reviewed. Assign responsibility to this group to develop recommendations for a national model and standard for compliance reviews.

c. Develop a national agenda for the complete elimination of segregation and discrimination in educational institutions. Failure to address the multiple forms of discrimination in K-12 schools and at every level of higher education has resulted in skyrocketing dropout rates of students of color and especially channeled female students of color into low salaried, dead-end careers. Concurrently, the sexual abuse of teen and pre-teen girls by adult men as predators and sexual abusers in their own social circles results in many unplanned pregnancies and births and is hidden in the pretense that most of the fathers of the often unwanted, frequently neglected children are teenaged boys. This allows adult men, including many married men to evade responsibility for their children and their infidelity to their wives (often women of color too), creating an environment in which women and girls of color are perpetuated as dehumanized sex objects who are simultaneously blamed as the cause of the immoral behaviors of adult men. When men in the highest positions in both public and private sectors are allowed with impunity to exploit women and girls of color and when wives and daughters of such men are subjected to the associated demeaning, public disgrace, the collective self esteem of the members of the group—women of color—is dramatically diminished. In addition, young men of all backgrounds are taught by example that there are no serious or lasting negative consequences to the exploitation and abuse of women of color.

The additional comments to this section (c) were not included in the material sent to the Obama campaign. It must also be recognized and addressed that

the experience of most women of color college/university students is comparable to living in a convent because of extremely limited social opportunities for female students of color with male students of color. A high proportion of male students are recruited to athletics where they more often socialize with cheerleaders and other females at their events. Women of color experience discrimination and exclusion from activities like cheerleading. In addition, many state related colleges and universities are in rural areas which lack stores willing to stock products such as makeup, hair care products, and nylons in shades desired by women of color. Services for women of color, such as beauticians are also absent. Efforts to address the social needs of women of color on the campuses most often is responded to with laughter and inaction.

d. Respond to the need for mental health care delivery for women of color by women of color professionals or professionals with relevant experience.

e. Expand academic support program funding substantially to provide more academic advising, individual and group tutoring, after-school and summer academic enrichment programs, mentoring by local businesses and community organizations, cultural enrichment programs, and intellectual stimulation programs. Women of color are least likely among students to have a mentor.

f. Insure the inclusion of women/women of color, minorities and other historically disadvantaged groups in the developing energy-related industries and careers through informational programs.

5. HEALTH CARE

a. Implement a national review of the health care of US women of color by a panel representing all federal agencies with health related responsibilities, including the military and Veterans Administration, the American Medical Association, medical associations representing multicultural groups and women, unions, women of color health advocacy groups, grassroots advocacy groups, immigrant and migrant groups, domestic violence specialists, and scholars conducting research on the impact of the intersection of racism and sexism on the health care of women of color. Instruct the panel to review and compare health care delivery to women of color, incidence of diseases among women of color compared to the rest of the population by race, gender, age, disability, gender orientation, veteran status; incarceration, economic status, employment status, health care and geographic locations. Include in comparative data, information regarding domestic violence, suicide, deaths from curable diseases, deaths from lack of medical care, and deaths in nursing home care.

b. Foster care of children is primarily a women of color issue, which explains the terrible neglect of foster children and the refusal to pay any just compensation for the care of foster children to foster parents. The majority of foster children are female. The majority of foster parents are female, most often single females. Corruption in the foster care system is rampant, facilitating the abuse of foster children and foster parents. Private foster family agencies routinely enrich owners and administrators by assigning their own compensation and those of relatives to levels far exceeding the compensation provided to those who actually care for the children. Conditions under which foster children are living include rampant physical

and emotional abuse by untrained foster parents who are paid at rates far below minimum wage for 24 hour responsibility. Special needs children fare even worse. Child protective agencies refuse to act on complaints. These conditions increase dropout rates, teen pregnancies, youth violence, criminal behavior, substance abuse, unemployment of young adults and incarcerations. A national task force is needed on foster children and youth aged 18 to 21 who often become homeless when they become ineligible for further foster care and have no where else to go. Immediate and realistic funding of foster care, which should be considered therapeutic care as is the case in the state of Hawaii, must be mandated

c. Implement a major study of the circumstances of aging women of color, with special attention to the deteriorating living conditions of human and civil rights activists who are punished for their activism. Identify needs and develop action strategies to remedy this problem which effectively intimidates others from speaking out against injustice and against whistle-blowing.

6. INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT

a. Appoint a multi-cultural team of seasoned female and male professionals drawn from multiple disciplines and associations, including small as well as large businesses, environmentalists, labor organizations, women of color organizations and grassroots civil rights advocates to review and discuss the successes and complaints associated with NAFTA, including the repeated violence against and numerous disappearances of women of color in industrial areas on our borders.

b. Review all international trade support programs and cultural exchange programs of the US Department of Commerce and US Department of State, and other federal agencies, to determine equity of access for all citizens. Insure equal access to women, women of color. Develop programs that provide opportunities for people of color to interact in international activities, conferences and forums, especially with people with whom they share common heritage, such as African Americans with the people of Africa and with African Americans throughout the Americas. Encourage the acquisition of skills in multiple languages, especially the languages of the Americas —Indigenous languages, English, Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese and Caribbean Pidgin and in the languages of all parts of the US, including Hawaiian, Hawaiian Pidgin, Samoan, and other languages of the US Pacific Islands. Also encouraged should be the languages of many other citizen populations which can assist the US in resuming many kinds of leadership in the world, including multiple Chinese languages, Japanese, Tagalog, Korean, Vietnamese and Arabic. *(end of platform recommendations)*

Nothing will change unless we—women of color and those who support us, especially including men of color and white women, work together and change it. Women of color have the right to be recognized, represented and share equitably in the benefits and resources of our country. It is our responsibility to insist that we are *identifiably* included in every aspect of citizenship and government and in all documents referring to protected classes as “women of color” in acknowledgement that mention of women, minorities, specific racial/ethnic/national origin groups has had no meaningful impact on relieving us from the racism and sexism which occurs within and between some of those groups. The neglect and oppression of women of color is worsening and needs to be addressed directly, specifically and immediately. Every woman of color who wants to

be free in her lifetime, and our supporters, can contribute to this movement by attending the September 26-27, 2008 conference in Sacramento, purchasing our merchandise, making contributions of time and money (we are not tax-deductible), and by voting for those who support us.

This essay was written by Suzanne Brooks, human and civil rights activist whose entire adult and professional life has been committed to justice and who despite many years of education and experience, including BA, MA and ABD for 2 doctorates, has spent the last 18 months job-hunting in Sacramento where she lives. Over and over again, she has been denied access to work and tools of work, such as the refusal of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing to approve her credentials despite having met and exceeded all educational, testing, and teacher preparation requirements for teaching in California. Frequently, as happened with her application to resume her former position as director of the CSUS Multi-Cultural Center (where she conducted up to 70 programs and activities in a year with one secretary and no program budget and was recommended as a model program to the United Nations) at the request of students and members of the community and at the Cristo Rey High School where she applied to be Director of Admissions, she has been passed over and those hired lacked any comparable levels of education and experience and in some instances failed to meet the basic requirements and/or had records as a convicted felon. Obviously, some barrier is in place. Brooks has previously unsuccessfully sued CSUS for race and age discrimination—the lack of success can be attributed to the lack of competent counsel and sufficient funds to secure a third attorney after others acted against her interests—a complaint which has been alleged by other complainants in discrimination cases in California, particularly in state employment. The tragedy is that Brooks's experience is a common one for women of color throughout the country. And like other women of color, the reality of her circumstance is ignored while she is applauded for hard work, intelligence, dedication to community and creativity in music, literature and other arts.


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BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator Suzanne Brooks is CEO of Justice 4 All Includes Women of Color ([NIWC](#)). Click [here](#) to contact Ms. Brooks.

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