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# “My Life's Work Is to End White Supremacy”: Perspectives of a Black Feminist Human Rights Educator

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## Abstract

*This article highlights the contributions and thinking of scholar and activist Loretta Ross on the intersection of human rights, Black feminism and education for liberation. This essay is organized into themes, drawing from Ross' writings,<sup>1</sup> scholarship that discusses her contributions, and an hour-long conversation between Ross and Monisha Bajaj, Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of Human Rights Education. Ross explores her own history and introduction to the human rights movement, her radical re-shaping of the field of reproductive justice, and her vision for human rights education after more than five decades of advancing it through her many books and other writings, advocacy, and grassroots activism.*

**Keywords:** Black feminism, economic and social rights, human rights education, reproductive justice, international advocacy, White<sup>2</sup> supremacy, Civil Rights Movement

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<sup>1</sup> Sections of this article draw from Ross, Loretta J. (2006) A Personal Journey from Women's Rights to Civil Rights to Human Rights, *The Black Scholar*, 36(1), 45-53, and an hour-long conversation held on Zoom between Loretta Ross and IJHRE Editor-in-Chief Monisha Bajaj on July 23, 2020. Once the interview was transcribed, the themes were generated and compiled by Bajaj and verified by Ross for accuracy with her final approval to publish. Copyright for this piece rests with Loretta J. Ross under the *International Journal for Human Rights Education's* Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.

<sup>2</sup> Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups in our articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.

*In this article, Loretta Ross—a pioneering human rights activist and educator—shares perspectives from her journey in the struggle for greater racial equity in the United States. Written mostly in first person through her own voice (as gathered through her writings and through an interview with the International Journal of Human Rights Education’s Editor-in-Chief, Monisha Bajaj), the following sections cover the themes that emerge, namely: (1) her early life and development of a political consciousness; (2) human rights activism; (3) human rights education; (4) reproductive justice; (5) “bringing human rights home” to the United States; and (6) advice for young activists and scholars. The following sections illuminate Ross’ life-long commitment to making the personal political, and advancing human rights and racial justice in the United States.*

### **Early Life and Development of a Political Consciousness**

As a revolutionary Black feminist, my goals are to challenge silences about African-American women, to confront myths about our bodies and our right to self-determination, and to help others not silently endure the human rights violations I survived. As bell hooks said, to move from silence into speech is a revolutionary act (hooks, 1989). My life's work is to end male and White supremacy. Arguably, White supremacist politics in the United States most dramatically affect African-American women, whether one is looking at the destruction of the welfare state, population control policies, limits on reproductive rights, or the miseducation of our children (Ross, 2006, p. 45).

I was not particularly politically conscious as a child during the 1950s and 1960s. My family was religious, conservative, and in the military. I was the sixth child and second daughter in a poor, Black Texas family of eight children with five boys and three girls. My father emigrated from Jamaica as a child with his family in the 1920s. At sixteen, without a high school diploma, he joined the Army, probably lying about his age, because it was the only way to survive during the Depression. He served in three wars, was critically wounded several times, and retired from the Army after 26 years. He was still in his mid-forties so he became a postal worker for another 20

years until he retired a second time in the 1980s. My mother came from a hog-raising farm family in central Texas. Her family moved to Texas in 1867 from a peanut plantation near Selma, Alabama after the Civil War. She was a domestic worker until her seventh child, my sister Toni, who was severely disabled by polio, spinal meningitis, and epilepsy. Mom believed that faith healers saved Toni's life. We had a patriarchal, nuclear family with clearly defined gender roles. We moved quite a bit because of the Army, but we were luckier than most because we had both parents at home. We did not always have enough to eat or new clothes to wear, but we had plenty of love and deep family roots (Ross, 2006, pp. 45-46).

My nearly 50-year journey as a Black feminist was not a conscious choice but grew from a determination not to work on my hands and knees like my mother. I remember how White women hired Black domestic workers based on the number of scars on their knees. This proved they cleaned floors that way (Ross, 2006, p. 46).

My body was a metaphor for many of the gender-based crises in the Black community. Not to dwell on the horror, but I was kidnapped from a Girl Scout outing and raped when I was 11, my first experience of sexual trauma, although I lacked the feminist words at that time to describe the experience. Through incest committed by a much older cousin, I became pregnant when I was 14 and had my only child, a son. I did not know how widespread incest was in the African-American community at the time. I just knew that it had happened to me. At age 15, we had to fight for my right to stay in high school because it was common in the 1960s to force pregnant girls or teen mothers out of school. This was my first lesson in winning against a powerful institution. Despite these traumatic events, I was a reasonably good student with wonderfully supportive parents. I won a scholarship to Howard University in 1970, when I was 16, to study chemistry and physics, intending to become a doctor. I was gang-raped at a party my freshman year and had an abortion. A few years later I was sterilized by a malfunctioning birth control device (an IUD) from Howard University's health services (Ross, 2006, p. 46).

It was at Howard University that I first heard feminist language with which to describe my experiences and realized that violence against Black

women was more common than anyone knew. I learned that one out of four Black women would experience incest or be raped in their lifetimes, and ninety-five percent of the time, their violators were Black men. I found that even Black doctors sometimes sterilized poor Black women, carrying out the population control plan of White supremacists. I was lucky to be in Washington, DC at the time because the city legalized abortion three years before the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision. Otherwise, I would have had three children at age 16 (I aborted twins), and been unable to take care of my son. By the time I was 23, I was a rape survivor, an incest survivor, a victim of sterilization abuse, and a single parent. In short, I had experienced both gender-based and state violence (Ross, 2006, p. 46).

My earliest memory of human rights was 1970 in Toni Cade Bambara's book *The Black Woman* (which had essays by her and authors like Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker). I was 16 years old, but like anything else, when you're not ready for the knowledge, I didn't necessarily pay attention to it.

So, my first conscious memory of human rights was when I started monitoring hate groups in 1990 and my boss was Dr. C.T. Vivian (a civil rights leader who worked closely with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.), who unfortunately recently passed away. C.T. surprised the hell out of me when he told me that Dr. King never meant to build a civil rights movement, that he meant to build a human rights movement. I said, "What are you talking about?" Because everything I knew about Dr. King at that point was that it was "Reverend-Dr.-Martin-Luther-King-Jr.-Civil-Rights-Leader"—like it was all one word. And Dr. Vivian told me to look up his last Sunday sermon on March 31st, 1968, which was four days before he was assassinated. And in it, he called upon us to build a human rights movement. And I wondered, "Why isn't this known?" Everybody told me that Dr. King had a dream; nobody told me he had a plan.

There is a tendency of people to think that human rights is overseas, and civil rights is what we fight for here. But we can go back to Frederick

Douglass' 1854 speech<sup>3</sup> to the words of Malcolm X<sup>4</sup> to Martin Luther King Jr.'s last sermon to find mentions of the need to focus on human rights in the struggle for Black liberation in the United States.

## Human Rights Activism

Howard University was a cauldron of student protests during the 1960s and 1970s, and I became an activist. While I was vice-president of my freshman class, police tear-gassed one of our protests. Fellow students gave me my first political books like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* edited by Alex Haley. It was this heady mixture of Black nationalism and Black feminism that initially defined my politics. There was limited political space for radical Black women within either the Black nationalist or White feminist movements. [The Combahee River Collective statement](#) was still seven years away.<sup>5</sup> We Black feminists felt poised between two distinct

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Douglass—born enslaved and escaped to later become a writer, abolitionist, and diplomat—wrote the following in 1854, “Human rights stand upon a common basis; and by all the reason that they are supported, maintained and defended, for one variety of the human family, they are supported, maintained and defended for *all* the human family; because all mankind have the same wants, arising out of a common nature” (Douglass, 1854, p. 34). Accessed at <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mfd.21036/?sp=34&loclr=blogflt>

<sup>4</sup> One of Malcolm X's most well-known quotes about human rights was from his article “Racism: The Cancer that is Destroying America,” in the Egyptian Gazette (Aug. 25 1964): “The common goal of 22 million Afro-Americans is respect as human beings, the God-given right to be a human being. Our common goal is to obtain the human rights that America has been denying us. We can never get civil rights in America until our human rights are first restored.” Accessed at: <http://malcolmxfiles.blogspot.com/2013/07/letter-to-egyptian-gazette-august-25.html>

<sup>5</sup> The Combahee River Collective statement was published in 1977 by a group of Black Feminists who had been meeting regularly since 1974. It stated that “we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.” Accessed at: <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>

movements that did not fully represent our unique intersectional experiences (Ross, 2006, p. 46).

I became involved in anti-apartheid<sup>6</sup> activism, and I joined a Marxist-Leninist study group and began a lifelong study of Black history. We studied the liberation and anti-imperialist movements of Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean, and linked our domestic activism to global peoples' movements. Through the study group, I met two women who had a major impact on my political future. The first was Yulanda Ward, a Howard University student, and the second was Nkenge Toure, then a member of the Black Panther Party. Yulanda was a student activist who organized many of our activities while she was an eighteen-year-old freshman and connected us with community activists in other cities. She helped us occupy empty buildings owned by the government, demanding that they be renovated to house homeless families and introduced us to advocacy for prisoner's rights (Ross, 2006, p. 47).

Nkenge Toure was the second woman who changed my life. Nkenge had been in the Black Panther Party as a high school student in Baltimore. She invited me to work at the DC Rape Crisis Center (RCC) where she was the Executive Director. Founded in 1972, the RCC was the first rape crisis center in the United States. Black women were the majority of the staff because its predominantly White Board of Directors prioritized hiring from the Black community. I replaced Nkenge as the Executive Director in 1979. This is where the trauma in my life crystallized into a commitment to fighting the oppression of women, particularly male violence and sterilization abuse against Black women (Ross, 2006, p. 48).

Through the RCC, I became involved with the United Nations' (UN) World Decade for Women, which was launched at the UN Conference on

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<sup>6</sup> Apartheid was a system of complete segregation based on racist beliefs about the superiority of White people. It was implemented in South Africa and South West Africa (now known as Namibia) from 1948 until the early 1990s. Global activism, particularly in the United States, helped impose sanctions on the apartheid government of South Africa that ultimately helped lead to a negotiated transition to democracy.



Women in 1975 in Mexico City and promoted equal rights and greater opportunities for women worldwide. I had traveled on study tours to Nicaragua, the Philippines, El Salvador, and Cuba, but going to the second UN World Conference for Women in Copenhagen in 1980 was consciousness-raising mostly because of the absence of radical African-American women there. Nkenge and I organized the International Council of African Women (ICAW) from 1982-1989 as a vehicle to encourage more radical and progressive African-American women to go to the third UN World Conference for Women in 1985 in Nairobi, Kenya (Ross, 2006, p. 48).

The Center for Democratic Renewal (CDR, formerly called the National Anti-Klan Network) was founded under the leadership of Rev. C.T. Vivian as the first Black-led anti-hate group organization in the United States in response to the 1979 massacre of five anti-Klan<sup>7</sup> demonstrators in Greensboro, North Carolina. Even though the murders were videotaped, the perpetrators were acquitted by an all-White jury. I worked as CDR's Program Director beginning in 1991 with experts on the far right, Leonard Zeskind and Daniel Levitas, who helped me understand the relationship between the civil rights and anti-fascist movements. I had experienced racism like most African-Americans, but I had not formally studied the organized White supremacist movement as I did for five years at CDR—its racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, and homophobia. White supremacist ideas infect every important social policy issue in the United States in the debates on immigration, welfare, affirmative action, abortion, and crime. While I knew this intellectually, it is quite different to actually go to Klan rallies and talk to neo-Nazis and militia members and hear their views echoed by the White House. It was very difficult to explain to my parents why I went to Klan rallies (Ross, 2006, p. 50).

The missing perspectives of African-American women weaken the anti-racist/anti-fascist movement because links between movements of the

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<sup>7</sup> The Ku Klux Klan (also known as “the Klan”) is a White supremacist/terrorist organization in the United States that is responsible for numerous hate crimes and murders since its founding in the 1860s.

Right may be overlooked in analyses. The lack of a racialized gender perspective hampered the development of a more complete picture of their activities. I initiated CDR's Women's Watch Project in August 1992, with the research assistance of Heidi Dorow, to investigate individual and organizational links between the anti-abortion and the White supremacist movements. I believed it was possible to cross-reference our research on the White supremacist movement with data the pro-choice movement collected on the anti-abortionists. As a Black feminist, I was convinced that the anti-abortion movement would copy the terrorist tactics of the white supremacists. In fact, Dr. David Gunn was murdered in Florida in March 1993 only months after beginning this cross-checking research. This progression had not yet been explored by anti-fascist researchers, but anti-abortionists had moved from prayers to blockades, from wanted posters to kidnappings, and then onto the brutal murders of doctors who perform abortions. My feminist perspective helped recognize the parallels between the racists and the anti-abortionists long before either the pro-choice or anti-fascist organizations discovered how individuals and ideas moved between the porous membrane separating the two movements (Ross, 2006, p. 51).

### **Human Rights Education**

In 1996—along with Shulamith (Shula) Koenig (founder of the People's Movement for Human Rights Education), C. T. Vivian, and Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, a Sudanese Muslim law professor at Emory University—we co-founded the National Center for Human Rights Education (NCHRE) in Atlanta. I served as director for 9 years and in that time, we distributed over a million copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

The Center decided that our first focus would be on offering human rights trainings and strategic retreats for social justice activists in the United States. These are people who are already concerned about social justice so they didn't have to be persuaded to fight against oppression. We wanted to give them new tools. Obviously, we could have focused on the

media or college students, but we thought that we would get the most leverage by focusing on social justice activists. We developed all kinds of human rights training programs aimed at different wings of the social justice movement for economic justice, LGBTQ<sup>8</sup> rights, civil rights, youth activism, environmental justice and so on. We developed a training curriculum for each of those sectors and our job was to just get there, deliver it, and give them a human rights framework for them to situate their social justice work in.

The very first program we had was at a Georgia Public Library in Atlanta here every Wednesday night for three months. We would have community based human rights education and invite people representing different sectors of social justice work. But within our first two weeks, homeless people started walking in off the street because it was open to everyone. And then people surprised me by driving from around the state to get there. There was one woman who drove from rural Georgia for two hours each way to come every Wednesday night. It turned out that she was planning to run for office for her local school board and she wanted to use the human rights framework. Even after the three months of community-based trainings were over, people didn't want us to stop. They asked, "Why can't we continue this every Wednesday night for the rest of our lives? What else can we do to continue these conversations?"

The other thing we tried to do was piggyback onto other conferences. If I heard that someone from the feminist movement was presenting at a conference, then I would submit a proposal to do a human rights education workshop there. When people invited me to keynote, I would always make it a human rights education presentation no matter what the topic was by tying issues together.

We engaged in advocacy as well. We met a member of the Clinton administration in the State Department, which of course handles human rights treaties for the United States. She listened to me and Shula very patiently making the case that if you're going to revise the federal education

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<sup>8</sup> LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer.

standards for children in the United States, wouldn't it be natural to make sure that every child knows the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as easily as they know the Pledge of Allegiance? She said, "I think that's a wonderful idea, but I don't think that will suit our policy agenda." And I remember pausing, trying to figure out, "Okay, what is she actually saying?" And then I blurted out, "You mean welfare reform?" because at that time, President Clinton had proposed and later passed welfare reform that reduced public assistance benefits for the poor in the United States. And she said, "Yes." I said, "Wait a moment. Are you telling me that President Clinton doesn't want the American public taught about human rights because he's about to institute a policy that would violate human rights?" And she said, "Well, I wouldn't say it that way." And I said, "Well, I will. That's what I'm hearing." It became clear to me that even a Democratic administration lacked the vision that we had in terms of the possibilities of institutionalizing human rights education.

Along with Ed O'Brien, founder of [Street Law](#), Kristi Rudelius-Palmer of the University of Minnesota Human Rights Center, and Nancy Flowers and Janet Schmidt of Amnesty International's Human Rights Education Network, we co-founded Human Rights USA in 1997 with NCHRE as one of the anchor organizations of this new network funded by Larry Cox at the Ford Foundation. [Later, NCHRE also helped to launch the U.S. Human Rights Network, which established itself formally as its own organization in 2003.] Human Rights USA did a survey that tried to ascertain what the American public knew about human rights. And it turned out that over 90% of the American public had never heard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We released the survey results in 1998 on the 50th anniversary of the UDHR. That survey made our job even clearer. With Human Rights USA, we sought to connect local human rights organizations around the country and give them tools so they could take the human rights temperature in their city and issue a human rights report card annually. We started one in Atlanta, and it ultimately lost momentum. There's a couple of other places that still do this, and the most successful one that is still ongoing is in St. Louis run by Jamala Rogers of the

Organization for Black Struggle. Every year on December 10th, they issue a new human rights report card to the city.

It was important that I was mentored by Shula because she had founded human rights education projects in 22 different countries. As a result, I was able to meet with people from Latin America, Asia, and all over sub-Saharan Africa, which enabled me to not have to start from scratch as the Director of NCHRE. At that time, the human rights movement was dominated by lawyers who would talk about the lack of justiciability, meaning if we can't litigate human rights in the court system, why use human rights as a framework? It was Mallika Dutt, who was at the Ford Foundation before she founded [Breakthrough](#), who really simplified it for me. She said the power of human rights, first of all, is its moral power. We have to keep on convincing people that they are entitled to human rights, and then we infuse it into the political system. And then, finally, and only after those first two steps are taken, do we try to infuse it into the legal system. That made me realize that the lawyers who were poo-pooing us were really approaching it from the wrong end. And it was one of my mentors at CDR, Leonard Zeskind, who told me a long time ago when we were talking about passing the first hate crime reporting bill, that the laws are only going to be as good as the people make them be. He said, "Look at those statutes they were using to go after the Klan. They were written right after the Civil War. But it took a Civil Rights Movement [nearly a century later] to make America use its own laws."

In 1997, NCHRE became one of the founding members of the [SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective](#) originally organized by sixteen women of color-led groups. Although NCHRE was not a formal "reproductive rights" organization, it was included as a founding organization to provide human rights education to the other SisterSong members. In 2003, I helped organize SisterSong's first national conference on reproductive health and sexual rights issues, which drew more than 600 participants. Representing SisterSong, I served as national co-director (the first woman of color) of the April 2004 March for Women's Lives in Washington, DC, the largest women's rights march in United States history, with more than one million participants. Another significant event

in my life was that the first book that I had officially co-authored was published in November 2004 by South End Press, *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organizing for Reproductive Justice*. Written with co-authors Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, and Elena Gutierrez, *Undivided Rights* is the first detailed study of women of color reproductive health organizations during the 1980s and 1990s. The SisterSong Collective rapidly grew after the events of 2004, and I decided to leave NCHRE to provide leadership to SisterSong. The Collective hired me to become its national coordinator and to open its first national office in January 2005, at which time I transitioned out of NCHRE by selecting a new executive director. This move felt like completing a full circle because I was organizing on women's rights again (Ross, 2006, p. 52).

## **Reproductive Justice**

A decade before I became director of SisterSong, I had been part of a group of activists advocating for a more expansive definition of reproductive rights and justice. Together with 11 other Black women,<sup>9</sup> we coined the term “reproductive justice” at the 1994 Illinois Pro-Choice Alliance Conference in Chicago as a response to the Clinton administration’s proposed health care reforms at that time. As I have written elsewhere, “As a Black feminist, I am committed to focusing on the powerful role of colonialism and White supremacy in determining reproductive destinies” (Ross & Solinger, 2017, p. 2). The definition of reproductive justice, that I detail in the first chapter of my book with Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*, is as follows:

Reproductive justice is a contemporary framework for activism and for thinking about the experience of reproduction. It is also a

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<sup>9</sup> The women involved in coining the term “reproductive justice” and developing its frameworks were: Toni M. Bond Leonard, Reverend Alma Crawford, Evelyn S. Field, Terri James, Bisola Marignay, Cassandra McConnell, Cynthia Newbille, Loretta Ross, Elizabeth Terry, ‘Able’ Mable Thomas, Winnette P. Willis, and Kim Youngblood.

political movement that splices reproductive rights with social justice to achieve reproductive justice. The definition of reproductive justice goes beyond the pro-choice/pro-life debate and has three primary principles:

- (1) the right not to have a child;
- (2) the right to have a child; and
- (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments.

In addition, reproductive justice demands sexual autonomy and gender freedom for every human being. At the heart of reproductive justice is this claim: all fertile persons and persons who reproduce and become parents require a safe and dignified context for these most fundamental human experiences. Achieving this goal depends on access to specific, community-based resources including high-quality health care, housing and education, a living wage, a healthy environment, and a safety net for times when these resources fail. Safe and dignified fertility management, childbirth, and parenting are impossible without these resources.

The case for reproductive justice makes another basic claim: access to these material resources is justified on the grounds that safe and dignified fertility management, childbirth, and parenting together constitute a fundamental human right... Reproductive justice uses a human rights framework to draw attention to—and resist—laws and public and corporate policies based on racial, gender, and class prejudices. (Ross & Solinger, 2017, pp. 9-10)

I brought my experience and perspectives in the fields of reproductive justice and human rights in 2005 to SisterSong—a network of women of color and allied organizations and also hundreds of individual members—when I became its director. We challenged the pro-choice movement to move away from its myopic focus on abortion to embrace the human-rights based "reproductive justice" framework offered by SisterSong

that built on the definitions many of us had been involved in elaborating earlier, namely: the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, and economic well-being of women and girls, based on the full achievement and protection of women's human rights. We argued for the right to have—and not to have—a child, and the necessary enabling conditions to realize these rights. We believe that the ability of any woman to determine her own reproductive destiny is directly linked to the conditions in her community, and these conditions are not just a matter of individual choice and access. A reproductive justice analysis focuses on better lives for women, healthier families, and sustainable communities (Ross, 2006, pp. 52-53).

Throughout my entire career, I have sought to connect reproductive justice to human rights in the United States and to explore how we can learn from and leverage international connections to advance justice for women of color.

### **“Bringing Human Rights Home” to the United States**

I was amongst the generation of women of color—along with people like Jaribu Hill who had started the Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights—who were reclaiming control of the definition of human rights from organizations like Amnesty International (Amnesty) and other more mainstream organizations that seemed to not want to bring the lens of criticism to the United States. They were much more comfortable in describing human rights violations overseas, but never wanted to do it here. So our tagline back in the 1990s with the National Center for Human Rights Education became, "Bringing Human Rights Home." A lot of others have since borrowed that phrase that we coined back in the early 1990s.

We had an earth-shattering meeting back in 1996 with Pierre Sané, who was originally from Senegal and served as the Secretary-General of Amnesty International from 1992-2001. Pierre came to the United States and Ajamu Baraka (then leading Amnesty, Intl. Southeast Region) arranged for us at NCHRE to meet with him at the Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger (the Coalition), which was also run by Black women. We had previously done human rights education trainings for the Coalition for their campaign



to raise Georgia's minimum wage. The Coalition had started out as a welfare rights organization and then expanded beyond that to talking about all the causes of hunger in terms of poverty, welfare, gentrification, and the need for living wage jobs. To give a little background, the state of Georgia said they didn't have to pay the federal minimum wage at the time because they said that they were only obligated to pay the federal minimum wage for people who worked at companies that received federal support. If you worked, for example, at a McDonalds that didn't receive federal support, they paid \$2 less than the federal minimum wage. There had been a 10-year campaign to lift Georgia's state minimum wage of \$3.25 to the federal minimum of \$4.75, which was already low. It was just ridiculous where we started. Pierre Sané heard this whole presentation by the Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger and he decided that Amnesty was going to embrace economic, social, and cultural rights globally for the first time. He said to us, right there in the parking lot, "We're going to change." That probably doesn't seem like a big deal to anybody else, but for me it felt like a big deal. It took organizations like Human Rights Watch another decade to develop a focus on economic and social rights.

After that, Amnesty started doing reports on economic, social, and cultural rights; they started saying that women's rights are human rights and rape is a human rights violation—words that we hadn't heard from Amnesty prior to that. That is one of the impacts Black women had on the international human rights movement and organizations like Amnesty.

We were also influenced by the international arena as well in terms of advancing racial justice work here in the United States. Back in the 1950s, there was a struggle between Walter White who was at the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and scholar and activist, W.E.B. DuBois about using the human rights framework, and them getting called communists for doing so. Carol Anderson has written about this in her book *Eyes Off the Prize* (2003). For decades, people used the term "civil rights" as opposed to "human rights," despite mentions about the need for human rights by leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X in their speeches and writings, as mentioned earlier in this article.

This changed when we got to the United Nations' World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa in 2001. That's when U.S. racial justice organizations realized how far behind they were in world discussions on racism and White supremacy, because the rest of the world was effectively using the human rights framework to talk about the African diaspora. Delegates from the United States had this realization and said, "Ah, we want to talk about reparations, but we don't have the volumes of books that people have bought from place like Brazil, Jamaica, Senegal and elsewhere," where they had done their homework and were already using the human rights framework. I think the U.S. civil rights leaders, frankly, were embarrassed. They didn't want to listen to us Black women in the U.S. human rights movement, but they witnessed how they were so disregarded in Durban for not having prior knowledge of the expansive human rights framework. It really just made clear that if you followed the U.S.' lead, you were going to be out of step with the rest of the world.

After Durban, that's when more openings for discussions on human rights within the civil rights movement really started taking place. I remember being asked to brief the Board of the NAACP, and I brought the speech by Frederick Douglass using human rights. I brought the speech by Martin Luther King Jr. that I mentioned before about human rights. Then you could put it all in plain sight the role of human rights in the struggle for Black liberation. All these years since the "We Charge Genocide" petition in 1951 that was brought before the United Nations by leaders such as William L. Patterson and Paul Robeson (and signed by many leaders including W.E.B. DuBois), which argued that the widespread lynchings, police brutality, and overall disenfranchisement of Black Americans was a form of genocide as defined by the then brand new United Nations Convention on Genocide (adopted in 1948). In the 1950s, these leaders were then "red-baited" and called communists, and dismissed by U.S. officials. Resistance is always going to be deemed as communist. That's what we're hearing now with the allegations by the Dept. of Justice against the Black Lives Matter movement; they are called "cultural Marxists." White supremacy is strikingly unoriginal in its attacks!

I spoke to civil rights leaders in the register they were capable of hearing, using these moments in Black history where movements and leaders had demanded human rights and sought to bring international attention to what was happening in the United States. People in the Global South had realized much earlier than I did that Black Americans are part of the Global South when you look at international law—the South within the North. The representation of Americans in these international conferences that I have been attending since the 1970s was always dominated by the White perspective, whether at the International Conferences on Women (in Mexico City in 1975, in Copenhagen in 1980, in Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995) or the UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (1994). There were so many conferences sponsored by the UN where we would fight to get the voices of Black women in particular and women of color in general into the conversation; a lot of our global comrades had only ever heard White perspectives that could not as authentically represent the realities of Black women.

The 1970s, 1980s and 1990s for me were a time of greater cross-racial global solidarity than even I'm seeing today. It was routine as a Black feminist activist to go to the Philippines to oppose the Marcos regime or go to Nicaragua and ally oneself with the Sandinistas, or go fight against apartheid in South Africa. Those were, for me, a very natural part of the global struggle against patriarchy and White supremacy. I see much less emphasis on global solidarity now amongst feminists.

### **Advice for Young Activists and Scholars**

Something I tell young activists is that “A group of people moving in the same direction thinking the same thing is a cult. A group of people moving in the same direction thinking different things is a movement” (Ross, as cited in Levenstein 2020, p. 4). I believe that what distinguishes activists is our determination to fight against oppression, rather than merely enduring it. Fighting male and White supremacy is a therapeutic privilege because life is good but the world is crazy. It is even more of a privilege to have a career in social justice organizations when most people

do not have that option. We all have people on whose shoulders we stand (Ross, 2006, p. 45).

Look at the impact that Black Lives Matter is having on changing people's attitudes and perspectives. We have laws, but they have to be enforced, and that requires changing people's mind and hearts. You can only get the policies and the laws changed through social impact. You don't lead with the law.

Young scholars and activists should not let themselves get dissuaded by the people who think they know everything. For example, in law schools, you're basically taught a perspective that you don't take a case that you don't think you can win. But in human rights, you take all the cases that you don't think you can win because you never know if just that one dissenting judge will be a platform for future cases. Justiciability is not the standard you use when deciding what to litigate if you use a human rights plan, but that's not how they're taught in law schools.

Because of this, you may find people with a learned helplessness coming into graduate programs, where you see these very large problems and students are largely convinced that there's nothing they can do about them. As a result, they think let's just do incremental changes that are possible because the larger paradigm shift doesn't seem to be possible. I would advise that young scholars and activists instead think outside the box. You fight for human rights, even if you're not going to win at first. Elie Wiesel, the Jewish Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate, said once, "there are times when you can't do anything about injustice, but there should never be a time that you fail to protest it." This is a lesson I've also learned through a lifetime of activism and that I'd share with emerging scholars and activists in the field of human rights. Always use your platform and raise your voice for justice.

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