

# If Not Me then Who? The Identity and Activism of Black Women during Jim Crow and Apartheid in the United States and South Africa

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## Abstract

Jim Crow and apartheid are two examples of systems that have extensively propagated differential oppression among the echelons of humanity. Apartheid laws in South Africa and Jim Crow laws in the United States assigned black people to subordinate social, economic and political positions to whites while simultaneously incorporating the repression of women's rights. Moreover, feminist issues faced by black women were inherently different from those of white women because of the legacy of slavery. This placed black women in the difficult position of having to overcome both racism and sexism as imposed by both systems. While many black women have championed the causes of conventional movements for liberation and equality, they have found those crusades to be lacking in a commitment to addressing the unique race, gender, and class concerns related to black womanhood. This article delineates that the interwoven discrimination of sexism and racism manifested by Jim Crow and apartheid resulted in black women forming autonomous liberation movements from those of black men and white women in the United States and South Africa.

## Keywords

Apartheid, Jim Crow, Black Women, Liberation Movements

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## 1. Introduction

People faced with oppression innately desired to triumph over that oppression. Consequently, some segments of humanity have undergone a long history of having to fight for certain rights. Black people all over the world at some time or an-

other have struggled to eradicate race and class discrimination to gain equality. Similarly, women of all races have had to overcome class and gender discrimination on a global scale. Jim Crow and apartheid are two examples of systems that have extensively propagated differential oppression among the echelons of humanity. Apartheid laws in South Africa and Jim Crow laws in the United States assigned black people to subordinate social, economic and political positions to whites while simultaneously incorporating the repression of women's rights. Moreover, feminist issues faced by black women were inherently different from those of white women because of the legacy of slavery. This placed black women in the difficult position of having to overcome both racism and sexism as imposed by both systems. While many black women have championed the causes of conventional movements for liberation and equality, they have found those crusades to be lacking in a commitment to addressing the unique race, gender, and class concerns related to black womanhood. This article delineates that the interwoven discrimination of sexism and racism manifested by Jim Crow and apartheid resulted in black women forming autonomous liberation movements from those of black men and white women in the United States and South Africa.

Assigning perplexingly dissimilar employment categories to black men and women demonstrated one way that the proponents of Jim Crow and apartheid promulgated the notion of whites' superior status to blacks. Both systems dictated that black men and women worked predominantly in subservient jobs. The distinction was that black men were customarily assigned to menial duties away from white households while black women were relegated to servile tasks as maids and cooks within the dwellings of white families. The constrained and limited freedom of domestic service kept black women away from their husbands and children, which left them isolated and vulnerable to the oppressive and authoritative behavior of the white women whom they served. Inopportunistly, these domestic servants had to travel for miles from their communities to the white suburban neighborhoods, and travelling back to their homes sometimes meant arriving there in the middle of the night. The time constraints imposed by traveling back and forth from work left black women with little time to spend with their families. Conceivably, members of a unified family would stand a better chance of resisting the negative effects imposed by Jim Crow and apartheid. Manifestly, black women not being around to nurture and care for their husbands and children led to the demise and destruction of many black families (Cock, 1980; Dill, 1994).

For practical purposes, black women began to strive to overcome both class and gender discrimination. The identity constructed for black women during apartheid and Jim Crow placed black women at a disadvantage to satisfactorily gain equality among black men and white women. Paradoxically, they confronted the difficult question of where they fit in with the black liberation and feminist movements. Joining the predominant feminist movements would put them in a position of having to endure racism from white women who not only discriminated against them but also devoted little attention to the class and economic matters

that foremost affected black women. On the other hand, joining the prevalent movements for black equality would put them in a position of having to endure sexism from black men who demanded to be leaders of the movement. While they did join with black men to mutually fight for the civil rights denied them by Jim Crow and apartheid; they found difficulty in joining popular feminist movements. (Bernstein, 1985; Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001).

In order to adequately address the concerns that specifically plagued black women, South African black women and African American women decided to intentionally create their own crusades of activism. The activism displayed by these women sought to restructure their socioeconomic positions within their racially segregated and sexually biased societies. Their objectives were to elevate themselves above all of the peculiarities associated with their presumed position of being subordinated to men and white women in society. Through elevating their positions, black women were able to reestablish their own identity within the confines of apartheid and Jim Crow. The liberation movements performed and led by black women in South Africa and the United States became essential towards recreating a sociopolitical environment that supported rather than suppressed the livelihood of black women. (Bernstein, 1985; Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001).

## **2. The Education System for African American Women during Jim Crow Era**

Jim Crow laws relegated African American children to an inferior position to white children in the educational system in the United States. Though state and local governments controlled the development and direction of education in America, black Americans did not have the government's protection to ensure their equal rights to public facilities and education. In 1896, the Supreme Court decision in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* solidified the "separate but equal" doctrine as a solution towards handling race relations in the United States (Ihle, 1986). State and local governments used the "separate but equal" doctrine to establish separate education systems for black children and white children. As a result, education among blacks deteriorated in the United States (Ihle, 1986).

In applying the "separate but equal" doctrine to the structure of the educational system, state governments disproportionately supported white education over black education. A. D. Beittel, former president of Talladega College in Alabama, delivered an address about the "separate but equal" doctrine before the Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools for Negroes in 1950. In his speech, Beittel (1951) repudiated the states' position in distributing educational opportunities as he states, "To insist on *separate* education is to make *equal* education impossible. Even if equal education were possible on a segregated basis, it has not been the intention of states in which separate schools are required by law to provide equal opportunity for Negroes. Segregation and discrimination have been inseparable twins." Beittel recognized that, through the "separate but equal" doctrine, state

governments did not adequately provide black children with access to the same education as white children. The education system became a tool used to systematically place white Americans in a superior position to black Americans. Separating the educational facilities meant separating the opportunities among black and white students. Black children received an inferior education to white children because they were placed in inadequate facilities equipped with insufficient learning tools and supplies. The education accessible to black boys and girls echoed the subordinate treatment that all black Americans underwent during state regulated racial segregation.

Through their ideals of paternalism, white Americans stereotypically characterized black people as indecent and immoral. Subsequently, they believed they had to rid black people of their offensive behaviors. Consequently, in the 1900s to the 1930s, the structure of black education centered on improving the low moral standards of black Americans. Black women were taught, from their elementary education into the college and university level, instructions in morality and proper living standards (Ihle, 1986).

Jim Crow consisted of hidden elements of sexism along with their discriminatory laws. The sexism was hidden because it was not pronounced in any written laws but became visible through the education and job opportunities given to black women. The racism and sexism that black women encountered evolved distinctively from others' experience of American life. Each discriminatory system laid a foundation whereby black women were forced to perform domestic duties in white households as practically their exclusive economic resource. The expectancy that black women would occupy subservient positions within white households exposed them to forms of racial discrimination different from that of black men. One such difference is seen in the way that black girls were educated dissimilarly from black boys. Expectations placed on black women caused whites to establish education systems on the basis of properly educating black women for their "station in life" (Ihle, 1986). Aforementioned education systems were designed to teach African American girls how to become domestic servants. The premise involved teaching black women how to clean, cook and take care of a household to prepare them for their place in the workforce in servitude to whites. The education system perpetuated the dual discrimination of racism and sexism that kept black women from being elevated to the social and economic status of all other Americans. Since training in domestic service became the only form of education offered to black women, they did not have the ability to enter into other job fields that were occupied by men or white women. They underwent discriminations that put them in an isolated position from which they had to on their own fight to liberate themselves.

### **3. Education among South African Women under Apartheid**

In South Africa, the education system operated within the rules of apartheid. Similar to the United States, the apartheid regime led by the national government,

disenfranchised black children by limiting their access to education. For Africans, the national government created a policy called the Bantu Education Act. The Bantu Education Act ultimately prepared Africans to be subservient to the white population. Its policies mandated a curriculum designed to prepare African students to meet the labor demands of South Africa, without threatening the job opportunities for white workers. The national government disproportionately financed the education of African children when compared to that of white children. In 1971, the South African government spent an average of \$345 on white children's education and only spent \$19 on education for African children (*The Washington Post*, 1971). The poor education for black children caused half of them to drop out within their first three years. By spending a small amount of money on their education, the government restricted black people from obtaining the training necessary to accrue them the same social and economic status as white South Africans. Black and white children going to separate schools kept them from obtaining the same means of employment. Black South Africans lacked the right to live free and prosperous because of the policies placed against them that restricted their economic growth (*Martineau*, 1997; *The Washington Post*, 1971).

During the era of apartheid in South Africa, many African girls did not receive an adequate education. Accordingly, a large portion of African women were illiterate under apartheid because of the lack of educational opportunities available to them. It was reported that in 1985, less than 5 percent of African women completed secondary school (*Martineau*, 1997). Under the apartheid regime, black education for girls was not considered to be important. African girls did not receive a compulsory education until the end of apartheid in 1994. Nonetheless, African girls only went to school if their families could afford to send them to school. White children and black boys heavily outnumbered black girls in obtaining secondary and tertiary levels of education. Most African girls finished primary education but did not have the opportunity to attend secondary and tertiary schools because their families did not have the financial means to keep their daughters in school. As a result, the black community experienced a high dropout of its girls. By only having a basic education, many black women were forced to take the only jobs available to them—domestic work (*Unterhalter*, 1990; *Duke*, 1990).

The educational system in South Africa employed different tactics against black African girls from those used in the United States against black American girls. South Africa discouraged black girls from their educational opportunities while the U.S. limited the educational opportunities that became available to them. Albeit black girls in the United States received an inferior education, they had access to a compulsory education that provided them the opportunity to become literate by allowing them to at least learn to read and write. South Africa provided education to black girls but not enough education for them to become literate in order to elevate their social status and alleviate their economic disparities. This type of treatment revealed to both sets of women that if they were going to prevail, they had to fight and struggle against the systematized sexism and racism that kept

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them from ascending to the same social status as the white citizens (Cock, 1980).

#### 4. The Domestication of Black Women Servitude during Jim Crow Era

Prior to 1900, only 25 percent of domestic workers in the United States were black women (Nadasen, 2015). European immigrant women heavily dominated the domestic service industry and often competed with black women for jobs in domestic service. After the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, European immigrant women began to decline in numbers as domestic servants. Their withdrawal from the industry resulted from immigrant women's ability to elevate themselves and move on to better means of employment. European immigrant women found job opportunities in department stores, telephone industries and garment factories. Black women did not receive the same privilege to transition to another field of work. So, by 1950, the percentage of black women working in domestic service rose to 60 percent (Nadasen, 2015).

While employed in domestic service, black women either lived with their employers full-time or traveled to their place of employment. Black women who lived outside of the white household had the challenge of traveling across town into white communities. They relied on public transportation that was racially segregated and had drivers who treated black passengers poorly. In comparison, the women who lived inside of the white households suffered more than those who had the opportunity to travel home each day as they were kept from their own families and could not regularly socialize with people in the black community. Black women were practically held in captivity by being confined to the household and only having to service white people. Moreover, in-house domestic workers encountered incidences of sexual harassment and abuse from their white male employers more than black women who lived outside of the white household. The sexual assaults from white male employers undermined the respect and dignity of their black female employees. Isolation from family and friends deprived in-house domestic workers from sharing their stories of attacks and abuse. Such a work environment was meant to degrade them in order to reinforce the racist and sexist stereotypes being imposed upon them (Nadasen, 2015).

Both live-in domestic workers and those who traveled from the black community underwent long hours of labor with little recompense. Black women as domestic servants withstood humiliating and degrading treatment in virtual silence. They endured intensive hours of cooking, cleaning, sewing and rearing white children while barely earning enough money to take care of their own families. Their compensation was not adequate enough to allow them to advance beyond their exploitative and isolated conditions. Even so, white employers disregarded the effects that their actions had on the livelihood of the black domestic workers. They perceived black women only as people who serviced their needs. They did not care to honor the black women's desires to take care of their own husbands and children (Nadasen, 2015).

Another model of sexism and racism implicated within the field of domestic work is the depiction of the black mammy. An article published in the *Afro-American* on July 15, 1931, entitled, “The Black Mammy” disclosed the sentiments of a white Southerner, J.S. Boswell whose description of black women working for white families highlighted the “beloved black mammy” figure that was promoted often during the period of Jim Crow. Boswell attempted to profile black womanhood in the United States through the caricature portrayal of black women domestics. The image of mammy kept black women from being perceived as more than domestic servants catering to the needs of white families. Boswell elucidated his perception of mammy as he wrote, “. . . the black woman, under God, became a sub-creator and trainer of the best white men and women that have come to birth in any country and in any age. Such was a spiritual contribution, and it was the best and noblest contribution to the ideals of our country ever rendered by the negro race” (*Afro-American*, 1931). Within his characterization of black women as domestic workers, he failed to include the sentiments and emotions that black women held regarding their role. Boswell hailed black women’s contributions in raising white men and women but neglected to acknowledge the time spent away from nurturing their own families. What is more, he omitted the abuse, heavy workload and under compensation that black women were subjected to as domestic workers. Rather, Boswell portrayed black women as a mammy figure that should be proud of their accomplishments whilst raising the white race. The interwoven stereotypes of sexism and racism constructed the identity of the mammy figure to be a representation of what is expected and acceptable behavior for black American women. It was implied that the mammy figure was exceptional at taking care of a home and attending to the needs of children because she was a woman. Mammy being black meant that she should be accustomed to being in servitude to whites. (*Afro-American*, 1931; Hale, 1998).

## **5. The Domestication of Black Women Servitude under Apartheid**

Beyond the lack of education that restricted black South African women to domestic servitude, the apartheid laws that regulated the labor force placed black women in a vulnerable position to be exploited and overworked. The Nationalist government enacted The Native Land Act of 1913, designating 87 percent of the land in South Africa as white-only residential areas, thereby restricting black and white people from living amongst each other (Cock, 1980). Through this racial separation, the white population had the opportunity to regulate the black labor force. It was arranged so that the white-only areas of South Africa held industrial employment and suburban neighborhoods, while blacks were restricted to live in rural areas with little means to make a living. Furthermore, the South African government issued the Bantu Act of 1964, which declared that no Africans could leave the Bantustan (black homeland) without obtaining a contract of employment from the government labor bureau. The contract would be for only one year with

the possibility of being renewed. Because the new laws further entrenched racism in the labor system, black African people became even more disenfranchised. The regulations enacted by the government made black laborers into migrant workers that were excluded from the mainstream of socioeconomic opportunities. Hence, black laborers became powerless and cheap to hire. Apartheid laws restricted them from gaining the resources that they needed to create wealth within their own communities. Instead they were compelled to work for white employers who had complete control over their wages and job opportunities. The government placed black people in a subordinate position in the work force in order to control black labor and thereby regulate the economic and social conditions of black people. In all probability the new laws further subjugated black women to a subordinate position (Mafukidze & Mbanda, 2008; Cock, 1980).

In 1980, Sociologist Jacklyn Cock (1980) conducted research on South African black women who performed domestic work for white households. In her study, she interviews black women to gather information pertaining to their labor plights during apartheid. One of the participants in Cock's study explains that she worked 66 hours a week and barely made enough money to take care of herself. The domestic worker expounds on the disparity of her situation as she states, "Because everything is so expensive, I can hardly buy myself a pair of panties. I don't talk about shoes. They cost my whole month's pay." Cock pointed out that the participant made 16 Rand a month, which is approximately \$1.07 in U.S. currency. Her work provided confirmation that African women spent the majority of their time working in white households without receiving enough money to adequately provide for themselves.

Working long hours in white households kept black women away from their homes unable to attend to their own families. They remained isolated because of the distance apart from the rural areas where their families resided. Without anyone around to come to their assistance, black women depended on their employers for their basic needs. This dependency left black women to be exploited in South Africa. Their exploitation remained hidden because of their placement in a household structure that was away from the public atmosphere. Domestic servitude kept black women immobile and unable to function outside of the authority of their white employers (Cock, 1980).

The discriminatory practices that black women endured did not coincide with or relate to the oppression placed on other minority groups, such as black men and white women. South African scholars such as Deborah Gaitskell et al. (1983) analyzed black women domestic workers under apartheid in South Africa and determined that the women faced triple oppression as black people, as women and as workers. The concept of triple oppression can also be applied to black women domestic servants during Jim Crow in the United States. In both nations the triple oppression stemmed from the western ideologies of womanhood that were being attributed to black women. The western ideologies of womanhood adopted by both Eurocentric-centered nations focused on "the material dependence of

women in the nuclear family.” For that reason, the work force established during Jim Crow and apartheid divided people among race and gender which created class distinctions among everyone in society. In order for black women to elevate beyond their lowly status as domestic servants, they had to strategically adopt a form of resistance that would disrupt the function of Jim Crow and apartheid in the United States and South Africa (Turshen, 2010; Gaitskell et al., 1983).

## **6. Comparing the Identities of Black Men and Women in the United States**

From 1910-1920, the U.S. Census Bureau noticed a significant decline of black men in domestic service (Haynes, 1923). In 1920, the bureau specified the occupations that were considered domestic work (Haynes, 1923). They acknowledged barbers, midwives, hotelkeepers, cooks, servants, waiters and bootblacks as domestic workers. Black women began to increasingly outnumber black men as domestic servants, once the preparations for the First World War commenced. The United States entering the war provided black men the opportunity to fill the job vacancies of white men who left to fight for their country. This afforded black men the opportunity to elevate their level of employment above domestic work. The 1920 U.S. Census showed that black men increasingly held employment in trade and transportation, manufacturing and mechanical jobs and clerical work (Haynes, 1923). On the other hand, black women were not given the same opportunity to elevate from their positions as domestic servants. They stayed behind providing personal services, while black men improved their social status and economic conditions. The black men’s ability to work outside of domestic servitude reflected the sexism that existed within the structure of Jim Crow. Since black men were able to step into new areas of employment, black women increased their opportunity to be wage earners by entering into domestic servitude customarily reserved for black men (Haynes, 1923).

## **7. Comparing the Identities of Black Men and Women in South Africa**

Similar to black women’s experience in America, black women in South Africa experienced their oppression distinctive of the discrimination towards black men. More African men worked outside of the black homelands or townships than African women. Because of the long distance travel from the townships to the industrialized white suburbia, often times, African men were granted housing in hostels by some of their employers. Under apartheid, black women and children were officially viewed as superfluous appendages. Therefore, housing for black male employees had strict rules, such as, no women visitation, not even for their wives. The forced separation between husband and wife kept many black families apart. Black men lived in temporary housing in industrialized cities, while black women and children were restricted to the rural-area townships. An African woman frustrated by the plight of black women in South Africa explained, “The homelands

are tribal death cells. The lands are not fertile and there are only hungry women and children with no health facilities to speak of” (Gilliam, 1985). Black women were left to raise their children alone and endured the lack of resources and healthy environs because of the racism and sexism that existed in South Africa. Black women receiving menial pay for domestic work and not having the immediate support of their husbands created drastic financial problems within the black homelands. The absence of black men from their families caused black women and children to become vulnerable to the harsh conditions of apartheid (Sparks, 1987; Howe, 1970; Gilliam, 1985).

## 8. Comparing the Identities of Black Women and White Women in the United States

Black women had to strive against sexism and racism alone because they could not depend on white women to acknowledge and support their desire to elevate themselves beyond their social and economic conditions during segregation in the United States. In an effort to explain the social structure that existed among black and white women in the United States, historian Elizabeth G. Hale’s *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South* (1998) addresses the overt racism that prevented white women from empathizing with black women. Before segregation, southern white women managed their own houses with the help of slave women and children. During segregation, white women had limited rights and control within society. In the midst of segregation, the white women’s gender identity was subservient to the roles of white men. The only power they had involved household maintenance. Therefore, they chose to assert their supremacy over black women by having them clean their homes and raise their children. The relationship between white and black women during segregation highlighted the false sense of security that white women needed to believe that they are superior to blacks. Domesticated black women in white households provided white women a power and authority that they lacked in the presence of men. Thus, white women did not relate to the overall condition of black women during Jim Crow. Their whiteness allowed them privileges that were not granted to black women. Black women experienced sexism that was closely tied to white women’s racial prejudices.

## 9. Comparing the Identities of Black Women and White Women in South Africa

Comparably, Elizabeth Ann Schneider’s *Forbidden Friends: Living Under Apartheid* (2014) recounts her experience in South Africa with her husband during the apartheid regime. In 1975, Schneider left the United States for Johannesburg once her husband found a job teaching mathematics at the University of Witwatersrand. Without a job of her own, Schneider spent most of her days at home in her apartment with her maid, Elizabeth. Early on, Schneider noticed the clear distance that Elizabeth always kept from her. Elizabeth, who cleaned and did laundry, made

sure to never get in the way of Mr. and Mrs. Schneider and always responded to questions in short sentences. After spending more time with each other, Schneider was able to comfort Elizabeth enough so that they could share morning tea with each other. Schneider recognizes the danger in fraternizing with Elizabeth as she states, "If Mrs. Wood, the live-in manager, knew what I was doing, she would throw us out for being anti-apartheid troublemakers" (Schneider, 2014). Despite being from America, Schneider understood the racial segregation that occurred in South Africa. It was not acceptable for a white woman and her maid to sip tea and share each other's company as equals. South African scholars explain that the different social statuses that were constructed for white and black women defined the boundaries of sisterhood among both women. White women had to remain separate from socializing with black women in order to reinforce the superior status of whites over blacks. Since black women and white women did not share the same experiences of sexism in South Africa, black women had to rally together in order to dismantle the unfair treatment they received while living under apartheid (Turshen, 2010; Schneider, 2014).

Indeed black women in the US and in South Africa underwent discrimination on the basis of sexism and racism that became unparalleled to the subordinate treatment received by black men and white women. In order to protect themselves and achieve the same rights and privileges as men and white women, black women had to initiate their own liberation movements. They began movements that served the purpose of dismantling the discriminatory practices of Jim Crow and apartheid and improving their social and economic conditions in the United States and South Africa (James, Foster, & Guy-Shetall, 2009).

## **10. Liberation Movements among Black Women in the United States during Jim Crow**

One way that black women in the United States banded together to combat discrimination was to establish clubs that focused on racial uplift and improving their status as women. From the 1890s into the 1950s, so many clubs and organizations formed across the country that eventually their collective efforts were referred to as the Black Women's Club Movement (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001). The two notable women within the movement were Ida B. Wells and Mary McLeod Bethune. Ida B. Wells contributed to the movement in its early stages by bringing international attention to the horrific attitudes and behaviors of lynching that spawned from white supremacy in the United States. Wells, a middle-class black woman from Mississippi, worked from 1892 to 1900 as an activist against the lynching of African Americans in the United States (Royster, 1997). She used her skills as a journalist and public speaker in order to develop her own anti-lynching campaigns. She worked determinedly to get legislation passed to outlaw lynching in America (Royster, 1997; Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001).

In 1896, Wells led a protest in Washington D.C. to bring to President William McKinley's attention the racial injustice that African Americans underwent

through the practices of lynching in the United States (Royster, 1997). While leading the protest, she also advocated for the passage of an anti-lynching bill. That same year, Wells assisted in establishing the National Association of Colored Women's Club (NACW). Wells and women from various other organizations used that club as a means to come together to address how to improve upon women's suffrage, health, education and other issues that impacted the lives of black women (Royster, 1997).

Mary McLeod Bethune, who grew up poor and one of 17 children in South Carolina, became fortunate enough to attend college and fulfill her dream of opening her own school for African American girls. In 1904, Bethune established the Daytona Literary and Industrial School for Training Negro Girls in Daytona, Florida (McCluskey & Smith, 2001). Bethune wanted to make sure that black girls were able to receive an adequate education that taught them more than just domestic work. Initially, the school began to provide educational opportunities to black women, but eventually the college serviced both black men and women and evolved into Bethune-Cookman University (McCluskey & Smith, 2001).

In 1935, Bethune established the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) to continue efforts to advance the status of black women in America (McCluskey & Smith, 2001). The NCNW gathered black women from other clubs and organizations to focus on political issues that affected black women. The NCNW advocated for black women to gain a formal education and become leaders in the political discourse regarding the status of black people in the United States. The organization funded scholarships for students to attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and lobbied for the inclusion of black women in governmental positions. Also Bethune's intentions were for the organization to invite black men to their meetings. She felt that including men in the meetings would allow the organization to discuss the issues of race and gender without alienating and castigating black men (McCluskey & Smith, 2001).

Both Wells and Bethune made considerable contributions within the Black Women's Club Movement. They took on the dual responsibility of striving for racial equality, while establishing avenues for black women to uplift themselves from the racism and sexism that they encountered. The duality of fighting racism and sexism remained a constant focus for women through the club movement. Wells speaking out against lynching demonstrated the concern and courage that it took to advocate against a racial discriminatory practice during the time that Jim Crow commenced in America. Bethune starting her own school for black girls displayed her determination to restructure the system of education for black women. Her establishment of the NCNW presented black American women with an opportunity to be more than just maids in white households and gave them a catalyst for their issues to be heard within the confines of a racially-segregated republic. Both women, being a part of the middle class while involved in the movement displayed the commitment that prosperous black women had in struggling for the liberation of all black people regardless of their economic status. These

women showcased that the Black Women's Club Movement labored towards ending racist and sexist behavior that emerged within the Jim Crow era (McCluskey & Smith, 2001; Royster, 1997).

Another significant measure made by black women to improve their social status in America was igniting the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Black women, in Montgomery, Alabama, were involved in deconstructing racial discrimination within their city prior to boycotting the bus system. As early as 1946, the Women's Political Council (WPC) emerged as an organization founded for black women by Dr. Fair Burks, a professor in the English Department at Alabama State University (Robinson & Garrow, 1987). The WPC had a well-known presence within the black community because of its charitable events and community service activities. Because of their community activism, many black people in Montgomery, who had grown tired of being bullied and mistreated while riding the city buses, called the WPC and complained about the harassment received from bus drivers. In 1950, Burks resigned and assigned JoAnn Gibson Robinson as leader of the WPC. The complaints inspired Robinson to plan a bus boycott. During 1954-1955, Robinson along with other members of the WPC prepared and staged the bus boycott. The members of the WPC agreed that the boycott would only be implemented when the people appeared ready (Robinson & Garrow, 1987).

Even though the WPC planned a bus boycott prior to Rosa Parks's arrest for refusing to move from her seat on a bus, the police detaining Parks became the catalyst needed to trigger the participation of the community in boycotting the bus system. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, a seamstress at a department store and secretary of the Alabama chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) defied the rules of the local government by declining to give up her seat to a white man on the city bus in Montgomery, Alabama (The New York Times, 1956). Many black people became agitated with the bus system when Parks was arrested and jailed for the violation of a city segregation ordinance. The WPC interpreted the shift in attitude as a signal that the people were geared up to protest. Therefore, the organization began sending out notices and announcements of a bus boycott to take place on December 5, four days after Parks' arrest (Robinson & Garrow, 1987; The New York Times, 1956).

To facilitate the transportation needs of the boycotters, the WPC organized a taxi service to drive African Americans to work at reduced rates. 200 black people volunteered as taxi drivers who chauffeured African Americans around town at 10 cents per person (Robinson & Garrow, 1987). Although there was bad weather on the first day of the boycott, enough African Americans stuck with the plan and resisted riding the Montgomery city buses. Black people continued to avoid riding the city buses for months beyond that first day. The lack of black passengers caused a significant loss of revenue for the city buses. Eventually, the Montgomery Bus Boycott started by the WPC became more successful as civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. took over and continued to lead the boycott. The success of the bus boycott stemmed mainly from the participation of black women do-

mestic workers who traveled across town to work in white households. They had no choice but to ride the buses because the low pay that they received did not provide them with the financial means to afford cars or taxi service. For black women domestic workers, the bus boycott brought on major hardships in finding alternative ways to get to work, but became very important towards gaining equality within the bus system. Furthermore, the boycott allowed black women to be viewed as more than just domestic workers, working in white households and going along with the status quo of Jim Crow. They strongly supported the boycott because the movement offered them a sense of militancy and gave them the opportunity to change their social condition (Robinson & Garrow, 1987; *The New York Times*, 1956).

Black men also refused to ride the buses in protest of the brutal attacks that occurred more frequently against them. Their activism was necessary in order for the bus boycott to be effective. Black women initiated the boycott to break the constraints of white supremacy's sexism and racism and in doing so was able to restructure their identity from being oppressed servants to activists. In due course, racial segregation on Montgomery city buses was irreversibly eradicated due to the combined efforts of both genders (Robinson & Garrow, 1987).

## **11. Liberation Movements among Black Women in the South African during Apartheid**

The political activism of black women in the Montgomery Bus Boycott sparked change throughout the country and became known as one of the most successful protests and symbols of progress for African Americans. In a like manner, black women in South Africa fought against the oppression of apartheid through the development of anti-pass campaigns and a bus boycott in the late 1950s (Brooks, 2003). In 1955, the Minister of Native Affairs declared that African women would have to start carrying passes effective January 1, 1956 (Bernstein, 1985). The issuing of passes to black African women came about because officials feared that the impending recession was going to spark competition between blacks and whites in the labor force. Passes became a way to restrict the opportuneness of black women to compete for jobs (Bernstein, 1985; Brooks, 2003).

Many black women were outraged and dissatisfied having to withstand the same humiliation and discrimination that black men bore with the pass system. Many black women entered into urban centers for various amenities besides just work and did not condone the ill treatment they received from police who checked for their passes. The black women, majority of them domestic workers, experienced the harassment of being arrested and sexually assaulted by police. Woefully, single women underwent added discrimination by having to present a male-guardian pass before receiving their own. Those who were found without a pass were arrested and spent the night in jail. Oftentimes no one from their families were notified of their detainment. In self-defense, black women in South Africa gathered together and formed an anti-pass movement in an attempt to dismantle

a segment of the racist and sexist apartheid system that brought chaos into their lives (Wells, 1983).

Actions to develop an anti-pass campaign escalated when Lillian Ngoyi organized women of various organizations to protest against passes in 1965 (Wells, 1983). Ngoyi was a former garment worker, turned activist, who presided as president of both the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL) and its umbrella organization the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW). She understood that the only way to end the harassment imposed by the government was to lead a massive demonstration against the laws of apartheid. She advocated the necessity of an anti-pass campaign as she stated, "Only direct mass action will deter the government and stop it from proceeding with its cruel laws" (Brooks, 2008). She along with Rahima Moosa, Sophia Williams, Amina Cachalia and FEDSAW's secretary Helen Joseph (the first woman to be arrested and placed on house arrest) were successful in organizing women across the country to take part in what would become the largest mass protest to occur in South Africa (Brooks, 2008; Bernstein, 1985; Brooks, 2003).

On August 9, 1956, twenty-thousand black women and women of other ethnic backgrounds traveled to Pretoria to the Union Buildings to see the Prime Minister J. G. Strydom (Bernstein, 1985). Their undertakings were funded with money they raised themselves to travel to the Union Buildings on trains and in private cars. The women appeared well-organized as they wore special uniforms identifying the different organizations represented. Domestic workers, nurses, members of the ANCWL and other women wearing uniforms gathered in the amphitheater of the Union Buildings and signed anti-pass petitions (Bernstein, 1985).

Ngoyi and Joseph intended to present the petitions to the prime minister once they sat down for their scheduled meeting. The prime minister never showed but the women were not disheartened. After learning the prime minister would not be attending the meeting, the women had a moment of silence and made a commitment to continue their efforts towards liberation. The FEDSAW and ANCWL continued to lead anti-pass protest for the remainder of the decade. Black women in South Africa refused to set idle and accept the subordinate treatment that they received from the government. Rather, they organized themselves with the conviction to protect themselves against the pass system that allowed them to be harassed and assaulted. Dismantling the pass system was an embodiment of their determination to gain respect and improve their status within the confines of white supremacy. Accordingly, the anti-pass campaign became the biggest protest against the apartheid regime. What is more, both men and women, were inspired to continue the efforts to obliterate the discrimination placed on black people in South Africa (Bernstein, 1985; Brooks, 2003).

The Alexandra Bus Boycott stands as another shining example of protest involving the political activism of black women. On January 7, 1957, black people from the townships of Sophiatown, Petoria and Alexandra boycotted the buses after the Public Utility Transport Company (PUTCO) raised the bus fare 4 pence

(5 cents) to 5 pence (6 cents) (*The Washington Post*, 1957a, 1957b, 1975c). 45,000 men and women chose to walk nine miles into Johannesburg to their place of employment rather than pay the price increase. The people who rode the buses were low-income workers who used bus transportation to travel to work. The increase in bus fare became a threat to the livelihoods of these low-income workers as it placed a burden on people who already faced economic hardships. Particularly, the fare increase became another inconvenience that black women tolerated while using the bus system. Washerwomen steadily complained about the overcrowded buses that did not allow them to fit comfortably with their laundry bundles. More importantly, women were left vulnerable as they were dropped off at bus terminals that were unsheltered and poorly lit. The terminals were usually far from their homes, which left black women susceptible to violence and sexual assaults (*The Washington Post*, 1957a, 1957b, 1975c; Brooks, 2008).

The spike in bus fare and the risk of being violently assaulted played a significant role in motivating black women to initiate, promote and persistently participate in the bus boycott.

Throughout the boycott, black women were found either marching with the mass crowd of protestors into Johannesburg or standing by bus stops picketing. In order to insure that no one was using the buses, black women stood alongside the bus stops shouting, *Azikhwelwa!* (Don't ride the bus!). Furthermore, it was the black women who planned and coordinated each meeting for the Alexandra People's Transport Committee (APTC), an organization that was created in response to the increased bus fare. Approximately 5000 people attended the meetings to gain an understanding of the direction of the protest. Additionally, they were there to gain insight into the negotiations being held with the Public Utility Transport Company (*The Washington Post*, 1957a, 1957b, 1975c; Brooks, 2008).

Black women being involved in the boycott greatly increased the number of participants in the movement and helped to prolong the protest against the bus fare. Many women were beaten and jailed by police for their protest against the buses. Nonetheless, they struggled alongside black men who also remained involved in the boycott despite the tactics that police used to discourage them (*The Washington Post*, 1957a, 1957b, 1975c; Brooks, 2008).

On April 1, 1957, after three months of picketing and refusing to ride the buses, the APTC ended the Alexandra Bus Boycott because the Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce issued coupons to subsidize the one cent increase in bus fare. Although leaders of the APTC previously rejected the coupons, the black workers began riding the buses after they learned that they were able to afford the bus fare. Overall, the problem of fare affordability was settled and Alexandra bus boycott was deemed a success. Presumably, the bus boycott would not have been as successful without black women's participation in diminishing PUTCO's economic profits. In South Africa, Black women became militant and confrontational and used the only strength they had, their power as consumers (*The Washington Post*, 1957a, 1957b, 1975c).

Towards the end of the Nationalist Party regime in 1990, South African women scholars began publishing literature regarding the plight of black women under apartheid (Daymond, 1996). Nelson Mandela's release from prison along with the lifting of the ban on anti-apartheid movements ignited black women's interest in sharing their own stories about the ill-treatment they received due to the rules of apartheid. Through books, poems and journal articles, women scholars broadcasted the subjugation of black women in South Africa in order to convince the government to eliminate laws that hindered their social, economic and political advancement in the country. The literature describing the discrimination endured by black women gave rise to South African feminism. South African feminism developed out of black women's criticism of feminism only addressing the issues of white women and neglecting to include non-white ethnic groups. The literature pulled from the experiences of black women acknowledges apartheid as a gendered as well as racist institution. South African feminism helped to improve the status of black women and restructured their movement in South Africa from revolution to reform (Daymond, 1996).

By the end of apartheid in 1994, black women were provided compulsory education, elected as government officials and became more able to advance their socioeconomic status in South Africa (The Washington Post, 1995). Black women being outspoken about the discrimination that they endured provided them the opportunity to combat their oppression and dismantle the laws of apartheid that stifled their well-being. The activism of black women in South Africa through publishing their lived experiences ultimately shifted the identity of black women from being discounted and forgotten women to women that deserved an adequate change in government policies in order to benefit from the socioeconomic environs of South Africa. Beyond the protest and boycotts, black women in South Africa utilized the ideology of South African feminism in published literary works to bring an end to the racist and sexist apartheid regime (The Washington Post, 1995; Daymond, 1996).

Black women organized their own protest and boycotts to improve their standards of living without the desired need for black men and white women relating to their distinctive experiences of systematized discrimination. Given the aforementioned facts and examples, it can be concluded that the activism of black women in the United States and South Africa was instrumental in combating the racism and sexism that prevailed throughout Jim Crow and apartheid. The successes gained in the various movements are a testament to the fact that when black women from different economic backgrounds and social structures gather to demonstrate their commonalities rather than their differences, a lot can be accomplished (Brooks, 2008).

## 12. Conclusion

In the end, this study is important to understand the isolation forced on black women in the midst of apartheid and Jim Crow. Through the isolation of black

women, both systems created an identity and space for them that required the women to fight against their subjugation alone. The identity shaped for black women during these time periods is significant in understanding the institutionalized racism and sexism that developed from government-controlled segregation. In South Africa and the United States, the contrast between the identity of black men and black women exposed the sexism being cast upon black women. In comparing the identities of black women and white women, white women were positioned to be the employers or overseers of black women. Although both were confined to the household, the white supremacy that existed during Jim Crow and apartheid placed black women in an inferior position to white women. Without black men and white women relating to their experience of systematized discrimination, black women organized their own protests and boycotts to dismantle Jim Crow and apartheid. All things considered, this study is a body of work that reiterates that without individual motivations for change, no change will ever occur. Moreover, this overview postulates a manifesto for those who appreciate that the hard work against discrimination is ongoing in the African Diaspora to compel all to ask the question, If Not Me Then Who?

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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