

22.

SHIRLEY CHISHOLM

Shirley Chisholm (1924–2005) devoted her life to fighting for the subaltern, including the poor, Black people, minorities of various other ethnic groups, farm workers, and women. In the early 1960s Chisholm was an advocate for quality education and focused on early intervention as an educational consultant for the New York City Bureau of Child Welfare. She was a first-class activist; she worked within the Brooklyn, New York Democratic Party, the Bedford-Stuyvesant Political League, the League of Women Voters, and the National Organization of Women. However, her grassroots activism eventually led her into electoral politics. In 1964 she was voted into the New York State Assembly and in her most extraordinary accomplishment, Chisholm became the first African American woman seated in Congress in 1968.

Never the meek woman, like her counterparts in this section, despite being a freshman congressperson, Chisholm was outspoken from the minute she arrived. Her campaign slogan had been “unbought and unbossed” and she was determined to let her actions buttress her campaign slogan. From the outset she proclaimed to her fellow congresspersons that she was going to vote no on all bills that appropriated funding for the Department of Defense instead of funding education and anti-poverty programs. She vehemently opposed the war in Vietnam. While in Congress she served on the Agriculture Committee, Veterans’ Affairs Committee, and the Education and Labor Committees. With her feet firmly planted in Washington politics she went on to become a founder of the National Women’s Political Caucus and the Congressional Black Caucus. As a powerful player in these committees Chisholm, along with John Conyers after years of struggle, were able to get Congress to pass the measure making Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday a national holiday. In another great milestone, in 1972 Chisholm campaigned for President of the United States on the Democratic ticket. Although, she did not even come close to winning the primary, she was a seven-term congressperson who demonstrated through both word and deed that Black women were powerful. Even after she retired in 1982, she did not stop fighting for the rights of marginalized Americans. From 1984 to 1992 she served as the chairwoman for the National Political Congress of Black Women.

Overview of Ideas

Chisholm was a staunch advocate for the rights of the poor and oppressed minorities, including Haitian immigrants, Native Americans, Hispanics, African Americans, and women just to name a few. Because of her political position and aspirations she was not always able to engage the vitriolic vernacular of her counterparts but the battles she waged for justice were just as fierce and uncompromising. However, because of her political position, she was able to be a pioneer. She was not just a pioneer because she was the first African American woman to be elected to Congress; she was a pioneer because she was one of the first women to bring feminism onto the Capitol building’s congressional floor.

Chisholm recognized that there is a matrix of oppression at work in the United States and that race, class, and gender conditioned an individual’s experiences in our society. In politics and in the economy women were incessantly treated as inferior and were fettered to discourses that had them bound to feminine labor and perpetually cast as intellectually inferior emotional housemaids. Due in large part to the Civil Rights Movement, the United States was beginning to confront its racial schisms and racial inequalities. She said racism was starting to be seen by many as unacceptable. However, sexism was not just tolerated but it was acceptable. In order to address society’s rampant sexism, particularly as it manifested itself in basic social institutions: economy, government, education, etc., there was a remedy; it was the Equal Rights Amendment.

Women did not require protection; they required laws to guarantee equal rights. “What we need are laws to protect working people, to guarantee them fair pay, safe working conditions, protection against sickness and layoffs, and provision for dignified, comfortable retirement. Men and women need these things equally.” Chisholm recognized that enacting new laws would not change the hearts and minds of all Americans and sexism *de facto* would surely still persist. However, these laws would certainly ensure equality in the labor market and other vital institutions. Chisholm’s emphasis on electoral politics and legal reform distinguish her from her counterparts. Readers should decide if her methods make her more moderate than Flo Kennedy who advocated constant direct action protest and Angela Davis who advocated revolutionary protest.

Along with her emphasis on sexism came an astute attention to the insidious ways in which racism conditioned sexism. Like her counterparts she was quite critical of the second wave women’s movement and its platform. “The Black woman cannot be discussed in the same context as her Caucasian counterpart because of the twin jeopardy of race and sex which operates against her, and the psychological and political consequences which attend them.” She argued that the movement’s leaders often neglected the bread-and-butter issues of Black women in favor of bourgeois issues such as utilizing Ms. instead of Mrs. Many White feminists may have neglected that while they were finding jobs as secretaries and teachers (while confined to feminine labor), they were not being relegated to dirty service work the way Black women still were. And while women made less than their male counterparts for the same work, Black women made

substantially less than them. Moreover, just as the women's movement neglected the issues of Black women, so did the Black liberation movement. She also astutely noted that the disunity between Black men and women were deleterious and only served the status quo.

Like her Black radical feminist counterparts she was critical of capitalism. Although not as outspoken against the system itself as her counterparts, she was quite vocal about the degree to which hired lobbyists and representatives of capital had been able to buy votes in Washington and rig the political game. When she ran for president she declared that she would never act in the interests of the bourgeoisie but only in the interests of her constituents. The political savvy, Black radical feminist made sure to tell Americans that while she did not want to just be seen as the "Black candidate" she was proud to be both Black and a woman. While certainly not as radical as Black Nationalism, she still shared with Black Power activists a commitment to unifying oppressed groups in the struggle for employment, quality housing, access to health-care, access to quality education and free day care, and other social services. Moreover, like Black Nationalists she appealed to the youth and urbanites and not just to middle and upper class constituencies with money for campaign donations. Not your average politician, Shirley Chisholm brought Black radical feminism to Washington.

Equal Rights For Women, 1969

Address To The United States House Of Representatives, Washington, D.C. May 21, 1969

Mr. Speaker, when a young woman graduates from college and starts looking for a job, she is likely to have a frustrating and even demeaning experience ahead of her. If she walks into an office for an interview, the first question she will be asked is, "Do you type?"

There is a calculated system of prejudice that lies unspoken behind that question. Why is it acceptable for women to be secretaries, librarians, and teachers, but totally unacceptable for them to be managers, administrators, doctors, lawyers, and Members of Congress.

The unspoken assumption is that women are different. They do not have executive ability orderly minds, stability, leadership skills, and they are too emotional.

It has been observed before, that society for a long time, discriminated against another minority, the blacks, on the same basis—that they were different and inferior. The happy little homemaker and the contented "old darkey" on the plantation were both produced by prejudice.

As a black person, I am no stranger to race prejudice. But the truth is that in the political world I have been far oftener discriminated against because I am a woman than because I am black.

Prejudice against blacks is becoming unacceptable although it will take years to eliminate it. But it is doomed because, slowly, white America is beginning to admit that it exists. Prejudice against women is still acceptable. There is very little understanding

yet of the immorality involved in double pay scales and the classification of most of the better jobs as "for men only."

More than half of the population of the United States is female. But women occupy only 2 percent of the managerial positions. They have not even reached the level of tokenism yet. No women sit on the AFL-CIO council or Supreme Court. There have been only two women who have held Cabinet rank, and at present there are none. Only two women now hold ambassadorial rank in the diplomatic corps. In Congress, we are down to one Senator and 10 Representatives.

Considering that there are about 3 1/2 million more women in the United States than men, this situation is outrageous.

It is true that part of the problem has been that women have not been aggressive in demanding their rights. This was also true of the black population for many years. They submitted to oppression and even cooperated with it. Women have done the same thing. But now there is an awareness of this situation particularly among the younger segment of the population.

As in the field of equal rights for blacks, Spanish-Americans, the Indians, and other groups, laws will not change such deep-seated problems overnight. But they can be used to provide protection for those who are most abused, and to begin the process of evolutionary change by compelling the insensitive majority to reexamine its unconscious attitudes.

It is for this reason that I wish to introduce today a proposal that has been before every Congress for the last 40 years and that sooner or later must become part of the basic law of the land—the equal rights amendment.

Let me note and try to refute two of the commonest arguments that are offered against this amendment. One is that women are already protected under the law and do not need legislation. Existing laws are not adequate to secure equal rights for women. Sufficient proof of this is the concentration of women in lower paying, menial, unrewarding jobs and their incredible scarcity in the upper level jobs. If women are already equal, why is it such an event whenever one happens to be elected to Congress?

It is obvious that discrimination exists. Women do not have the opportunities that men do. And women that do not conform to the system, who try to break with the accepted patterns, are stigmatized as "odd" and "unfeminine." The fact is that a woman who aspires to be chairman of the board, or a Member of the House, does so for exactly the same reasons as any man. Basically, these are that she thinks she can do the job and she wants to try.

A second argument often heard against the equal rights amendment is that it would eliminate legislation that many States and the Federal Government have enacted giving special protection to women and that it would throw the marriage and divorce laws into chaos.

As for the marriage laws, they are due for a sweeping reform, and an excellent beginning would be to wipe the existing ones off the books. Regarding special protection for working women, I cannot understand why it should be needed. Women need no protection that men do not need. What we need are laws to protect working people, to guarantee them fair pay, safe working conditions, protection against sickness and layoffs,

potential, which can and must be put to constructive use in getting this great nation together. I know that millions of Americans, from all walks of life agree with me that leadership does not mean putting the ear to the ground, to follow public opinion, but to have the vision of what is necessary and the courage to make it possible, building a strong and just society, which in its diversity and is noble in its quality of life.

I stand before you today, to repudiate the ridiculous notion that the American people will not vote for qualified candidates, simply because he is not right or because she is not a male. I do not believe that in 1972, the great majority of Americans will continue to harbor such narrow and petty prejudice.

I am convinced that the American people are in a mood to disc [sic] the politics and political personalities of the past.

I believe that they will show in 1972, and thereafter, that they intend to make individual judgments on the merits of a particular candidate, based on that candidate's intelligence, character, physical ability, competence, integrity, and honesty. It is, I feel the duty of responsible leaders in this country to encourage and maximize, not to dismiss and minimize such judgment.

Americans all over are demanding a new sensibility, a new philosophy of government from Washington. Instead of sending spies to snoop on participants on Earth Day, I would welcome the efforts of concerned citizens of all ages to stop the abuse of our environment. Instead of watching a football game on television, while young people beg for the attention of their President, concerning our actions abroad, I would encourage them to speak out, organize for peaceful change, and vote in November. Instead of blocking efforts to control huge amounts of money given political candidates by the rich and the powerful, I would provide certain limits on such amounts and encourage all people of this nation to contribute small sums to the candidates of their choice. Instead of calculating political cost of this or that policy, and of weighing in favors of this or that group, depending on whether that group voted for me in 1968, I would remind all Americans at this hour of the words of Abraham Lincoln, "A house divided, cannot stand."

We Americans are all fellow countrymen. One day confronting the judgment of history in our country. We are all God's children and a bit of each of us is as precious as the will of the most powerful general or corporate millionaire. Our will can create a new America in 1972, one where there is freedom from violence and war, at home and abroad, where there is freedom from poverty and discrimination, where there exists at least a feeling, that we are making progress and assuring for everyone medical care, employment, and decent housing. Where we more decisively clean up our streets, our water, and our air. Where we work together, black and white, to rebuild our neighborhoods and to make our cities quiet, attractive, and efficient and fundamentally where we live in the confidence that every man and every woman in America has at long last the opportunity to become all that he was created of being, such as his ability.

In conclusion, all of you who share this vision, from NY to CA, from WI to FL, are brothers and sisters on the road to national unity and a new America. Those of you who were locked outside of the convention hall in 1968, those of you who can now vote for the first time, those of you who agree with me that the institutions of this country

belong to all of the people who inhabit it. Those of you who have been neglected, left out, ignored, forgotten, or shunned aside for whatever reason, give me your help at this hour. Join me in an effort to reshape our society and regain control of our destiny as we go down the Chisholm Trail for 1972.

Beginning

The Black Woman in Contemporary America, 1974

Speech at the University of Missouri in Kansas City

Ladies and gentlemen, and brothers and sisters all—I'm very glad to be here this evening. I'm very glad that I've had the opportunity to be the first lecturer with respect to the topic of the black woman in contemporary America. This has become a most talked-about topic and has caused a great deal of provocation and misunderstandings and misinterpretations. And I come to you this evening to speak on this topic not as any scholar, not as any academician, but as a person that has been out here for the past twenty years, trying to make my way as a black and a woman, and meeting all kinds of obstacles.

The black woman's role has not been placed in its proper perspective, particularly in terms of the current economic and political upheaval in America today. Since time immemorial the black man's emasculation resulted in the need of the black woman to assert herself in order to maintain some semblance of a family unit. And as a result of this historical circumstance, the black woman has developed perseverance; the black woman has developed strength; the black woman has developed tenacity of purpose and other attributes which today quite often are being looked upon negatively. She continues to be labeled a matriarch. And this is indeed a played-upon white sociological interpretation of the black woman's role that has been developed and perpetrated by Daniel Moynihan and other sociologists.

Black women by virtue of the role they have played in our society have much to offer toward the liberation of their people. We know that our men are coming forward, but the black race needs the collective talents and the collective abilities of black men and black women who have vital skills to supplement each other.

It is quite perturbing to divert ourselves on the dividing issue of the alleged fighting that absorbs the energies of black men and black women. Such statements as "the black woman has to step back while her black man steps forward" and "the black woman has kept back the black man" are grossly, historically incorrect and serves as a scapegoating technique to prevent us from coming together as human beings—some of whom are black men and some are black women.

The consuming interests of this type of dialogue abets the enemy in terms of taking our eyes off the ball, so that our collective talents can never redound in a beneficial manner to our ethnic group. The black woman who is educated and has ability cannot be expected to put said talent on the shelf when she can utilize these gifts side-by-side with her man. One does not learn, nor does one assist in the struggle, by standing on the sidelines, constantly complaining and criticizing. One learns by participating in the situation—listening, observing and then acting.

It is quite understandable why black women in the majority are not interested in walking and picketing a cocktail lounge which historically has refused to open its doors a certain two hours a day when men who have just returned from Wall Street gather in said lounge to exchange bits of business transactions that occurred on the market. This is a middle-class white woman's issue. This is not a priority of minority women. Another issue that black women are not overly concerned about is the "M-S" versus the "M-R-S" label. For many of us this is just the use of another label which does not basically change the fundamental inherent racial attitudes found in both men and women in this society. This is just another label, and black women are not preoccupied with any more label syndromes. Black women are desperately concerned with the issue of survival in a society in which the Caucasian group has never really practiced the espousal of egalitarian principles in America.

An aspect of the women's liberation movement that will and does interest many black women is the potential liberation, is the potential nationalization of daycare centers in this country. Black women can accept and understand this agenda item in the women's movement. It is important that black women utilize their brainpower and focus on issues in any movement that will redound to the benefit of their people because we can serve as a vocal and a catalytic pressure group within the so-called humanistic movements, many of whom do not really comprehend the black man and the black woman.

An increasing number of black women are beginning to feel that it is important first to become free as women, in order to contribute more fully to the task of black liberation. Some feel that black men—like all men, or most men—have placed women in the stereotypes of domestics whose duty it is to stay in the background—cook, clean, have babies, and leave all of the glory to men. Black women point to the civil rights movement as an example of a subtle type of male oppression, where with few exceptions black women have not had active roles in the forefront of the fight. Some like Coretta King, Katherine Cleaver, and Betty Shabazz have come only to their positions in the shadows of their husbands. Yet, because of the oppression of black women, they are strongest in the fight for liberation. They have led the struggle to fight against white male supremacy, dating from slavery times. And in view of these many facts it is not surprising that black women played a crucial role in the total fight for freedom in this nation. Ida Wells kept her newspaper free by walking the streets of Memphis, Tennessee, in the 1890s with two pistols on her hips. And within recent years, this militant condition of black women, who have been stifled because of racism and sexism, has been carried on by Mary McLeod Bethune, Mary Church Terrell, Daisy Bates, and Diane Nash.

The black woman lives in a society that discriminates against her on two counts. The black woman cannot be discussed in the same context as her Caucasian counterpart because of the twin jeopardy of race and sex which operates against her, and the psychological and political consequences which attend them. Black women are crushed by cultural restraints and abused by the legitimate power structure. To date, neither the black movement nor women's liberation succinctly addresses itself to the dilemma confronting the black who is female. And as a consequence of ignoring or

being unable to handle the problems facing black women, black women themselves are now becoming socially and politically active.

Undoubtedly black women are cultivating new attitudes, most of which will have political repercussions in the future. They are attempting to change their conditions. The maturation of the civil rights movement by the mid '60s enabled many black women to develop interest in the American political process. From their experiences they learned that the real sources of power lay at the root of the political system. For example, black sororities and pressure groups like the National Council of Negro Women are adept at the methods of participatory politics—particularly in regard to voting and organizing. With the arrival of the '70s, young black women are demanding recognition like the other segments of society who also desire their humanity and their individual talents to be noticed. The tradition of the black woman and the Afro-American subculture and her current interest in the political process indicate the emergence of a new political entity.

Historically she has been discouraged from participating in politics. Thus she is trapped between the walls of the dominant white culture and her own subculture, both of which encourage deference to men. Both races of women have traditionally been limited to performing such tasks as opening envelopes, hanging up posters and giving teas. And the minimal involvement of black women exists because they have been systematically excluded from the political process and they are members of the politically dysfunctional black lower class. Thus, unlike white women, who escape the psychological and sociological handicaps of racism, the black woman's political involvement has been at most a marginal role.

But within the last six years, the Afro-American subculture has undergone tremendous social and political transformation and these changes have altered the nature of the black community. They are beginning to realize their capacities not only as blacks, but also as women. They are beginning to understand that their cultural well-being and their social well-being would only be affirmed in connection with the total black struggle. The dominant role black women played in the civil rights movement began to allow them to grasp the significance of political power in America. So obviously black women who helped to spearhead the civil rights movement would also now, at this juncture, join and direct the vanguard which would shape and mold a new kind of political participation.

This has been acutely felt in urban areas, which have been rocked by sporadic rebellions. Nothing better illustrates the need for black women to organize politically than their unusual proximity to the most crucial issues affecting black people today. They have struggled in a wide range of protest movements to eliminate the poverty and injustice that permeates the lives of black people. In New York City, for example, welfare mothers and mothers of schoolchildren have ably demonstrated the commitment of black women to the elimination of the problems that threaten the well-being of the black family. Black women must view the problems of cities such as New York not as urban problems, but as the components of a crisis without whose elimination our family lives will neither survive nor prosper. Deprived of a stable family environment because of poverty and racial injustice, disproportionate numbers of our people

must live on minimal welfare allowances that help to perpetuate the breakdown of family life. In the face of the increasing poverty besetting black communities, black women have a responsibility. Black women have a duty to bequeath a legacy to their children. Black women have a duty to move from the periphery of organized political activity into its main arena.

I say this on the basis of many experiences. I travel throughout this country and I've come in contact with thousands of my black sisters in all kinds of conditions in this nation. And I've said to them over and over again: it is not a question of competition against black men or brown men or red men or white men in America. It is a question of the recognition that, since we have a tremendous responsibility in terms of our own families, that to the best of our ability we have to give everything that is within ourselves to give—in terms of helping to make that future a better future for our little boys and our little girls, and not leave it to anybody.

Francis Beal describes the black woman as a slave of a slave. Let me quote: "By reducing the black man in America to such abject oppression, the black woman had no protector and she was used—and is still being used—in some cases as the scapegoat for the evils that this horrendous system has perpetrated on black men. Her physical image has been maliciously maligned. She has been sexually molested and abused by the white colonizer. She has suffered the worst kind of economic exploitation, having been forced to serve as the white woman's maid and wet-nurse for white offspring, while her own children were more often starving and neglected. It is the depth of degradation to be socially manipulated, physically raped and used to undermine your own household—and then to be powerless to reverse this syndrome."

However, Susan Johnson notes a bit of optimism. Because Susan, a brilliant young black woman, has said that the recent strides made by the black woman in the political process is a result of the intricacies of her personality. And that is to say that as a political animal, she functions independently of her double jeopardy. Because confronted with a matriocal past and present, she is often accused of stealing the black male's position in any situation beyond that of housewife and mother. And if that were not enough to burden the black woman, she realizes that her political mobility then threatens the doctrine of white supremacy and male superiority so deeply embedded in the American culture.

So choosing not to be a victim of self-paralysis, the black woman has been able to function in the political spectrum. And more often than not, it is the subconsciousness of the racist mind that perceives her as less harmful than the black man and thus permits her to acquire the necessary leverage for political mobility. This subtle component of racism could prove to be essential to the key question of how the black woman has managed some major advances in the American political process.

It is very interesting to note that everyone—with the exception of the black woman herself—has been interpreting the black woman. It is very interesting to note that the time has come that black women can and must no longer be passive, complacent recipients of whatever the definitions of the sociologists, the psychologists and the psychiatrists will give to us. Black women have been maligned, misunderstood, misinterpreted—who knows better than Shirley Chisholm?

And I stand here tonight to tell to you, my sisters, that if you have the courage of your convictions, you must stand up and be counted. I hope that the day will come in America when this business of male versus female does not become such an overriding issue, so that the talents and abilities that the almighty God have given to people can be utilized for the benefit of humanity.

One has to recognize that there are stupid white women and stupid white men, stupid black women and stupid black men, brilliant white women and brilliant white men, and brilliant black women and brilliant black men. Why do we get so hung-up in America on this question of sex? Of course, in terms of the black race, we understand the historical circumstances. We understand, also, some of the subtle maneuverings and machinations behind the scenes in order to prevent black women and black men from coming together as a race of unconquerable men and women.

And I just want to say to you tonight, if I say nothing else: I would never have been able to make it in America if I had paid attention to all of the doomday-criers about me. And I want to say in conclusion that as you have this conference here for the next two weeks, put the cards out on the table and do not be afraid to discuss issues that perhaps you have been sweeping under the rug because of what people might say about you. You must remember that once we are able to face the truth, the truth shall set all of us free.

In conclusion, I just want to say to you, black and white, north and east, south and west, men and women: the time has come in America when we should no longer be the passive, complacent recipients of whatever the morals or the politics of a nation may decree for us in this nation. Forget traditions! Forget conventionalisms! Forget what the world will say whether you're in your place or out of your place. Stand up and be counted. Do your thing, looking only to God—whoever your God is—and to your consciences for approval. I thank you.