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### Human Rights and Community Development through Low-Income Women's Leadership: The Voice of an African-American Organizer

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# TROTTER INSTITUTE

**Human Rights and Community Development  
through Low-Income Women's Leadership:  
The Voice of an African-American Organizer**

by  
**Claudine Michel**

**RESEARCH REPORT**

**WILLIAM MONROE TROTTER INSTITUTE**  
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT BOSTON  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125-3393

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**Human Rights and Community Development  
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Claudine Michel holds a doctorate in International and Comparative Education and is Assistant Professor in Black Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her current research focuses on value transmission and morality among African-American women. She has written many articles on systems of education, educational television, children's literature, Haitian traditional values and morality in different cultural contexts. She is the author of *Aspects Moraux et Educatifs du Vodou Haïtien* (1995), *Le Natal*, Port-au-Prince, and co-author of *Théories du Développement de l'Enfant. Etudes Comparatives* (1994), De Boeck/Université, Bruxelles.

## Foreword

Providing remedies for social, economic, and political ills remains a challenge worldwide. The United States is no exception, especially in regard to women's rights. Grassroots organizing appears as a viable option until women are better protected through legislation and public policy. This article relates the efforts of an African-American organizer to redress human rights abuses and develop women's leadership skills.

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## **Introduction**

### **“The Road to be Walked”**

This century has seen a proliferation of documents focusing on international, regional and specialized forms of human rights. Through the United Nations' International Bill of Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the international community reaffirmed that being alive and being a member of the human species entitles every person, worldwide, to certain rights, prerogatives and claims. These rights are numerous and include: “Protection against state abuses of a citizen's physical integrity and personal freedom; guarantees of substantive and procedural justice; the right to participate in one's government; guarantees of the right to food, livelihood, and an adequate standard of living; and the right to participate in the cultural life of a community.”<sup>1</sup> However, these are normative statements which are not necessarily enforceable in international and national laws unless the countries have ratified a particular bill or document in their own constitutions. Moreover, assessing human rights violations, imposing sanctions on the violators, and providing remedies for social, economic and political ills remain a challenge in all societies.

In both so-called developing nations and technologically-advanced societies, from Bosnia to Black America, from France to the Sudan, from Burma and Thailand to the hinterland of Haiti, human rights violations continue to occur. In the face of suffering and poor human rights records, the following questions come to mind: Are the leaders of this world truly committed to human rights for every person living on this planet? Are the ruling classes willing to share power, wealth, resources with the less favored so that poverty and violence could diminish? Are effective steps taken to not only assess human rights violations but also to act and redress the plight of millions of men, women and children who continue to be abused daily in their respective nations? Are progress and efforts

being monitored nationally and internationally? Are these efforts being supported financially and in the legislature? Are nations learning from one another's mistakes and sharing proposals and plans which seem to work? Unfortunately, the reality is bleak; reports of human rights abuses are increasing and children and women<sup>2</sup> continue to be particularly affected worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

Although the preamble of the Declaration of Human Rights and a number of supplementary United Nations documents have specified that human rights are due to all regardless of sex, historically, women's rights issues have never been a priority.<sup>4</sup> Women's rights gained some prominence with the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a document which set out internationally-accepted principles to achieve equal rights for women. However, some characterized it as a *normative exercise*, pointing to the tremendous gap between these ideals and the implementation of these principles.<sup>5</sup> Though Carter had signed the 1979 Convention, the latest available sources indicate that the United States Congress has still not ratified the CEDAW. At a 1993 hearing, Donna Sullivan, echoing the voice of many other individuals and progressive organizations, stated: "Ratification of the Women's Convention is long overdue. There are now 126 states parties to the Convention, and if the United States is to exercise moral and political authority on women's rights in the global community, we must be willing to be held accountable for women's rights here at home. Women are affected not only by gender discrimination, but also by discrimination based on race and ethnicity, and by the denial of core economic, social and cultural rights."<sup>6</sup>

The long overdue ratification of CEDAW by a leading nation such as the United States makes a dreary statement about human rights.<sup>7</sup> This country along with Iran and Saudi Arabia would be among the last to sign the treaty, if at all. As we approach the twenty first century, this indicates that

the United States, often viewed as the champion of human rights, has yet to assert its leadership in promoting gender equality and women's rights both nationally and internationally. The challenge to integrate human rights issues into its public policy here in the country and to lead the international community in supporting initiatives that will empower women as political and economic actors remains.

At a time when women and children worldwide continue to be marginalized by discriminatory practices which limits their access to health care, education, social services and economic resources, the debates which took place at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in China in September 1995 seem to indicate that government officials and representatives are indeed working on documents delineating various areas of women's rights and on developing policy guidelines. Shirley Kennedy, a participant at that forum, confirms that "the tasks ahead are daunting" while acknowledging that something of lasting value might have been achieved through the power of collective organization: "Thirty thousand women were talking to each other at Hairou and at Beijing. Has that ever happened before?"<sup>8</sup>

However, until now, the reality is that women—third world women, women of color, poor women—continue to be the real activists and the true heroines of the women's movement as they work for long hours nurturing generation after generation, raising their children, tilling the soil or engaging in other low-paying job, quietly providing food and shelter for a large portion of the world's population; the other heroines are the community organizers, the activists, leading the struggle against poverty and oppression. If women are to lead better lives in the immediate future, this will be done through their own work, through community organizing and collective action which might then lead to meaningful policy changes.



In this essay, I argue that grassroots organizing appears as one of the most viable option worldwide until women are better protected through legislation and public policy. I also posit that it is important to learn from divergent leadership philosophies, from the different values, roles and styles that women adopt in various parts of the world in the course of their day-to-day activities and in their efforts to organize, to support current community programs, and to train future community leaders. This essay relates the experiences of a grassroots organizer and presents what I believe to be a successful model of low-income women's leadership. It is hoped that others will find this framework useful and work to further develop and expand it for the benefit of the global community.

### A Case Study

#### *Methodological Note*

Increasingly, researchers are using oral history, personal narratives and other such methodologies<sup>9</sup> to give a *voice* to those previously *silenced* by a conservative socio-political system, an oppressive class and gender conscious society, and a close-minded academia. For these reasons, I have chosen to focus on the work of Barbara Nabors-Glass, a grassroots organizer and educator, as a way of gaining wider recognition for women of color and poor women, and to learn more about community-based strategies for the implementation of women rights in the United States and in a larger context. In the following section you will hear the voices of women, poor women and women of color, through the words of Barbara Nabors-Glass, an African American activist who has worked over the past twenty years, primarily in the Oakland/San Francisco area, to redress human rights abuses and develop low-income women's leadership skills. Her work is grassroots-based and is grounded in the web of the community where she lives and works. As she said herself: "My inspiration comes from the people."

What follows derives in part from a presentation made by Barbara Nabors-Glass on women and leadership at the University of California, Santa Barbara in February 1994. It is supplemented by a life history interview which I conducted with her in 1993,<sup>10</sup> and various informal conversations I have had with her and her daughter between 1992 and 1995. At times, I have taken the liberty to integrate these various sources to try to present the essence of her message as accurately as possible. Though I started with over two hundred transcribed pages, every effort was made to recreate a shorter narrative which retains her actual words, maintains her original ideas, and convey her vision. I comment on her views and the issues she raised in a brief discussion following the narrative.

### *Biographical Information*

Barbara Nabors-Glass was born in 1950 in Oakland, California and raised in the East Bay area. Her biological parents moved to California from Cotton Plant, Arkansas. She is a product of the foster care system along with her two older sisters and a younger brother. She had her first and only child at age 21 and raised her as a single parent. Her daughter is now in graduate school. Barbara Nabors-Glass considers herself to be working class and was involved in the Black Panther Party. In the mid-eighties, she went back to school to get a law degree. For many years, she worked for San Francisco Housing Authority and, as Executive Director of the Income Rights Project, advocated for the homeless, especially women and children. She founded the George Wiley Democratic Club in the East Bay where she also served as Vice-Chair of the Lesbian and Gay Caucus. She lived all her life in the San Francisco/Oakland area until 1994 when the Clinton administration invited her to join the Cooperation of Community Service and Housing in Washington, D.C. She stayed there only a few months. She now lives in Seattle where she continues to advocate for the education and the empowerment of low-income women in housing projects.

## **In Her Own Words: Lessons From an African-American Organizer**

*I was on the phone . . . and someone said: "You sure stay on the phone a lot". I said: "Yeah, I got to call the ladies". Yes, I call them from Santa Barbara, I call them from wherever I am, and I ask them: Are you alright? Did you get this? Did you get that? It is my way of building trust, of holding them close. I want them to know that even though I am here at the hot shot university, with you all, that I am still thinking about them. That is an important part of the work and that phone call may have done more to build trust between me and these women than a lot of other things that I could do which would be much more grandiose.*

My work, my life is about representing women from the Community Housing Project, welfare recipients, women on public assistance (AFDC) and the homeless. I was on welfare once in my life and as a result of that terrible experience I decided to go to law school. And I decided to go beyond law school and set up an advocacy organization. That was the Income-Rights Project which basically believed that women on welfare could do just as good a job advocating on their own behalf as any lawyer or politician. We had an excellent record in winning cases and overturning judgments. It really was a very powerful thing to see those welfare moms presenting their own cases: "Your honor, this is my case." This really changed the power relationship.

Now, the Income-Rights Project was not always a bed of roses. There was always drama in the clients' lives, differences among workers but we took care of it in the context of an organization and in the spirit of organizing. People realized that it was not going to overwhelm them, and their lives became manageable within a context of something bigger than themselves—collective organization. I believe that there are three essential things that we must do or must have in order to develop and support low-income women's leadership: (1) we must believe that it is possible for low-income women to lead; (2) we must know our place; and (3) we must promote, support, and sustain low-income women leadership.

- **Low-Income Women Can lead**

First of all, we must really believe that it is possible for low income women to lead. We must then look for low-income women's leadership and encourage it. When I say *look for it*, we must be aware of and open to it. We must be in the kind of place where we can sometimes be patient, be silent, and watch for it. We must put ourselves in situations where low-income women's leadership may emerge. One example of believing that this is possible is the Oakland-based Asian Women's Immigrant Group. Most of the women were working in big sweat shops in San Francisco. Soon, they realized that they had skills. So, whenever a family would get a little bit of money, they would open a little sweat shop of their own. These Asian women learned to support one another and to organize.

Now, there was a case where some of these women had not been paid for about six months, and then the guy who put together these sweat shops, skipped town with all of their money. They had just done a big run of fashions for Jessica MacClintoch who said she had nothing to do with them not getting paid. Well, they picketed Jessica. These women were relentless, we're talking about not speaking the language, not having a lot of money, not being familiar with laws and customs of the land. But, they had leadership. They went out there, and Jessica had to pay off the money. These women were able to bring more Asian women into their organization. They have put together women's sewing circles, and they do more and more stuff for themselves. They also started to organize other Asian women who were engaging in other activities. In the face of this dominant society and this culture, that is a story of genuine courage—knowing that you can do something like that and win. As a community-based organizer, to have been a small part of supporting that effort is really incredible.

Another example are the homeless hotels in San Francisco which the Income Rights Project had decided to shut down in 1988. Mind you, no homeless people's hotels had ever been shut down in this country. Ever. But, some folks decided that they would do it. The women organized. There were two hotels with no lights, where there was so much mold and mildew that it started growing on the children's hair and on their chest causing respiratory problems. One group of youngsters had started a tutoring center downstairs. The owner shut it down. The residents went to the health department but that did not work. So, they had the kids stop the owner in the street and say, "Mister X, what are you going to do about this and that?" Then, they said let's find out about this big shot who owns this hotel. He was a big time democrat drove a brand new corvette, sent his kids to big private schools, the whole thing. Two blocks away he ran this hotel where for \$22 a night, you could get a room with color television, clean sheets and nice curtains. This guy was making money. The folks were paying him about \$500 a month—their welfare check plus whatever the state gave them. They even searched the record to see what kind of contributions this man was making to democratic candidates. They went and talked to some of them: "Mister mayor, are you accepting a \$1,000 contribution from a man who has contracts with the government to keep families in homeless hotels?"

They went to politicians, but things did not change. So, they decided to go to the man's church. I said, "Oh, oh, oh" but, then I said ok. You have to follow the people. Well, they went, they greeted the church members, then ask the preacher to pray for the owner of these hotels. They all got up and told the congregation: "We want you to join with us and pray so this man will stop treating our children like this." Finally, they called nuns and priests to come visit the hotels and they brought in the media. The results is that they shut down those hotels. There are no more homeless hotels in San Francisco. All these families got Section 8 housing and I am still in touch with some

of them to this day. Again, we were able to provide the support, the skills, and the training to let the people lead. It was a beautiful thing to watch these ladies in front of the building that was boarded up, holding a press conference. Going to the nuns, and going to the church and going to the media: You're talking sophisticated organizing.

The leader is sometimes a person who is way in the back of the room, who comes with two or three other folks, who sits right there on the edge of her chair. That person may get up and leave first but it is a person who is interested, who has heard every single thing that you said, someone who cares about what's going on and takes that right back out to the community. We must support the women who display a willingness to do the work. Yet, people often want to identify and choose leaders for a community based on some traits that they perceived them to have. Once, while trying to redevelop one of our projects in the San Francisco Housing Project, it became clear that someone was needed to work with the administrators and the engineers—a resident. A young architect thought he had the answer: "Ms. Jones will be good because she sure can talk." It happens so often. First of all, they want to identify who the leaders are for the rest of the people in the development. Secondly, they want to identify the person who has the gift of gab. To me, the leader is the person who is willing to do the work, to set up the chairs, to make the phone calls; it is the person who gets people to come to the meeting. But to me, that is a real display of leadership. We must support those women who are willing to do the work, to support that work and to respect the work that they do whether it is doing the child care or setting up the chairs, or making the leaflets or making the phone calls. We must really respect them, and hold those women close to us physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

In most legal aid organizations out there, it's always been: you come to me with your problem and you put it in my lap and then I do something for you and then you say *thank you*. And it's always been a relationship of I'm doing it for you, I'm the big cheese. You come and tell me your problem, and I'll say, well this is what we're gonna do about it. But, I know that the women themselves had the answers to their problems. We had our own answers. The only thing we needed was a little technical assistance. However, when the people started talking about "well we're gonna start our own organization, we're gonna start learning to advocate on our behalf," it was a real scene. Most of the lawyers who had supported the early work of the organization abandoned us. They abandoned us because they couldn't be in the lead anymore. They could no longer say, "We got it going, we the leaders, we the lawyers, we the big time JDs."

Then, we took a group—the original group of twenty welfare mothers—and we sat down with them, and we got out the regulations, the laws, the books, and we went through a training program. What we did was that we took the regulation, the Welfare Rights regulation, and developed our own training manual: publications on knowing your rights, your rights with food stamps, your rights with Medicare, your rights to go to school, your rights to receive AFDC. We tried to make each of these publications simple for the client. All it was was really the simplification of the regulation to make it accessible to the people, to break down the laws so they were not so confusing—we all know that they were written that way to keep people from being able to understand them. The original twelve graduates were able to run that organization, to provide leadership, and in many ways to change the way business was done in San Francisco when it came to AFDC. They were able to sit on committees and boards, to understand, to speak, to talk, and to represent themselves. If a woman had a problem, for example, with her welfare check, we would not

just send one woman. We'd all go and we'd say: "You take care of Ms. Jones, then Ms. Rodriguez, and then . . . none of us are going to leave until you take care of all our problems." So to get rid of us, they'd say okay, okay.

That organization is still there, and now it's run completely by welfare recipients. We started off with a \$20,000 a year budget, and I'm happy to say that when I left the budget was almost \$600,000 a year. These women were able to do it, with a little support, with us, taking a step backwards and pushing them out there and giving them the skills. And that to me is one of the crucial points: Knowing our place, knowing where we belong as far as helping low-income women's leadership develop.

- **We Must Know Our Place**

This sometimes is very difficult to do, especially when we see ourselves as leaders and everybody else as followers. We have to know our place, we have to know what role we can play and should not play in the development of low-income women's leadership. This is the difference between being an organizer and a leader. A lot of times, we're impatient. We can't listen. We don't want anybody to stumble. Sometimes, I'm in a group with some of the ladies from the public housing projects and we're meeting somewhere, and I get all anxious. No, I have to step back and let them lead. For example, one day we met with a Secretary of State who came to San Francisco, and wanted to meet with a bunch of public housing residents. She got them all in a room, and you're talking big conference room. And the ladies were there around the table, and they started to speak, and they started to stumble, or they repeated themselves. I wanted so bad to jump in and correct, and support and clarify. But I have to know my place. My place is to sit and to listen, and to let them stumble,



to let them express themselves, to let them interface, and if they need me, they will turn around and let me know.

Sometimes we have to know what our role is, that is, if we feel like stepping forward, we may need to step back. That is our role as organizers. We have to be there, but be invisible almost, to allow the folks to have the opportunity to empower themselves. That's real empowerment for people to be able to make mistakes. And we are able to help them learn from it. And we are there when people start to falter and they need us, but never to the point where we would take over and try to run the show. It is alright to be in a place where sometimes people are speaking, and you can't quite understand them because they have a different accent or come from another culture. It is important that you keep listening and that you are able to follow.

We must also get rid of the fear of *them* and of our guilt of being *us*. We are sometimes fearful; and, it is not that we are fearful of anything big. It is just that we're afraid that we might say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing or act in the wrong way. We become so afraid: Did I say the right thing? Is she going to like me? I had to overcome this going into the project, going into folks' houses, people who have a lot less than I do. I have done it, while sitting on their furniture, eating their food, I would be fearful, trying to act *just right*. Going to the project trying to dress *right*, acting all down because I want to be accepted. I learned that I had to get through the fear in order to be in the place where I was. I had to learn to stop feeling guilty about being who I am and doing what I do, and looking the way I do, and having the education I have. The real issue and the real point are that I have to take that education and use it and take it there. I really believe that if we can get behind the *fear of them*, and get beyond the *guilt of being us*, that we can put ourselves in the position to identify women's leadership. There are people out there who want to do it if you work

hard to create the atmosphere where it can happen. We have to be there to *witness* the leadership of these women and let them *experience* their own leadership.

- **We Must Support and Sustain Low-Income Women's Leadership**

I know that people are thinking: "She is telling me to go down to the project, to go down to the food stamp office and hang out." You can do it *right where you are*. There are low-income women wherever you are, women who have the ability to lead and who have ideas. The only thing we need to do is put ourselves in a room, in the same classes, in the same social groups, in *that space*, so we can be there and we can be there to see it, identify it, and support it. It is right there. We don't have to go far. Now, I do encourage people to also work in the larger community where that low-income women leadership exists.

It is when the times are hard or when we disagree politically, that we abandon low-income women. We should not abandon them, because we have the money, we have the skills, we have access to the bank. We must continue to support and sustain low-income women's leadership to help it grow and develop. We must agree on strategies or tactics which make us uncomfortable, or when we may have some vested interest that we don't want that leadership to attack. For example, there have been times with the Income-Rights Project when people wanted to do something which made me feel awful. Willie Brown, speaker of the Assembly, a man I really respect was coming down on the wrong side of the welfare cuts. When folks said: "We are going to take our children and we're going to sit in Willie Brown's office and show him up," I really had a moral dilemma, I really did not want to go but, I had to. . . . I thought, "Oh! God, can't I persuade them to go some place else?" The folks had decided that's where we were going, and, to follow that women's leadership, I had to

go to, and I went and we won. Willie backed down. But, it took a lot to respect that leadership, to support that leadership even when we did not agree politically. Working at the grassroots level, sometimes we have competing morality, competing interests. I knew the women were right morally. I had to stick with that. I also knew that if I did not follow them, I could never go back to this group of women again and have everything the same. I was going to lose five years of my life in the struggle to change things. I would lose this group of people that I respected. And in the final analysis, all that came together, *these were the leaders*, the group that was leading, and I was part of the followers. I had to come to grips with maybe losing something like a friendship. In the long run, if I did not follow, I felt that I would be losing even more than friendship, I would be losing my political soul, my center. . . . Next time, what would it be? I would be compromising something else. No, sorry. Everything became clear: to really respect a leadership and allow it to grow, we have to follow it.

We don't ever want that low-income women's organization and low-income women issues to be the last thing on the list after we write a check to National Organization of Women (NOW) or to the Environment Protection Agency. Financially, we also have to support women's leadership; we have to make our skills, our knowledge, our abilities accessible to these women. We have to take it and offer it to them in the true sister sense of the term, a true open, non-judgmental way. How can I be of assistance? There are some people who do not want to lick the stamp. They say, "I am an anthropology major, I don't understand why they're asking me to door knob." "I have a masters in philosophy and I don't understand why they're asking me to make phone calls." "I have a degree, I have traveled all over the world and I would do so much better being the office manager but, now they are asking me to make coffee." Doing those things may be a way of building trust, it may be a

way of showing your willingness to work, to show your support for the organization so those women can get a chance to know you and judge you in a positive way.

To support and sustain women's leadership, we need to start from the point of education and that's what we are doing: educating people and doing group advocacy. It is really the things which help make it work. We educate to organize. We educate women about money management, about making good choices in their lives, about their own values as women and that they do not have to put up with oppressive living conditions. We educate fathers, we educate children. We involve everyone. Let the children march. Whenever, we had demonstrations, we included the children. In fact, we had the children sing, chant. It was very powerful. Your having all the children holding hands saying "We want a home. We want a home." It is very effective. We must know that if we go into a community, if we're working with a group of women who are working in a community and we talk about the issues that concern that community that people are going to accept us. There is a lot of work to be done. But, how do we do it? How do we get women to even come to the table? You have to go out!

How do I do it? I knock on their doors and I talk to them. I talked to them about issues that concern their lives. I talked to them about education, safety, child care, health care, the recreation center across the street because in the end folks care about the very same thing that I do. I pay close attention, somewhere in that conversation, she is going to say something that sparks something. I am listening, I am waiting for that thing. I am patient. Then, I'll say, Ms. Jones, I really need you to come to the next meeting and say that, because if you are not there, nobody will say it and it won't get said. I really need you there. Would you come to the next meeting? Now, I am going to go back an hour before the meeting and say: Ms. Jones, you're coming to the meeting, right? And, I am

going to call her and make arrangements so that it is possible for her to get there. I am going to support her and I am going to let her know that it is important for her to be in the room.

What do I do? I go there and I knock on doors and I knock on doors. I just think that grassroots, community organizing, door to door, door knocking, phone begging, the basic organizing we learned from George Riley and all these other folks, Fannie Lou Hamer still works. It has not changed, not a bit.

Again, I believe that to support and sustain low-income women's leadership, we must believe in it. We must be there for when it happens. We must be able to identify it, we must make ourselves accessible. It is important to get over the fear that maybe we may not have something to offer. Because, I believe that everyone has something to offer to the struggle, it may be very small, but, if you put yours with mine, and I put a little bit in, and you put a little bit in, it will make a difference!

### **Conclusion: Community Struggle, Global Change**

The common thread in Barbara Nabors-Glass' work and life is clearly a love for the people and a passion for justice and social change. In her struggle for the liberation of the disenfranchised, and for women and children in particular, she inspires others to form a vision and to work to accomplish these changes in the spirit of shared collective responsibility and action. Along with Angela Davis<sup>11</sup>, she says:

I want to suggest . . . that we link our grassroots organizing, our essential involvement in electoral politics, and our involvement as activists in mass struggles with the long-range aim of fundamentally transforming the socio-economic conditions that generate and persistently nourish the various forms of oppression that we suffer. Let us learn from the strategies of our sisters in South Africa and Nicaragua. As Afro-American women, as Women of Color in general, as progressive women of all backgrounds, let us join our sisters and brothers across the globe who are attempting to forge a new . . . order . . . such a social order should provide us with the real opportunity to extend further our struggles, with the assurance that one day we will be able to redefine the basic elements of our oppression as useless refuse of the past.

It is impossible to separate the inspiring words of Barbara Nabors-Glass from the context of oppression and strategies for empowerment in general. The specific examples and tactics that Barbara describes are located within an historical framework which links the struggles of all women. The challenge for academia is to validate these experiences by avoiding marginalization and generalizations. While the centering of women's history gains momentum, the relatedness and differences of specific struggles must be noted. Hence, Barbara's work focuses on a particular class of women in American society, but she does not fail to connect their plight to universal female oppression.

When Barbara Nabors-Glass states that "we must believe that it is possible for low-income women to lead," she hints at a certain mentality or attitude which delegates poor women, especially women of color, to an inferior status. This assignation is the result of a pervasive Eurocentric ideology which seeks to place white males as the only legitimate leaders. In this hierarchy, the antithesis of the white male is the woman of color, whose status denies her power and the possibility of leadership. But, as history has demonstrated, and as Barbara Nabors-Glass has testified, this victim-like status is a fallacy: with the appropriate education and encouragement, poor women can lead, indeed they can lead most effectively.

This achievement of self-representation does entail education and training. Without the experience and knowledge of Barbara, many of these women would have not possessed the confidence or skills to struggle for their rights. But a key feature of this mentorship was recognizing when to step back and allow the women to organize. Any program which aims at empowerment would do well to follow such lead, or risk the change of becoming disempowered.

The key to low-income women's empowerment in Barbara's experience has been collective grassroots organization. In a time when technology and corporate networks dominate the political landscape, it is alarmingly easy to overlook this simple, but effective strategy. In order to participate and contribute to these efforts, it is necessary for many of us to overcome our own pride and place the goals of the community above our own individualistic needs. The empowerment of disadvantaged groups in society should not be seen as a threat, and we should not allow political demagogues to portray it as one. Empowerment of these groups only redresses imbalances which some groups have created to the detriment of society as a whole. By encouraging and supporting low-income women to advocate for themselves, we are merely legitimizing their voices in an arena which seeks to marginalize and undermine them. As the feminization of poverty occurs on a global scale, it is imperative that we as individuals and as members of groups support women's empowerment. While scholars and theorists can debate the Marxist or Fanonian aspects of these struggles, we must not lose sight of practicalities. For the most articulate and brilliant writings have no relevance if we do not actively apply them. Barbara Nabors-Glass has shown us that the real challenge is not just about recognizing the intersection of racial, gender and class oppression, but about communicating and implementing this understanding at a level where it will make a difference.

## ENDNOTES

1. Howard, R. E. "Women's Rights and the Right to Development." In Cohen, R., Hyden, G., and Nagan W. (Eds.) *Human Rights and Governance in Africa*. (Tallahassee and Tampa, FL: University Press of Florida, 1993), p. 113.
2. To date, in all regions of the world (though this may be worst in some countries than others) women and children do not enjoy the same rights and privileges as men. Also, gender-specific violations, such as rape, sexual intimidation, and sex trafficking, as well as genital mutilation and female infanticide continue to exist. In war-ravaged nations, the systematic abuse and mass rape of girls and women have become a weapon of war. Well documented are the "Japanese military brothels" of World War II, where around 200,000 women were raped by soldiers, and the recent mass rapes which have taken place in Bosnia-Herzegovina with the intended purpose of "ethnic cleansing." Abuses faced by the Somalian, Peruvian or Haitian women may be less documented, but are, nonetheless, as real and devastating. The systematic abuse of these women and mass rape lead to what Adrien Wing called "spirit injury", a combination of physical and psychological effects which affect not only the individual victim but society as a whole. Patricia Williams refers to the same phenomenon as "spirit-murdering." (See Wing, Adrien K., and S. Merchan. "Rape, Ethnicity, and Culture: Spirit Injury From Bosnia to Black America." *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, Vol. 25. No 1, Fall 1993.)
3. Hearings, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, U.S. Senate, September 28 and 29, 1993; October 20, 1993; March 22, 1994; and August 2, 1990, Washington, DC.
4. For example, the U.S. State Department started to include abuses against women in their annual country human rights reports only in 1989. Representative Pat Schroeder, U.S. Senate Hearing, September 28, 1993.
5. Howard, op. cit., p. 114.
6. Donna Sullivan, Director of Women in the Law Group, International Law Group. Statement to the Subcommittee on International Security, International Organizations and Human Rights (U.S. Senate Hearing, September 28, 1993. Washington, DC: U.S. Government).
7. Warren Christopher called women's rights "a moral imperative" at the 1993 United Nations Conference on Human Rights in Vienna as he announced the Clinton administration's intention to seek ratification of the CEDAW document, a document already ratified by all but three to five nations. Geraldine Ferraro at a U.S. Senate Hearing expressed the real sense of urgency behind the matter: "I stress the 'very soon'. I also endorse ratification of the other pending agreements, the convention against racial discrimination and the economic covenant, because gender discrimination is linked to racial and ethnic discrimination as well as poverty. All of these strip people of their rights." (Ferraro, G. U.S. Senate Hearing, October 20, 1993. Washington, DC: U.S. Government.)
8. Kennedy, S. "Letter from Hairou." *The Santa Barbara Independent*, September 21, 1995.



9. See for example, Gwaltney, J. L. *Drylongso. A Portrait of Black America*. (New York: The New York Press, 1993). Also see, Krause, C. A. *Grandmothers, Mothers, and Daughters: Histories of three Generations of Ethnic American Women*. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991); Blauner, B. *Black Lives, White Lives: Three Decades of Race Relations in America*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); Funderburg, L. *Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk about Race and Identity*. (New York: William Morrow, 1994); McCarthy Brown, K. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); and Patai, D. *Brazilian Women Speak: Contemporary Life Stories*. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

10. The interview with Barbara Nabors-Glass was conducted as part of a larger project on value transmission in the African-American community.

11. Davis, Angela. "Radical Perspectives on the Empowerment of Afro-American Women: Lessons from the 1980s." *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 58. No 3, 1988, p. 353.