



‘UNBOUGHT AND UNBOSSSED’

The National Political Congress of Black Women



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‘Unbought and Unbossed’: The National Political Congress of Black Women

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The National Political Congress of Black Women defines itself as an organization created to “encourage Black women to engage in non-partisan leadership activities within the educational, economic, social and political arenas”.ⁱ The Honorable Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to the United States Congress, and the Honorable C. Delores Tucker, a prominent figure in the Civil Rights movement, founded the NPCBW.ⁱⁱ The National Political Congress of Black Women, also known as the National Congress of Black Women, has been an active participant in the fight for women’s reproductive rights, fight against voter suppression, and access to education for African-American women. Its impact is noted in the increase of voter turnout in African-American women throughout the decades following its foundation.

This research paper focuses on the socio-cultural impact realized by this organization- specializing in its fight for gender equality and pursuit of education for African-American women. In addition, it will explore the NCPBW’s involvement in the fight for reproductive rights for African American women. The crusade against “gangsta rap” by the National Political Congress of Black Women will also be explored, focusing on C. Delores Tucker’s fight against the lyrics she considered to be

harmful to the image of African American women. It will further research and elaborate on their methods of protest, contributions to their local and national community, and key figures. The timeline focused on this paper is that of NPCBW’s activities and that of its members throughout the period of its conception in 1984 until the 1990s.

Founders: The Honorable Shirley Chisholm

The Honorable Shirley Chisholm was born on November 30, 1924 in the neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, New York to immigrant parents.ⁱⁱⁱ Her mother and father immigrated to the United States from Barbados. Her father, who was a factory worker, and her mother, a seamstress, opted to send Chisholm and her siblings to Barbados from 1924 until 1934. After receiving her elementary education in Barbados, she returned to New York where upon completing high school, she attended Brooklyn College.^{iv} After graduating from Brooklyn College with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology in 1946, Chisholm worked as a nursery school teacher in Brooklyn. She later went on to obtain an M.A in early childhood education from Columbia University. During her tenure as an educational consultant in the city’s Bureau of Child Welfare, she belonged to a number of political organizations. Thus began her involvement in local politics. She later became involved in organizations such as the League of Women Voters and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1964, she

was elected to the New York state legislature.^v

During her run for Congress, she employed her spitfire attitude in campaigning. Not one to sit quietly, she drove a truck next to housing projects in her native Bedford-Stuyvesant and proclaimed that "Ladies and Gentlemen ... this is fighting Shirley Chisholm coming through."^{vi} An effective and controversial strategy garnered her a spot in Congress, winning by 800 votes in June 1968. However, the election that granted her a place in Congress was found to have had a low voter turnout, an issue she would campaign against as president of the NPCBW. She was characterized as outspoken and provocative during her time in the House of Representatives. Her "unbought and unbossed" attitude helped her champion for causes such as increasing federal funding for daycares and implementing a guaranteed minimum annual income for families.^{vii}

Founders: The Honorable Cynthia Delores Tucker

Cynthia Delores Nottage was born on October 4, 1927 in North Philadelphia. The daughter of Reverend Whitfield Nottage and Captilda Gardiner. The tenth out of eleven children, Nottage was raised in an extremely religious environment in which she was not allowed to sing or dance and forbidden to date until she was twenty-one.^{viii} Hyper-segregation was rife across Philadelphia and "White Philadelphians began to separate themselves from their black neighbors in all spheres, segregating not only housing, but accommodations,

services, education, and religion. Black people were barred from all Center City restaurants, hotels, lunch counters, dime-store counters; and theaters. At the same time, attempts were made to segregate Philadelphia's schools."^{ix} Tucker was aware of the racial injustices that took place in her community, taking part in protests against Philadelphia hotel that refused to admit black athletes.^x

She attended Temple University but did not earn a degree, instead choosing to focus on her activism by registering black voters during the Philadelphia mayoral campaigning in 1950.^{xi} She was renowned for her avid candidness and prolific fund-raising. In 1971, she was appointed Secretary of the Commonwealth by Governor Milton J. Shapp.^{xii} Like the Honorable Shirley Chisholm, Tucker would also champion against voter suppression and institute a lower voting age. She was later accused of paying employees to write her speeches and was consequently fired from her position as Secretary of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. This was followed by an unsuccessful attempt to run for Congress and Senate. During her later years, she decided to fight against "gangsta rap", her most famous rival the acclaimed rapper Tupac Shakur. She deemed the lyrics to be demoralizing to African-Americans and was supported by former vice-president Al Gore as a "four-star general in the battle for righteousness."^{xiii}

The Fight Against Voter Suppression

Voter suppression had been a prevalent affliction in the African-American community. Low voter turnout resulted in

one of five African Americans voting in the 1980 election where Reagan won the presidency. Of this fraction, only 60.7% of Black women were eligible to vote. Of this 60.7%, only 6.1 million Black women headed to the booths.^{xiv} The NPCBW held demonstrations urging Black women to register. In 1992, Black women were the highest percentage of voters. According to Shirley Chisholm, 86% of Black women voted for Hillary Clinton, the highest of any minority or gender group.^{xv} This came at a time when men were primarily registered to vote over women and opposed the social programs presented by Clinton. As a result, women were urged to vote to offset the vast gap between men and women. However, throughout the years, Black women's participation in elections increased considerably, more than any other minority group.

African American Voter Turnout in the 1980s

Throughout the years, the Honorable Shirley Chisholm took a stance against voter suppression by going directly to churches and clamoring for women to register for the vote. This allowed her to broadcast her message to a large, diverse audience. As she told the crowds at the First Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church: "Because African Americans were barred for much of this country's history from mainstream institutions, the church was their bedrock of political activism".^{xvi} As a result, Black women were the ones with the highest voter turnout rates; steadily rising from 6.4 million in 1984 to 10.1 million in 2016. African American men, however, had much

lower turnout rates both in 1984 and 2016. Only 4.2 million Black men turned out to vote in 1984, which only increased to 7 million in 2016.^{xvii} This staggering difference can be attributed to the suppression of votes within males pertaining to the African American community by means of mass incarceration, discriminatory voting requirements, and restricted access to resources. On the other hand, Black women faced this as well yet still showed up to vote, thereby dispelling the myth that African Americans simply do not wish to partake in politics due to apathy.

African American Women in Politics

Spearheaded by two deeply entrenched political activists, the NPCBW found itself championing for the rights of underprivileged African American women who sought to be involved in politics. Both the Honorable Shirley Chisholm and C. Delores Tucker had seen success throughout their lengthy and influential political careers. Since 1865 up until 1992, there had been a total twenty-two African Americans who had been members of Congress. All twenty-two were males and female participation was never as high as in 1992, which has been dubbed as the "Year of the Woman" due to the record number of women, both black and white, running for Congress.

The NPCBW routinely gathered with other politically active Black women in order to foment the conversation about political involvement of women in the African American movement. Key figures of the Civil Rights movement such as Coretta Scott King, Dorothy Height, and Maxine Waters regularly attended meetings to

devise strategies targeted towards getting underprivileged women involved in politics. In June 1985, it had amassed over two-thousand members from across the United States and held its national assembly at Spelman College; the first institution that catered to the higher education of Black women.^{xviii} By 1987, three years after its foundation, they had acquired seven thousand members across the nation.^{xix} In 2017, the National Political Congress of Black Women honored Senator Kamala Harris, Representative Val Demings, and CNN political analyst April Ryan, among others, during its annual brunch commemorating African American women contributing to local and national politics.^{xx}

The Fight for Reproductive Rights

Members of the NPCBW knew all too well how anti-abortion legislature discriminated against African American women. In 1986, they joined the 125,000 women marching in Washington D.C. in an effort to reform anti-abortion legislation.^{xxi} It was the largest anti-abortion march of its kind, championing for equal reproductive rights for all women. Organizations such as the *Human Rights Campaign Fund* and the *Mexican American Women's National Association* also took part in the march, creating an intersectional space for women as a collective to have power over their own bodies and choices. Although those in the march were met with counter-protesters, it was the biggest organized rally since the proposition of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1978, which guaranteed equal rights for every citizen regardless of sex.^{xxii}

Figures such as Gloria Steinem and Holly Near were speakers at the rally, with Gaye Williams representing the National Political Congress of Black Women. In 1984, the number for single working mothers reached a record high. According to the *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, Black women without husbands tended to be much younger, completed less years of their education, and had more children than their white counterparts. This was a result of the lack of accessible anti-contraceptive methods and abortions.^{xxiii} Black and Hispanic women were in turn, more likely to live in single-parent households and consequently live in poverty. This created a noticeable gap in the pursuit of higher education by both African Americans and Hispanics. Additionally, the NPCBW claimed that it had a project targeted towards the prevention of HIV and AIDs among women in the African American community.^{xxiv} The NPCBW, much like the NAACP and Urban League, recognized the growing population of individuals suffering from AIDs in the African American community. However, it seemed to take a backseat in all three organizations, instead choosing to focus on representation in the media and female empowerment. While this yielded its own positive results, it was difficult to ignore that this was an issue within the community that was being set aside, deliberately or not.

Combatting the AIDS Epidemic

During the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, the HIV virus afflicted a multitude of Americans across the country. Perhaps what could be called one of the most underrepresented victims of this ultimately

fatal disease would be African Americans, in particular African American women. It is reported that between 1981 and 1988, the rate of African American women that had contracted the AIDs virus was thirteen times higher than their white counterparts.^{xxv} This occurred at a time when crack cocaine was being introduced to predominantly African American neighborhoods and as a result of the epidemic, the HIV virus spread much faster due to users selling sex for drugs. However, this pandemic was met with controversy at first, later being tackled by organizations such as the NAACP and Urban League. Their approach was a conservative one and geared mostly towards African American men. Simpson writes in 2007:

“Right now, HIV/AIDS is the number one cause of death for Black men and the second leading cause of death for Black women ages 25 to 44—before heart disease, cancer, and homicide. African Americans account for 57 percent of new infections of HIV and 60 percent of AIDS cases. It took the NAACP until October 1999 to launch an AIDS awareness campaign—and that campaign took a back seat to its negotiations with the networks for more Black actors in network sitcoms.”

The National Political Congress of Black Women was then faced with organizing projects to remedy this epidemic that had ravaged its community. However, their efforts were found wanting by many, as they had a project dedicated to help African American women suffering from AIDS but

instead chose to focus on fighting gangsta rap and the empowerment of women. The Honorable C. Delores Tucker’s crusade against gangsta rap and its exploitative lyrics is one of the most notable aspects of her career. Oftentimes conflicting and engaging in discussion with Tupac Shakur about the nature of the lyrics of the songs he wrote, Tucker was determined to put an end to gangsta rap.

The Quest for Moral Righteousness

Tucker was a vehement opponent of gangsta rap and its depiction of African American women. In 1994, noted rapper Tupac Shakur was nominated for an Image Award by the NAACP. The award is usually given to members pertaining to the African American community who have contributed to it being portrayed in a positive light. Upon hearing about the nominated, Tucker sent out a statement claiming that “Allowing Mr. Shakur’s name to remain on the list of nominees would send a troublesome message to African Americans nationwide.”^{xxvi} That same year, the NPCBW held a meeting in Washington D.C. to discuss how gangsta rap should be dealt with. The consensus was that gangsta rap exploited and demeaned Black women by using overtly sexual imagery in its album covers, as well as sexually explicit lyrics in its songs. Delores Tucker assiduously campaigned against its proliferation, suggesting that members in and outside of the NPCBW to put picket lines around record stores in order to pressure producers into stopping production.^{xxvii}

In February 11, 1994, Delores Tucker appeared before Commerce

Committee of the United States House of Representatives and voiced her concerns against the morally corrupt music sensation. In a riveting statement she proclaims:

"No one and no industry should be allowed to continue this social and psychological genocide of America's women and children. The record industry is out of control and should be regulated. In fact, too often they demand in their contracts that these messages of degradation be in the music of the artist."

This was supported by her claims that:

"No form of popular music is important enough to justify or excuse racism, sexual bigotry and the endorsement of sociopathic violence...such leads to the death of conscience, the corruption of the spirit, and ultimately the destruction of the individual and the community."

Her approach towards gangsta rap was lauded by then President Bill Clinton, who exhorted the music industry to resort to less violent and exploitive imagery.^{xxviii} Senator Bill Ratliff of Texas worked alongside Tucker to introduce a bill that prohibits investments in companies that promote any music that describes or glamorizes acts of violence, degrades women, and racially motivated violence against a particular race or ethnic group.^{xxix} Gangsta rap had long been hailed as a weapon that could be appropriated by youths to carry out heinous crimes. Such was the case in Milwaukee, where two teens were convicted of

murdering a police officer as a result of being inspired by one of Tupac Shakur's songs.^{xxx} This further fueled Tucker's zeal for the prohibition of gangsta rap, but the bill proposed by Senator Ratliff was ultimately not passed. However, her zeal and candor against gangsta rap led former vice-president Al Gore to call her a "four-star general in the battle for righteousness"^{xxxi} The National Political Congress of Black Women's impact in fighting against the morally corrupt and dehumanizing lyrics employed in the music industry is noted by many and one of the Honorable C. Delores Tucker's crowning achievements.

Conclusion

As the Honorable Shirley Chisholm once said: "You don't make progress by standing on the sidelines, whimpering and complaining. You make progress by implementing ideas". This belief is one that the NPCBW has demonstrated throughout its mission to fight for Black women's equal rights and access to education and political advancement. The National Political Congress of Black Women is an integral organization in the defense and empowerment of African American women. Founded by political powerhouses the Honorable Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to run for president, and the Honorable C. Delores Tucker, former Secretary of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Their mission is to uphold and empower Black women. In doing so, they fight for their rights regarding bodily autonomy, voting, and the combatting of voter suppression. Their fight against the misogynistic music produced during the late

nineties as part of the gangsta rap movement was highly documented; receiving appraisal from various members of Congress and even President Clinton.

Throughout the years, the NPCBW has amassed a following totaling in thousands of members from across the country. Influential Civil Rights leaders such as Coretta Scott King and Rosa Parks were once heavily involved in its development

and causes; their legacy forever living on through the National Congress of Black Women. Its impact has seen a marked increase in voter turnout among African American women; resulting in them being the minority with the highest turnout rate. The NPCBW's continual fight towards advocating for Black women will never cease, its causes growing larger each day and its impact reaching neighborhoods and households across America.

NOTES

ⁱ National Congress of Black Women, 2015, *Our Mission/Our Vision*, <https://www.nationalcongressbw.org/our-mission-our-vision>.

ⁱⁱ National Congress of Black Women, 2015, *NBCW History and Highlights*, <https://www.nationalcongressbw.org/our-trailblazers>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barron James, "Shirley Chisholm, 'Unbossed' Pioneer in Congress, Is Dead at 80", *The New York Times*, 3 January 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/03/obituaries/shirley-chisholm-unbossedpioneer-in-congress-is-dead-at-80.html>.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v [http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/C/CHISHOLM,-Shirley-Anita-\(C000371\)/](http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/C/CHISHOLM,-Shirley-Anita-(C000371)/), accessed 18 April 2018.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Douglas Martin, "C. Delores Tucker, a Voice for Minorities and Women, Is Dead at 78", 6 November 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/06/us/c-delores-tucker-a-voice-for-minorities-and-women-is-dead-at-78.html>.

^{ix} Ken Finkel, "Roots of Hypersegregation in Philadelphia 1920-1930," *The Philly History Blog*, 22 February 2016, <https://www.phillyhistory.org/blog/index.php/2016/02/roots-of-hypersegregation-in-philadelphia-1920-1930/>.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Douglas Martin, "C. Delores Tucker, a Voice for Minorities and Women, Is Dead at 78", 6 November 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/06/us/c-delores-tucker-a-voice-for-minorities-and-women-is-dead-at-78.html>.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Center for American Women and Politics, "Gender Differences in Voter Turnout," Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, 20 July 2017, <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/genderdiff.pdf>.

^{xv} Victoria Stanhope. "Cover Story: EXPO '96: Getting Women Out To Vote." *Off Our Backs* 26, no. 4 (1996): 3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20835432>.

^{xvi} "Shirley Chisholm Encourages Baptists to Make Change," *USA Monitor (Fort Worth, Texas)*, October 1, 1992.

^{xvii} Center for American Women and Politics, "Gender Differences in Voter Turnout," Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, 20 July 2017. <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/genderdiff.pdf>.

^{xviii} Congress of black women in historic meeting here. (1985, Jun 04). *Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003)* Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/491634310?accountid=14270>

^{xix} "Political Power," Chicago Metro News (Chicago, Illinois), 22 August 1987, http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=G65O52GNMTUyNDQ4NDI4Ni42NTE4MD

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^{xx} National Congress of Black Women, 2017, <https://www.nationalcongressbw.org/2017-brunch-honorees/>.

^{xxi} Denise Kulp, "125,000 March for Women's Lives." *Off Our Backs* 16, no. 4 (1986): 1. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25794934>.

^{xxii} Ibid.

^{xxiii} Howard Hayghe, "Working Mothers Reach Record Number in 1984, December 1984. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1984/12/rpt1full.pdf>

^{xxiv} Andrea Y Simpson, "Going It Alone: Black Women Activists and Black Organizational Quiescence." In *African American Perspectives on Political Science*, edited by Rich, Wilbur C., by Hamilton Charles V., 151-68. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bt02q.15>.

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^{xxviii} Congressional hearings held on the impact of gangsta rap. (1994, Mar 03). *Hyde Park Citizen* Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/367402252?accountid=14270>

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