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Mainstream education has long centered the Progressive Era (1896-1916) suffrage movement narrative around the efforts of middle-class white women like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Stone.[1] Though their achievements are inspiring and notable, the legacy of African American women's suffrage efforts remains less told in the shadow of white suffragists. Excluded from the white women's movement and organizations, like the National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and the National Women's Party (NWP), their stories were long undervalued in history, despite the immense progress the community made from the Civil War to the 1920s.[2] The National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was one of the largest and most effective organizations in the efforts of African American women to achieve suffrage. Prior scholars acknowledge the NACW's feminist approach to uplift communities, their exclusion from the mainstream suffrage fight, and the continued struggle of African American women's suffrage.[3] These historians, however,

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[1] Mary Church Terrell, "The Progress of Colored Women," in *The Progress of Colored Women: An Address Delivered Before the National American Women's Suffrage Association, at the Columbia Theater, Washington, D.C., February 19, 1998, on the Occasion of Its Fiftieth Anniversary*, ed. Richard T. Greener and Charles R. Douglass (Glen Rock, New Jersey: Microfilming Corporation of American, 1898): 6.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Megan Bailey, "Between Two Worlds: Black Women and the Fight for Voting Rights," National Park Service, National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior, accessed January 10, 2022, https://www.nps.gov/articles/black-women-and-the-fight-for-voting-rights.htm; Judge Willie J. Epps Jr. and Jonathan M. Warren, "Sheroes: The Struggles of Black Suffragists," *Judges' Journal* 59, no. 3 (2020): 10–15, accessed January 10, 2022, https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.scu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=145220727&site=eds-live; Stephanie J. Shaw, "Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Coloured Women," *Journal of Women's History* 3, no. 2 (1991); Shavonne R. Shorter,

focus little on the specific strategies and contributions the NACW made to the suffrage movement. Under their motto "lifting as we climb," the NACW utilized suffrage as a means to an end of thoroughgoing reforms to improve all aspects of life for African Americans.[4] They focused on race and gender's close relationship in their fight for suffrage, which came about largely due to the exclusion from the purely gender driven goals of white women organizations. Their broad suffrage strategies included unifying black women, using feminine stereotypes of women in the private sphere, prioritizing child rearing, and fighting for racial equality. The NACW was a crucial asset for African American women to participate in the suffrage movement due to the organizations' holistic approach to voting equality in addressing the intersectionality of race and gender. The NACW gave black women a voice and a platform for unity that amplified their distinctive suffrage movement to aid in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, guaranteeing women's right to vote and starting their long fight for equality. The NACW, therefore, allowed African American women to realize their power and potential for activism that continues to inspire justice efforts today.

In the late nineteenth century, a lack of solidarity in women's defiance of their second-class status in formal politics and society led to exclusion and racial division within the suffrage movement, inspiring the formation of the NACW.[5] The ideal woman stayed in the private sphere of the home while men handled the public sphere of politics. Many black women, therefore, sought to collaborate with white women due to their common identity as American women fighting for the same rights and to break down

"Thank You, Foremothers; Thank You, Sisters: A Celebration of Black Women's Work in the Suffrage Movement and Beyond," *Women & Language* 44, no. 2 (2021).

[4] Addie Waits Hunton, "The National Association of Colored Women: Its Real Significance," *The Color American Magazine,* July 1908, 2.

[5] Sarah Evans, "Women in American Politics in the Twentieth Century," Gilder Lehrman, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed January 12, 2022, http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/womens-history/essays/women-american-politics-twentieth-century.

the same gender norms; they believed that success would come from unity across races and dispelling ignorance of racial prejudice between them.[6] This was easier said than done, as racial bias and stereotypes were the main obstacles to unity. Black women were stereotyped as "prostitutes," "liars," and "thieves," and being "devoid of morality."[7] White women could not see past race to respect black women enough to include them and did not want to be associated with these labels in their suffrage battle. Stanton further argued, "If people were enfranchised by car-loads at the Capitol of the nation, it might be a question who should go first."[8]

Many white suffragists felt it just to solely focus on their suffrage plight as they believed their needs were more urgent and they did not want to overcrowd the movement with black women. Moreover, after the Civil War, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments formally granted equal citizenship and voting rights to all men, regardless of race. This meant that former male slaves got the right to vote before white women, which insulted them and sparked bitter sentiments towards a bi-racial suffrage movement.[9] Stanton asked: "What will we and our daughters suffer if these degraded black men are allowed to have the rights that would make them even worse than our Saxon fathers?"[10] Therefore, white women were increasingly hostile towards the black community and focused exclusively on their own discrimination. White suffragists

[6] Adella Hunt Logan, "Why the National Association of Colored Women Should Become Part of the National Council of Women of the United States*," The National Association Notes* 3, no. 8 (December 1988): 1.
[7] Einav Rabinovitch-Fox et al., "Lifting as We Climb: The National Association of Colored Women," Scalar, Scalar, accessed February 10, 2022, https://scalar.case.edu/19th-at-100/the-national-association-of-colored-women-not-just-suffrage.
[8] Jen McDaneld, "White Suffragist Dis/Entitlement: The *Revolution* and the Rhetoric of Racism," *Legacy* 30, no. 2 (2013), https://doi.org/10.5250/legacy.30.2.0243, 249.
[9] Epps and Warren, "Shereoes."
[10] "For Stanton, All Women Were Not Created Equal," *NPR* online, July 13, 2011, https://www.npr.org/2011/07/13/137681070/for-stanton-all-women-were-not-created-equal.

did not want to risk attention on gender being shifted towards racial equality, fearing their oppression would be dismissed.[11]

Furthermore, they wanted to maintain good relations with southern suffragists and legislators by removing race from suffrage discussions, especially during the Jim Crow era (1877-1964) of segregation and continued racism.[12] The mainstream women's suffrage organizations, like NAWSA and NWP, ostracized black women and fought narrowly for white women. They held white-only conventions and segregated events to ensure support from racist legislators. The NWP, for example, limited and destroyed photo evidence of black picketers at their White House protests for suffrage in 1917.[13] Similarly, Ida B. Wells, a founding member of the NACW, participated as the only black women at the 1913 NAWSA suffrage parade in Washington D.C., but was forced to march in the back, to ensure a white centered narrative.[14] White women went along with racial resistances to strategically advance their own rights, "but justified prejudice in the meantime."[15]

In response to racism and the need for more cohesion among black female activism, the NACW was created in 1896. Through the unity of the D.C. National Federation of Afro-American Women and the National League of Colored Women, the NACW emerged as "one of the largest and most significant organizations of women in the world."[16] By 1902, the association had 125

[11] Evans, "Women in American Politics in the Twentieth Century."
[12] Epps and Warren, "Shereoes."
[13] Logan, "Why the National Association of Colored Women."
[14] "Ida B. Wells: A Suffrage Activist for the History Books," AAUW, American Association of University Women, accessed on January 10, 2022. https://www.aauw.org/resources/article/initiatives/2020-convening/ida-b-wells-a-suffrage-activist-for-the-history-books/.
[15] Mary B. Talbert, "Women and Colored Women," *The Crisis*, August 1915, https://archive.org/details/crisis910dubo/page/n55/mode/2up?q=august+1915.
[16] "'National Association of Colored Women,' The Woman's Era, III: 3" in *What Gender Perspectives Shaped the Emergence of the National Association of Colored Women, 1895-1920?,* eds. Thomas Dublin, Franchesca Arias and Debora Carreras (Binghamton, NY: State University of New York at Binghamton, 2000), 2.

branches with over 8,000 members in 26 states.[17] The founders of this nationwide community included Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, Frances E.W. Harper, and Harriet Tubman.[18] As Terrell, the first president of NACW, stated: "not only are colored women with ambition and aspiration handicapped on account of their sex, but they are everywhere baffled and mocked on account of their race."[19] Women of color naturally had a different suffrage fight based on their low societal status that legally took away their right to education, property, and ownership of their own body, even after emancipation, as "nothing…that could degrade or brutalize the womanhood of the race was lacking in [the U.S.] system."[20] This automatically made their fight one of intersectional oppression. White women could not relate to these obstacles and, therefore, did not want to risk fighting for it, fearing their suffrage campaign would be radicalized or jeopardized. Besides common womanhood, educated white women and working-class African American women had vastly different struggles and diverse suffrage agendas, proving the need for a separate national organization, like the NACW, to address black women's unique adversities.

The NACW was founded as a widely accessible organization to uplift black women and the broader black community through a vast range of programs to fight for suffrage within a larger civil rights mission, which included economic equality, educational opportunities, and racial justice. The organization's Constitution states it was formed to help, "furnish evidence of moral, mental and material progress made by [black] people."[21] The

[17] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Ida Husted Harper, and Susan B. Anthony, "Description of National Association of Colored Women, *History of Woman Suffrage* 4 (2013), https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2770800, 1051.
[18] "'National Association of Colored Women,'" 2.
[19] Terrell, "The Progress of Colored Women," 8.
[20] Ibid., 5.
[21] National Association of Colored Women, "Constitution of the N.A. of C.W. 1906, Papers of Margaret Murray Washington" in *What Gender Perspectives Shaped the*

organization's purpose was to fight against sexism and racism by proving African Americans', especially women's, worth to the nation. The motto "lifting as we climb," embodies the sentiment that the NACW was a turning point for black women to uplift their race through realizing their full potential in organizing, developing, and managing public activism.[22] It is a testament to the unity among black women and the holistic, forward-thinking approach that the NACW members' took in their suffrage fight as a step toward full equality. As long as black women's clubs had at least ten members, a similar constitution to the NACW, and paid ten cent dues per person, they could join the Association.[23] These local clubs met together biennially to discuss progress and host elections for leadership roles.[24]

As a part of their holistic mission, the NACW created a plethora of welfare departments, including "social science, literature, young women's work, domestic science, evangelistic art, humane, mothers' clubs, parliamentary law, rescue work, music, kindergarten, business, professional, juvenile court, forestry, suffrage, church club, and religious work."[25] For the purpose of suffrage, "young women's work, domestic science," "mothers' club," and "kindergarten" were particularly important as they uplifted black women within the stereotypical female sphere of motherhood and social work. Anti-racism campaigns and the anti-lynching movement also intersected effectively with suffrage because of the importance the NACW placed on recognizing intersectionality.

The NACW Equal Suffrage League mobilized clubs country-wide to support suffrage and officially passed a resolution in 1916

Emergence of the National Association of Colored Women, 1895-1920?, eds. Thomas Dublin, Franchesca Arias and Debora Carreras (Binghamton, NY: State University of New York at Binghamton, 2000).

[22] "The National Association of Colored Women's Clubs," *The Colored American Magazine* 14, 1908, 497.

[23] National Association of Colored Women, "Constitution."

[24] Ibid.

[25] "The National Association of Colored Women's Clubs," 504.

supporting the Nineteenth Amendment, along with the aforementioned department outreach.[26] Through conventions, speaking tours, magazine articles, and newspaper interviews, NACW members wanted to show the nation that they could be helpful citizens in forming the most perfect government, appealing for suffrage rights through welfare action and community uplift.[27] Wells, speaking on the impact of the organization, exclaimed, "If this work can contribute in any way toward [arousing] the conscience of the American people to demand justice for every citizen…I have done my race a service."[28] The NACW knew their fight would not be easy, but did what they could to lay a foundation for future black women activists, planting ideas of equality and suffrage into the nation's consciousness. NACW women therefore believed the best avenues for suffrage included unity, uplifting black women's self-worth, promoting black motherhood, and ending racism.

The NACW contributed to the suffrage movement by uniting and uplifting black women on a national level to help them recognize their worth in the generation after emancipation. Post-slavery, many black women faced an extreme transition in understanding who they were as free individuals and identifying their ambitions. The NACW provided a space to uplift these women in cultivating their "domestic virtues, moral impulses and standards of family and social life."[29] The goal was to strategically portray black suffragists as true American mothers and house-makers, worthy of the vote. The organization inspired black women as part of a community mission and a suffrage tactic to

[26] Edith Mayo, "African American Women Leaders in the Suffrage Movement," Turning Point Suffragist Memorial: Education, Turning Point Suffragist Memorial, accessed January 11, 2022, https://suffragistmemorial.org/african-american-women-leaders-in-the-suffrage-movement/.
[27] Talbert, "Women and Colored Women."
[28] "Ida B. Wells: A Suffrage Activist for the History Books."
[29] Fannie Barrier Williams, "The Club Movement Among Colored Women of America," in *A New Negro for a New Century*, ed. J.E. MacBready, ed. (Chicago: American Publishing House, 1900).

prove to the white population that black women could meet white society's standards of purity, refinement, and character.[30] These women, under the NACW, became a unit of womanhood, greater than their ex-slave status. Working together to share love and sympathy among one another in the arduous times of the Jim Crow era gave these women the motivation to complete their work for emancipation in gaining citizenship through the vote. "A united sisterhood has become a beautiful reality," Terrell said in relation to the formation of the NACW.[31] In being such a widespread national organization, the NACW helped, "give respect and character to a race of women who had no place in the classification of progressive womanhood in America."[32]

By giving these women a platform to identify their needs and command attention, the Association made room for black feminists to be a part of "progressive womanhood." Since white women did not consider the needs of others in their conventions and campaigns, organization among black women was necessary in order to gain "respect" and visibility. Solidarity under the NACW stood as a symbol of strength and progress, where black women gained self-respect and respect for their race.[33] By learning their own value first and realizing their potential through the NACW, these women hoped the nation would follow in acknowledging their worth. That is why uplift was key to their suffrage movement and gave them the will to believe in the power of their activism. The NACW provided African American women a safe haven and protection of their political and social goals through the power of unity. The symbolic effect of uplifting not only increased black women's visibility in the 1900s suffrage movement but also created a long-lasting impact on the strength of black female activism.

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[30] Ibid.
[31] Mary Church Terrell, "A Few Possibilities of the National Association of Colored Women," *AME Church Review*, 1896, 220.
[32] Williams, "The Club Movement."
[33] Ibid.

Using the private sphere of African American motherhood and child rearing as key advocacy points for suffrage, the NACW fought for the equality of future generations and proved black women's importance to the nation.[34] Since women were limited to the private sphere of household duties during the Progressive Era, the NACW strategically used the stereotypical ideals of motherhood and the value placed on children to propel them into the political sphere. The NACW promoted the idea that black women were creating, "more homes, better homes, purer homes" in order to positively contribute to the nation's future.[35]

Mothers' clubs were a special segment of the NACW's domestic science program where women were taught to sweep, cook, dust, and wash.[36] These clubs provided an outlet for poor and ignorant women to learn how to perfect housekeeping according to socially appropriate standards. Social purity and gender norms at the time could have served as barriers to black women's acceptance into politics, but they instead utilized these standards as an opportunity to demonstrate the quality of their homes and high-class. They attempted to portray themselves as equals of white women. They used a similar appeal to the mainstream movement by claiming that they needed access to democratic rights in order to purify society and properly maintain the home. The home was a source of strength as it remained the female dominated space and therefore the space that they needed to protect by having the vote.[37] NACW activists believed that going through the home was the most promising way of obtaining rights, arguing for suffrage on the basis of female loyalty to the sacred home and bringing justice to children; this paralleled the rhetoric of white women on motherhood as a basis for rights.[38] NACW women sought to

[34] Terrell, "The Progress of Colored Women," 8.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Mary Church Terrell, "First Presidential Address to the National Association of Colored Women," Nashville, Tennessee, September 15, 1897, From Library of Congress, *Mary Church Terrell Papers*.
[37] Hunton, "The National Association of Colored Women," 4.
[38] Terrell, "First Presidential Address."

engage intellectually with the morality of government lawmakers in order to demand aid, which included equal rights, for all people to maintain a decent, civilized society. "Protection and sympathy of good women" became the main suffrage strategy as women were the center of child rearing and societal values; if the government wanted to maintain female purity, they needed to allow *all* women a space in democracy.[39]

The NACW advocated for suffrage on the basis of mothers' need to protect children and raise future generations in a nation of equality. Kindergartens and day cares were central parts of the organization's attempt to bring justice to black children. These institutions helped women in three key ways. First, they encouraged education among younger generations, teaching black children their potential and setting them up for greater success.[40] Second, working mothers were provided a space to leave their children for the day, empowering mothers to earn an income while their children were being safely cared for.[41] Third, and most important, they demonstrated the emphasis the NACW placed on the future generation. The NACW wanted black children to be seen as fully human, so they fought for suffrage on the basis of justice for basic respect. Fearing that future children would be raised in an environment of hate and racism, the NACW sought suffrage as a way to protect children and rear them in a purified society, one of equality and love.[42] The Association was devoted to teaching integrity, morals, and strength, the kind of uplift only possible in a nation with equal suffrage.[43] "In the name of the innocence and helplessness of children," the NACW appealed for the nation to recognize their need for suffrage in order to protect the freedom and future of every American child.[44]

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[39]Ibid.
[40] Mary Eliza Church Terrell, "The Duty of the National Association of Colored Women," *AME Church Review* 16, no. 3 (1900): 342.
[41] Ibid., 343.
[42] Terrell, "First Presidential Address."
[43] Terrell, "The Duty of the National Association of Colored Women," 345.
[44] Terrell, "First Presidential Address."

They also stressed the economic and social differences between white and black motherhood and, therefore, the need for all women to receive equal justice for the sake of future generations. Middle- and upper-class white women had optimism in knowing their children had the privileged access to resources, such as education and employment opportunities, and would go on to do great things whereas black women feared doors would be closed on their children due to prejudice, no matter how great they were.[45] Understanding this difference explains why both white and black women needed the vote as white women could not relate to the complexities of black motherhood. The NACW pleaded for access to the political sphere on the basis of their need to defend their intersectional status as mothers in society and raise their children right. Women had the most sway over the upkeep of the private sphere, therefore domestic duties and child care remained essential to the strategy of the NACW's suffrage efforts.[46]

In a nation ruled by racism, the NACW's suffrage efforts were guided by the sentiments of anti-Jim Crow and anti-lynching campaigns. Racism created a major hurdle for black women's suffrage as they needed to gain respect for their race and humanity before fighting for gender rights. The abolition of slavery in conjunction with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, originally brought widespread hope for African American women's potential freedom and citizenship status; however, the emergence of Jim Crow laws segregating black and white individuals, make a mockery of this progress and "An absolute dead letter in the Constitution of the United States."[47] One-third of states implemented these laws disregarding black citizens' rights

[45] Ibid., 349; 351.
[46] Hunton, "The National Association of Colored Women," 4.
[47] Ida B. Wells, *How Enfranchisement Stops Lynchings*. Manuscript. From Library of Congress, *NAACP Papers,* May 1910. https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2561784, 2.

and equal protection under the law, justifying racism and violence toward the African American community.[48]

Appealing to morality and social justice, the NACW sought to correct the government's mistakes by pleading for suffrage as a way to weaken prejudice and demonstrate to the nation the capabilities of the black community, especially black women. This was in direct response to individuals, like South Carolina Senator Benjamin Tillman, encouraging white citizens to "shoot negroes to death to keep them from voting."[49] Violence, brought about by the Klu Klux Klan among others, was a major form of suppressing black rights. According to Wells, there were 52 lynchings in 1882, which rapidly increased to 250 in 1892, demonstrating the barbaric racism and cruelty that the black community encountered after slavery as white supremacy was still strongly embedded in the nation.[50] The NACW created petitions for southern state legislatures to repeal Jim Crow laws due to the barriers segregation placed on their ability to politically and socially participate.[51] The ballot is key to recognition of full human life and democratic power, and without it, black individuals were treated like animals.[52]

Without the vote, white supremacists had no reason to find black women or men equal, giving them "free reign to…lynch, hang, burn" whenever they pleased.[53] Law enforcement did nothing to protect black men's rights or black women's activism, often siding with these vicious mobs.[54] Thus, the organization made anti-lynching campaigns a major component of their suffrage movement. The NACW amplified the need to address the multi-

[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., 3.
[50] Ibid., 6.
[51] Mary Church Terrell, "Greetings From the National Association of Colored Women to The National Council of Women," 1900, From Library of Congress, *Mary Church Terrell Papers*.
[52] Wells, "How Enfranchisement Stops Lynchings," 5.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid., 16.

leveled oppression black women faced and continued to be outspoken in their extreme campaign for racial and gender equality. Although this fight did little to change many minds at the time, it established ideas for future activism and gave rise to moral arguments of equality in post-emancipation America.

Through these strategies, the NACW gave black women a voice and platform for intersectional activism, providing them influence over the success of the Nineteenth Amendment, despite continued inequality. Never before had black women formed such a unified nationwide community in which they fought not only for themselves, but for the rights of all black Americans. NACW women "tirelessly rallied for the right to vote for decades …[solidifying] the notion that women of color deserved more …[and] could be the norm rather than the exception."[55] They strove to prove that black women were capable of representing the same values, being just as good mothers, and being just as capable of running the house as white women. The plea for suffrage equality was heard loud and clear but was outright ignored by white women suffragists and white politicians.

In a time of Jim Crow segregation and racist violence, black women's intersectional identity greatly limited their ability to appeal for rights in a white supremacist nation that was not ready for them to be free, let alone equal. So, when the Nineteenth Amendment passed in 1920, it recognized the right to vote to all citizens regardless of gender, except for women of color.[56] They were ultimately excluded from both the mainstream suffrage movement and the implementation of the suffrage Amendment. Many states also passed discriminatory laws furthering efforts to keep black women out of politics.[57] Whites-only primaries, poll taxes, and literacy tests all continued to be implemented within Jim Crow society.[58] However, that did not mean that these women did

[55] Epps and Warren, "Sheroes."
[56] Epps and Warren, "Sheroes."
[57] Bailey, "Between Two Worlds."
[58] Shorter, "Thank You, Foremothers," 328.

not make a difference. The NACW supported and united black women in a contentious time of post-emancipation, helping them learn how to identify as free American women. Instilling values in these women and the greater population through widespread feminist activism, the NACW uplifted the entire black community through their suffrage strategies of raising child rearing consciousness and promoting anti-racism campaigns, as well as their many other non-suffrage related departments. Though their impact was less seen on the legal level, NACW suffragists planted seeds of progress in a symbolic effort to slowly change the nation's sentiments towards women of color.

With limited access to suffrage under the Nineteenth Amendment and continued racial inequality, the NACW's efforts in the Progressive Era were only the beginning of African American women's fight for civil rights, as seen through the Civil Rights Movement and present-day voting barriers. It took another 45 years for the Voting Rights Act (1965) to pass, which finally attempted to fully allow black women and men the right to vote.[59] Even still, women of color today are largely disadvantaged by states' voting restriction laws and efforts to suppress this right, such as limitations on mail-in ballots and obstructive registration requirements.[60] The work to gain full equal suffrage is still largely unfinished, but black female activism continues to remain strong. In 1996, on the NACW's 100-year anniversary, they had over 20,000 members and a total of 698 chapters in 32 states.[61] The NACW represented "a new national voice through which black club women could continue the struggle to improve their personal lives and the general standard of life."[62] The NACW is the nation's oldest and longest lasting black women's organization, still going strong today in raising awareness for black women's rights and

[59] "Ida B. Wells: A Suffrage Activist for the History Books."
[60] Ibid.
[61] Richette L. Haywood, "Still Lifting and Climbing." *Ebony* 51, no. 12 (1996): 101.
[62] Shaw, "Black Club Women," 20.

self-improvement as well as the greater mission of raising moral and civic standards.[63]

[63] Haywood, "Still Lifting," 101.