



Black Women Have Always Been the Heart of the Death Penalty Abolition Movement

By Dawn Blagrove

At my first death penalty abolition meeting, the topic of race never came up. The only Black woman in a sea of white faces, I wondered how people fighting against a system rooted in racism could avoid the conversation of race so easily.

But deep down, I knew the answer. Racism is an inconvenient truth. It's more comfortable for my white counterparts to simply avoid talking about race than to do the hard work of unpacking how racism did, and still does, loom over every aspect of the criminal justice system.

The unconscious attempt to force my blackness to become a non-factor in a struggle rooted in race felt like an erasure. I was not the first Black woman to feel this way, and without intention and deliberation on the part of my white counterparts, I will not be the last.

Black women are the ignored, diminished, and disrespected heroes in so many social justice struggles. Harriet Tubman led us to freedom. Ida B. Wells exposed the barbarism of lynching. Fannie Lou Hamer led us to political power. Not because of esoteric principle or moral dilemma, but out of necessity.

Black women are the heart of the Black family. We manifest our love by shielding our communities from the harsh punishment America inflicts. Black women stand when it's hard, scary, and inconvenient. We stand when others won't. The fight to abolish the death penalty is no different.

As activist and scholar Angela Davis noted, "In Virginia, before the end of slavery there was only one crime for which a white person could be executed, but there were 66 crimes for which a slave could be executed. Had it not been for slavery, the death penalty would have likely been abolished in America. Slavery became a haven for the death penalty."

The death penalty has always been about controlling Black bodies. And Black women have always been the caretakers of Black bodies.

In his book on the history of the North Carolina death penalty, *Lethal State*, Seth Kotch reflects on how Black women created the anti-death penalty movement. In the early 20th century, county sheriffs carried out public hangings that, while legal, were almost identical to lynchings. While white families picnicked and celebrated, Black women began gathering to pray and protest. In 1910, North Carolina moved executions to an

electric chair inside Central Prison, with tightly controlled audiences, to prevent Black women from standing in protest of broken, Black bodies swinging from nooses.

But, the oppression Black women face in American society only makes us more resilient. We've been key figures in struggles like the bus boycotts and the Black power movement. And we've never shied away from being the only Black woman in a sea of white faces.

The curse and gift of being invisible is that we can build power and influence right under the noses of our oppressors. When we began gathering to bear witness to the inhumanity of public hangings, we were mostly ignored — until it became clear we intended to use our voices to disrupt the status quo. By then, it was too late to stop the movement we quietly built. So, instead, white activists watered down our work and then claimed it. That's why, today, I'm often the only Black face in the room.

Black women also are charged with holding the moral line. In almost every work gathering there is a moment when someone says something passively racist or rooted in white privilege and all eyes shift to me. As the Black woman in the room, I am expected to be the one to call folks out, despite the fact that everyone heard the abominable statement. Yet, when I play my expected role, I know it will come with the uncomfortable stares and hushed whispers of “the angry Black woman.”

America has always attempted to create a diminishing narrative about Black women. As Kotch highlights, the first Black women death penalty abolitionists were referred to as criminals and loose women. As a Black woman activist, this particularly resonates with me.

I spend much of my time holding law enforcement accountable for the public executions of Black people for little more than being Black. But I constantly run up against the narrative that my demand for accountability is evidence that Black people have no respect for the law. Every day, I work to be recognized as a person deserving of a life without fear that my country will kill me or my loved ones simply because we demand to be seen. And every day, pernicious stereotypes try to erase me.

Despite it all, I will never walk away from abolition work. I stand because, like all the Black women before me, I do not have a choice. I will continue to dismantle systems designed to oppress my people. I will demand to be seen, heard and respected. I will not let the work of Black women be erased.

I am here. We are here.

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