

At the Forefront: Black womxn lead the fight for social justice

Black womxn have stood at the forefront of just about every large-scale movement for social justice in this country's history. As a Black womxn in 2021 fighting for progressive change — reproductive justice and racial equity, in particular — this history is not lost on me. To be Black and to be a womxn in America is to be routinely attacked, questioned, bothered and overlooked. Some days just getting out of bed, stepping out into the sun, and daring to claim breath and space feels like an overtly political act. We exist in an environment that is hostile to us at every turn, and yet.... We face that hostility with a fierceness that is unmatched, a determination that is unending. With astonishing power, and everlasting love.

Why do we fight so ferociously for a country that doesn't seem to want to fight for us in return? I ask myself this all the time. Fighting so hard day in and day out can be exhausting. And yet the burden to lead often falls on those who already have the most to carry. So why do we continue? How do we continue?

I continue because there is no other way. In my heart of hearts I'm an optimist — an idealist really (don't tell anyone!). I fight for my community and my country because, among other reasons, the Declaration of Independence is a gorgeous freakin document! Read it sometime, if you haven't in a while — it will give you chills. This nation, that was forged by genocide and all manner of sheer brutality, was eventually brought together because of a few radical ideals: liberty, justice and equality for all. (Do as we say, not as we do, I guess) These ideals were radical in 1776, and they're just as radical today. The fact that we as a nation have never come remotely close to living these values is infuriating. The thought that this democratic experiment of ours might be coming to an end before it comes anywhere near to reaching its full potential absolutely breaks my heart. And so the fight continues. For me, it's about creating a more safe and just world, but it's also about proving that a country founded with such righteous ideals in mind can persevere without ultimately tearing itself apart.

As an activist who is also a Black womxn, I continually seek sources of strength, renewal and hope in order to keep moving forward. The bravery, tenacity, genius and grace of my ancestors flows through me in ways that I can't fully describe. But I also find hope and motivation in my fellow sisters in the struggle. There are activists all across the country and around this little state of ours who are leading unapologetically, with determination and with grace. I look to them, I stand with them and I fight for them until we can achieve the justice, equity and empathy that we all seek.

Here are a few of their thoughts:

Jennifer Rourke is the founder for The Rhode Island Political Cooperative, and a board member of The Womxn Project:

"Black women have been fighting for years for intersectionality, equality and equity. We can see change from different perspectives that most people cannot see. Our fight is your fight and we take that to heart.

“With so many new faces running for office, especially Black/Brown and LGBTQIA+ women or female identifying shows that the time has passed for incrementalism. No more small steps for change. We need bigger movements in our everyday life and the time is now. This movement means that there will be more legislation that advocates for the people who live and work in places that are often ignored and have legislation introduced that works against their health, wellness and safety.”

Jessica Brown is the founder of Clam Jam Brass Band.

“Black womxn have been at the forefront of so many social justice movements because as Malcolm X said, “The most disrespected woman in America is the Black woman.” We know what it is like to be invisible and ignored, yet we prop up this country. We have fed this country, raised its families, cared for its sick, been its source for science, and been there to fix it when it’s broken.

“We are not complacent. And we know what the consequences are when certain people are elected into office or if certain laws aren’t passed. Black women feel these ripple effects the most. We carry this trauma and historical knowledge in our DNA. When Black womxn do work, everyone benefits. We don’t just look out for other black womxn, but for our men, our kids, and every other demographic group. One because we know what it feels like to be marginalized, and two, because we have been conditioned to concern ourselves of the needs of white people. We are used to picking up the slack for everyone else and if we have needs and want change, history will show that we can’t depend on anyone else to stand up for us. When we come out, we come out in numbers. We plot, plan, strategize, organize, march, knock and we VOTE. We don’t operate as individuals but as a community. We understand the power of numbers. As a group, we are powerful.”

Ditra Edwards is the Co-Founder and Director of SISTA FIRE

“Black womxn, blk queer womxn, blk trans womxn, are brilliant and beautiful and carry a vision for our communities that draws from our ancestors and our lived experiences and, most of all, our deep desire for joy and liberation. We are fighting to save black lives. Our long history of black resistance and black-led organizing is how we exercise our dignity and power.

“Ella Baker was always a person for me. I think about her, I read about her....The way she approached her work was very much grounded in building collective power, doing deep listening, and hearing what people were experiencing and what they hoped for and what their vision for themselves was. In the work that we do at SISTA Fire, we try to embody this. We are deeply engaged in listening and looking for how we can create our democratic process so that everyone can be actively involved.”