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**A Call for a Presidential Commission on Women
Women of Color
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Women of color are never more popular than when there is a need for strong voices in support of a cause. Other times, we are criticized as too loud or too aggressive. Just recently, someone called to say that Black women and other women of color should be jubilant that there will now be a Black First Lady in the White House. I pointed out that, brilliant and beautiful as she is, Michelle Obama was not elected to any position and will not receive a salary so there will be no direct benefit or modeling to those women of color who will always have to work for a living and who may or may not be married.

Essentially, First Ladies are unpaid volunteers who are expected to concentrate on being a wife, mother and hostess. Since we are not all married, that shuts out many of us. This reminds me that "back in the day," the first woman police officer in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to be promoted to sergeant was the wife of the police commissioner. A policewoman myself, I recall thinking that there was no increase in opportunities for women in that, only an opportunity for that woman. Wives of powerful men, whose husbands can install them into positions of influence or high pay, do not open pathways for the masses of women--married or single.

There have been queens throughout history. They did little, if anything, to help other women who could not be queens. The loyalty of queens and wives of the powerful has been to the patriarchy on which they rely. As for first ladies, it is hard for many of us to relate to the notion of being expected to work without getting paid. Slavery is also unpaid work.

A few weeks ago, I received a solicitation to support the efforts of a *new* group called "Women Count" which has issued a call and is soliciting petition signatures for a Presidential Commission on Women. Since "Women Count" is asking that their material be forwarded to others, here is their statement of goals in the material received:

We are reaching out to hundreds of organizations - like your own - asking for

your support for the establishment of a Presidential Commission on Women - much like the Commission on the Status of Women that was created by President John Kennedy in 1961 - 47 years ago.

Once established, a Presidential Commission can serve as a vehicle for all of us to raise the issues that we are working so hard to address, and seek common solutions that benefit women across the country.

Why A Presidential Commission On Women Now?

Women and gender equality have been at the center of the conversation in the election. It is critical that we address the issues that have emerged.

This election has engaged millions of women from all walks of life who want change. Record numbers of women want to participate more fully in ALL aspects of American life, politics and policymaking, and are seeking a way to end discrimination and ensure respect and full human rights for everyone.

The current economic crisis highlights the increasing impact on single parents (one income households - mostly women), working couples (almost a necessity in lower, middle and upper middle income households), and minimum wage workers (mostly women).

Now that the election is over it will be too easy, too convenient, for the busy new administration to forget the role that women played in this election. We can't let that happen!

We believe that now is the time for our country to have a national conversation to address issues and discriminatory attitudes that women face. It is time for a Presidential Commission on Women. ***It's our time!***

On the first reading of this material, I looked for some concrete mention of women of color. It is not there. I looked for mention of the race discrimination experienced by women of color, as well as gender discrimination. It is not there--though we were not forgotten because the thumbnail photos included several of us. In other words, we are remembered symbolically but without any issue that is uniquely ours.

So, I read the content of the "Women Count's" website, learning that they were established in May, 2008 in response (their words) to calls for Hillary Clinton to give up her presidential campaign. So they are not a brand new group, but just newly communicating with me as CEO of the International Association for Women of Color Day.

Upon reading "Women Count's" emailed Internet flyer, I found it to be just as their website had been. Although photos of women of color are there, there is no actual mention of women of color, nor of the fact that women of color experience racism as well as sexism. There seems to be some notion among groups like this that women of color will not notice that we are only there symbolically. They seem unaware that we want more than a few pictures along with generalizations about all the women supporting Hillary. Their list of issues needing attention does not mention women of color nor racism.

There were many women, mostly white, throughout the campaign season who harangued women of color as traitors to our gender if we did not support Hillary. This was a fascinating approach which failed because most women of color supported Obama, not because of his race but in the hope for some reduction in racism and

sexism. Hillary Clinton had no track record as an advocate for women of color that was known to the masses of us. And certainly, the administration of Bill Clinton was no friend to the most destitute women of color, as it cut welfare and deepened the poverty of so many women and children of color, and refused to address the disappearances of many Mexican women in the border towns of Mexico where they sought work in the factories--to cite 2 examples of our invisibility and marginalization.

Yet even without knowing that Hillary Clinton supporters are behind this petition, I noticed that this is the standard white feminist fare which focuses on employment equality for women, abortion rights and the same other issues that do not have the same importance for women of color because no reference to racism is allowed. To address sexism in employment while ignoring racism in employment is to try to persuade women of color to pretend that racism does not exist or, at least, if it does exist, to persuade us that white women are not among those who discriminate against us. This should be the case. With some, it is the case. But too many of those who should be our sisters in the struggle against racism, put energies into blocking us from getting relief from it. Then, astonishingly, they ask women of color to support their ideas, ignoring their self-centered work which leaves us always at the bottom. I did not accept this call for a Presidential Commission as a good thing. Rather, I saw it as another effort to develop a means of access to political and economic power that would not include us once it was put in place. There would be women who looked like us but they would not be those who regularly stand up against racism. So I wrote to the organizers.

Here is my letter to Women Count:

I recognize the importance that such a commission can have but like all other projects of this kind that I have seen over the years, it is built upon a presumably race-neutral model which is anything but race-neutral. This is a Euro-centric model because it does not mention, let alone suggest the inclusion of the most salient issue for women of color--the intersection of racism and sexism which only we experience. As has been the case throughout the history of the US, women of color are at the socio-economic bottom of this society. We are treated as if invisible. We are marginalized far below White women who, we know, are marginalized below men of color. Just imagine for a moment how it feels to be in our circumstances--a situation in which every group of conceivable allies has a substantive number of members who discriminate against us as virulently as the society as a whole practices racism or sexism against men of color or white women.

And lest you think that this experience is inadvertent, imagine this: In March, 2008 on the occasion of their first international conference in Washington, DC, I contacted the Women, Faith, and Development Alliance after learning that they were giving travel scholarships internationally to low income women who could not otherwise attend. I telephoned and asked how women of color in the US could apply for these scholarships and was told, in a rude tone, "This is not for you." The Women, Faith and Development Alliance has received \$4 billion in commitments from the United Nations and businesses and organizations across the US and around the world. When I followed up this telephone experience with a letter, I received a response apologizing for the discourtesy but still excluding low income US women of color as a whole. In other words, unless one had some money or connections, there was no planning to include us and, we were not included.

There was no application process for us. If there is no public information about a process, then the process is inherently biased and rooted in cronyism. Such a process

is divisive and harmful and destructive of women of color as individuals and in groups. Since then, I have made many women's groups aware of that situation. None has made any effort toward our inclusion.

I recall when the National Organization for Women and other women's organizations were founded and how women of color were subjected to racism within the organizations, then formed ethnic caucuses, then left never to return in substantive numbers. The so-called "main stream" predominantly white women's organizations refuse to address the racism we experience in the ways that we need it addressed. A few years ago, when addressing a major case of racism and sexism and age-ism by a California university, in which there were nearly 40 affected people of color, as well as the woman of color leading the effort, many of these groups were contacted, including the American Association for University Women which has a legal support fund. Not one of these organizations found this case to have any merit because of their collective view that the intersection of racism and sexism was not a sufficiently feminist problem. Most women of color belong to our own single ethnic groups, a few mimicking the power control issues from which we fled, but most willing and wanting to collaborate with other women of color as much as possible but, as the poorest of the nation, we are limited in our resources.

As a recipient of racist materials put out by members of the National Organization for Women during the period that Hillary Clinton was still a candidate, I was shocked to find women I thought of as sisters and allies, white women whose email addresses I recognized because of years of working together, were sending out racist materials from at least one NOW office in California with participation by the Chapter's president. I wrote to these women whom I had cherished as friends and urged their withdrawal of this material. They refused. I filed complaints with California NOW, National NOW, NOW Pacs and the Hillary Clinton campaign. They all refused to take needed action on the issue. I still have the emails, some rude.

I have had no reason to keep this information a secret. I have shared it widely with women and men of color and with those white feminists who really are our sisters in struggle, those who perpetually oppose racism equally with sexism and who, in their research and study of critical race theory are calling for a new definition of feminism that includes all forms of oppression, especially racism, in support of women of color, and against homophobia in support of our lesbian sisters and gay brothers.

Any call for a Presidential Commission on Women must address these concerns up front at the beginning or for us, it will just be more of the same. Women of color are tired of being window dressing to revolutions from which we are denied equitable benefits. We need to have the issue settled in advance of the establishment of any such commission. The issue is the intersection of racism and sexism experienced by women of color. Since we are the only groups experiencing both forms of discrimination, this focus deserves to be the starting point for addressing all other forms of inequity. Typically, we are expected to ask for less and to receive less--in other words, to be given nothing. We must have both issues addressed as the major focus of a Presidential Commission on Women in recognition of the dire straits in which we live. Unless the circumstances of women at the bottom of society are addressed first, there will be no meaningful changes for us because the oppression we experience at the hands of all the rest of society will continue to be ignored, excused, rationalized and acted. As added background and context, I strongly recommend the reading of Alice Walker's "[Lest We Forget: An Open Letter to My Sisters](#)" and Michele Wallace's classic "[Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman \(Verso Classics\) \(Verso Classics, 26\)](#)", written in 1979.

If the Presidential Commission on Women which is being proposed cannot represent women of color as we need to be represented, then the proposed commission should be proposed only for those for whom it will have benefit and we will propose a Presidential Commission on Women of Color. Of course, I hope that your proposal will become inclusive and address these issues by putting the greatest amount of attention where the need is greatest rather than suggesting that we all be treated in the same way, when only women of color are at the bottom and subjected to the racism-sexism intersection. If this concept cannot be understood and acted on, then it will be clear that there is no justice intended for us. I look forward to your sisterly reply as I am sure other women to whom I am copying this letter will too.


In response to this letter, I received a sisterly email supporting the notion of establishing the intersection of racism and sexism experienced by women of color as the top issue of the proposed Presidential Commission on Women. That letter was followed by two cordial phone calls. However, to date, the materials being distributed have not been changed to reflect these written and oral commitments and I have received no additional contacts, despite acting in good faith and contributing a list of critical contacts among women of color who would be willing to support this effort, providing the issues of women of color are paramount.


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BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator Suzanne Brooks is the founder and CEO of International Association for [Women of Color Day](#) and CEO of Justice 4 All Includes Women of Color. Click [here](#) to contact Ms. Brooks.

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