

- [PRESS](#)
- [Press Releases](#)

For Women's History Month: A Salute to Civil Rights Heroines

By Edna Kane-Williams, Vice President, Multicultural Markets, AARP

The late Evelyn G. Lowery, devoted wife of civil rights icon the Rev. Joseph Lowery, who left an activism legacy of her own, passionately reminded the organizers of the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington: "Don't forget the women."

This year, upon the 33rd year since the U. S. Congress established Women's History Week and the 27th year since Congress expanded the week to a month, it would behoove the nation to continually heed Mrs. Lowery's plea. In that regard let us pause to salute those historic organizations of African-American women - often facing oppression themselves - continue to voluntarily led America's movement toward equality and social justice for all.

Black women - from slavery to freedom - have been documented among the leading forces in the quest for social equality. Organizing, advising, strategizing, registering voters and marching, most never imagined fame or notoriety. They simply gave of their time and resources in order to move America forward.

"I want to be remembered as someone who used herself and anything she could touch to work for justice and freedom.... I want to be remembered as one who tried," said the late Dr. Dorothy I. Height, who for 50 years led the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), founded by educator and civil rights activist Mary McCloud Bethune.

Dr. Height's words speak for so many. NCNW; the National Congress of Black Women; the Black Women's Roundtable; and the National Coalition of 100 Black Women are just a few of the national African-American women's organizations on the forefront of America's social justice movement. Then of course there's the National Pan-Hellenic Council, Inc.'s Greek letter sororities Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta, and Sigma Gamma Rho which continue to prepare millions of both young and seasoned women for local, national and world leadership.

Every year, the Congress passes a resolution for Women's History Month and the President issues a proclamation. Yet, even as women are lauded for their valuable service to their homes and communities, they still suffer oppression in every corner of society. A Catalyst survey of Fortune 500 companies last year found that only 16.9 percent of corporate board seats were held by women in 2013, according to a Huffington Post article. The Catalyst survey also found that "10 percent of Fortune 500 companies employed zero women on their boards and that two-thirds of companies had no women of color as board members," the article reported.

Still, many laudable barriers are being broken, in part because of the fierce advocacy of modern day pioneers and heroines who deserve a heartfelt salute. A few examples include Roslyn Brock, who currently serves as the fourth woman and youngest chair of the NAACP as well as Lorraine Miller who currently serves as the NAACP's interim president/CEO. Barbara Arnwine has led the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights under law for more than 25 years; Sherrilyn Ifill is president and *director-counsel* of the *NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund*; Melanie Campbell is president/CEO of the National Coalition of Black Civic Participation and has served as an equal justice advocate for more than 20 years; Marian Wright Edelman founded the Children's Defense Fund 41 years ago and still sits at its helm; and Elder Bernice King now heads the King Center for Non-violent Social Change in honor of her parents, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King.

As barriers continue to be broken and the powerful voices of African-American women are raised, let us be inspired by the words of former Congresswoman and Presidential Candidate Shirley Chisholm, who is currently honored with her photo on a U.S. postage stamp: "You don't make progress by standing on the sidelines, whimpering and complaining. You make progress by implementing ideas."
