



**CELEBRATING BLACK WOMEN'S HISTORY:  
ACHIEVEMENTS, STRENGTHS AND STRUGGLES**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**A**S WE MARK THIS YEAR'S BLACK HISTORY MONTH II: Women Focus, we will again pay rightful homage to Black women, African women everywhere—to the pioneers, heroines, and way-makers who made ways out of no-way, who opened up ways for so many others. Indeed, we pay rightful and repeated homage to them for breaking down barriers, crossing boundaries, creating and increasing opportunities for women and girls, and others marginalized and excluded, and making great sacrifices and strides in the service of girls, women, our people and humankind. But as we celebrate Black women in their most awesome and expansive meaning, one of our most difficult and demanding challenges and tasks is to balance our stress on achievements and strengths with the urgent and unavoidable need for continuing struggle. For in spite of their extraordinary achievements and demonstrated strengths, the struggle does and must continue to decisively end the inequalities, injustices and unfreedom that Black and other women and girls still suffer throughout the world.

Thus, we are constantly confronted with several central and interlocking questions. First, how do we rightfully praise Black women's proven and impressive strength without denying or inadequately addressing their unobvious and visible vulnerabilities and disadvantages, and the debilitating and destructive conditions of coercion, discrimination and violence they face? And how do we balance the stress on personal strength and self-determination with the value of interdependence, their need to share, to be supported and support, and to love and be loved in essential, indispensable and worthy ways? And how do we, in our emphasis on the great and extraordinary women, give similar and appropriate weight and honor to the ordinary women who form an enduring wall against corrosive and destructive forces of racial, class and sexual oppression and create life-preserving and life-enhancing space in spite of it all?

Clearly, as we recount and reflect on the history of Black women and others in the world, we must raise and praise their achievements and strengths. But we are also obligated to acknowledge roads and doors still to be opened, battles still to be fought and won and a future to be forged that brings into being equal justice, full equality and a profound and promising freedom. Therefore, at the heart of all our celebrations of Black women, as well as that of others, must be commitment and recommitment to the struggle to create conditions necessary for the full liberation of women, i.e., *freedom from* oppression of all kinds, and *freedom to* develop and realize themselves or come into the fullness of themselves, as Marcus Garvey phrased it concerning our people as a whole. Such an awesome historical and ongoing task requires, as Mary McLeod Bethune teaches, that we remake the world. "We must remake the world," she says, and "The task is no less than that."

But to give the struggle due focus, foundation and concreteness in the conduct of our daily lives, it must begin where we are and spread outward. This means overturning ourselves personally and collectively, radically transforming society, and thru these practices and globally focused thrusts, ultimately remake the world. In other words, it requires separating ourselves from centuries of male privileging and dominance, and imagining and bringing into being new ways of relating and being human in the world.

It means also the concrete joining with women in the ongoing struggle to secure and enforce respect for the rights of women and girls in every area of life, to increase economic and educational opportunities and advancement for them, build strong and mutually respectful and reciprocal male/female, personal and family relations, strengthen and expand rites of passage programs to bring girls into African womanhood, end violence against women and girls, struggle to end human trafficking, and address the problem of women's' and girls' increasing

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entrapment in the jail and prison-industrial complex, euphemistically called the criminal justice system.

As women are often in many homes the life-line of family provision and stability, it is important to place special emphasis on poverty alleviation and eradication, and working women's issues of equal pay, job and economic security and opportunities, benefits, child care and workplace flexibility. Vital, too, is the rightful and urgent attention to the health of women, especially their increasing vulnerability and infection rate with regard to HIV/AIDS and STDs, as well as a host of other diseases plaguing Black women and Black people: i.e., in general, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and obesity.

However, in all we conceive, say and do, it is important, as Kawaida womanism argues, that attempts are not made to lift Black women out of Black history, the Black community and their relationships with Black men. For the liberation struggle is not one of either/or, but of both and of our people as a whole. Respect for women's rights and the need for women to have their own voice, define their own issues, represent themselves and speak also to the interests of the community, society and the world must always and earnestly be given. For we must always be careful to put forth in principles and prefigure in daily practice, the future and promise of an inclusive liberation of male and female, i.e., *the whole people*, conceived and carried out together.

Here the ethical teachings of our ancestors in the *Odu Ifa* teaches us no real, good or righteous world can be built without the respected presence, full and effective participation and recognized worth and capacity of women. In *Odu Ifa* (248.1), we are taught we are morally compelled to ask and answer rightfully and truthfully in every important and essential activi-

ty the two questions raised by the Divine at the beginning of human creative assertion in the world. And these are "What about the woman, where is she in the project and process?" and "Did (and do) you give her due respect as a person and indispensable partner in the ongoing project of building, bringing and sustaining good in our lives and in the world?"

As I argued in the early 70s, when revolution was a respectable reference, "Revolution is rank and unreal, if it is not a collective effort and experience, and if it does not reach and raise to a higher level each and all of us. Our freedom as a people is indivisible and to talk of liberation of less than all is sheer and shallow nonsense." This is the sense of concern for the liberation and life of African people as a whole that is conveyed in the inclusive definition of Kawaida womanism. For Kawaida womanism defines itself as "culturally grounded thought and practice directed toward the liberation of African women as an integral and indispensable part of the liberation of African people as a whole which includes not only freedom from oppression, but also the creation of those conditions necessary for the well-being, development and flourishing of women, men and children in family, community, society and the world."

**I**t is this *gender-focused, people inclusive, and world-encompassing conception* of the meaning and central thrust of Black women's liberation that is summed up in the womanist writings of Anna Julia Cooper. She notes that the Black woman's cause, in its most expansive sense, is universal, "demanding an entrance not through a gateway for ourselves, our race, sex or sect, but a grand highway for humanity." Thus she concluded "We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life and the unnaturalness and injustice of all favoritism, whether of sex, race, country or condition."

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