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Dawn Hinton

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## **Unheard Voices in the Community Building Process: The Role of Poor Black Women in the U.S. during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century**

By Dawn Hinton<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This work focuses on the process by which two Black women with little resources and education contributed to the development of community. These women were born in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and their narratives are included in the Black Women Oral History Project. Discovered here is that there was a path to community development that these women followed which involved their desire to help, the recognition and use of churches and other community organizations to implement change in their communities.

*Keywords:* Oral History, Black Women, Community Building

The contributions of Black women during the early to mid-1900's, in terms of community building, focuses on the work of the Black Women's Club Movement (Lerner 1972). However, there are many others who have done considerable work and made significant contributions to the Black community, yet their voices remain hidden. This study uses a data source that places at the center the lived experiences of two Black women, as heard in their own words through the Black Woman's Oral History Project. In much of the literature on Black woman's community activism middle-class Black woman spoke for all Black women (Hine, 1994; Scott 1990). Left obscured are the voices of poor Black women and the many contributions that they made towards community building. This research discusses their contributions to the development of community.

Recent research has begun to examine the current contributions of poor Black women in the creation of community (Mack, 1999; Walters 2004; Wingfield 2008). However, their historic role has been overlooked. Kincheloe and Steinberg (2008), when discussing the creation of indigenous knowledge, suggest that "we must always be careful to avoid race or ethnic designations that fail to discern the differences between people included in a specific category" (p. 142). This form of essentialism leads to a lack of understanding of indigenous populations. Black women have never been a monolithic group and any research that denies the multiple experiences of Black women limits our understanding of their experiences. To get a sense of the contributions of poor Black women, I examine the authoritative Black Woman's Oral History Project as primary source data. Careful analysis of this data reveals a process by which they are able to create community. This process of community building is presented in the light of Black feminism.

Current research on the community building of Black women during the early 1900s does not capture the role of Black women who grew up in poverty. Obscured are the voices of the poor Black woman and the many contributions that she made towards community building.

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<sup>1</sup> Dawn Hinton is a Professor in Sociology at Saginaw Valley State University. Her teaching and research interests include intersectionality, Black Feminism and community development. Email: hinton@svsu.edu

These voices are viewed through the lens of Black feminist theory, specifically the dichotomy of activism in the face of oppression (Collins 2000). Ultimately, this work highlights the connections of race, class and gender and their impact on community development. This work specifically focuses on the lives of two women, who grew up in poverty yet made significant contributions to the development of the Black community through community building activities during the 1930s and 1950s.

### **The Black Women's Club Movement**

Early discussions that address Black women's contributions to the development of the Black community, during the early 1900s, involve a discussion of the Black Women's Club Movement. Middle-class Black women in America have a long history of organizing to better the Black community, however, this organizing led to the development of a contentious relationship between middle- and lower-class Black women.

Since Lerner's (1972) seminal work, on the Black women's club movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been considerable further research. Much of this research focuses on how each club is experienced in various cities across the nation (Hine 1994; Riley 2008; White 1999). What has been shared about this movement is that they report a record of self-help, institution building and philanthropy (Hine 1994; Lerner, 1974). Yet, many believed that "before Black women could move into the larger arena of civic reform work, they had to first establish that their sexual natures were above reproach. Only when the larger society accepted them as virtuous women, would it be possible to press their broad demands for social reform" (Hine 1994, 112). However, many in leadership were middle-class Black women and their relationships with the poor Black women, they served, was strained. In some circles the attitudes of the women in leadership were patronizing, snobbish and elitist (Lerner 1974; Scott 1990).

The work of Black club women is significant in the development of the Black community and also offers an alternative and more realistic definition of Black womanhood, what is evident is their inability to identify with the experiences of poor Black women. Just as white women denied Black women the opportunity to fully participate in White women's clubs due to a perceived lack of morality (Lerner 1972; White 1999), the continued focus on the experiences of Black middle-class women denies poor Black women the ability to fully participate in the communication of their unique experiences, hence denying their unique perspectives and contributions.

There is a considerable upsurge in research on the connections between class and gender within the Black community. A number of studies examine the specific contributions of working- and lower-class women in the development of the Black community (Craig 2002; Higginbotham 1993; Naples 1991). The work of Higginbotham (1993) and Craig (2002) with this population share a similar approach, in that they study the impact of social institutions on this population. Their work suggests that both Black churches and colleges perpetuate middle-class values, as these institutions promote values of the white middle-class. Approaches such as these contributed to the discussion of respectability that complicated the relationship between Black middle- and lower-class women. The experiences of poor Blacks with the health care system are explored in a number of studies (Bell 2009; Reid & Tom 2006). Both examine the disparities experienced by poor Black women and the methods they employ to mediate the health care system. This discussion of the contributions and experiences of ethnically diverse, lower-

class women are not peculiar to the US but examined in India, Sweden (Arora-Johnson 2009), amongst Aboriginal Australian women (Fredericks 2010) and across the African diaspora (Berger 1983; Peterson 2001, Scarnecchia 1996). This work examines the impact of race, class and gender on the community building efforts of two women who actively built community institutions in the US during the early 1900s.

### **Black Feminist Theory**

Black feminist thought, the lens used for this research, is a theoretical idea that revolves around the notion of Black women creating realistic definitions of self. Relying on the Black woman to create a theoretical idea that explains her experiences is crucial. Black women are represented as mummies, matriarch, jezebels and welfare mothers (Collins 2000; Wallace 1990). These ideas are consistent with much of the work of Black club women who refuted these negative representations. Yet they did not recognize how they could be implicated in characterizing their lower-class sisters in this same way. This theoretical approach allows the women studied here to create definitions of self that more accurately reflect their experiences.

### **Oppression and Activism**

The experiences of Black women during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century were oppressive and restraining. Explored here is how poor Black women were able to employ activism in the face of oppression. Collins (2000) suggested that Black women have developed a way of thinking and being that opposed oppression. She argues that “social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of US Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice” (p. 9). Central to Black feminist theory is the connection that exists between oppression and activism.

Activism on the part of Black women occurs in two dimensions, the struggle for group survival and institutional transformation (Collins 2000). The struggle for group survival “consist of actions taken to create Black female spheres of influence within existing social structures” (Collins 2000, 204). Within oppressive institutions Black women develop oppositional identities in an effort to undermine these same oppressive structures. This requires that Black women view their experiences as the necessary and sufficient components of an alternative world view. This work focuses on the struggle for group survival and the methods and techniques used by the Black women, in this project, to ensure that their voices are heard and the needs of their communities are met.

The activism expressed by Black women can be seen in the work done for their communities. According to Hine (1994) “the philanthropic work of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century African American women ensured the survival of many of the most vulnerable members of the Black population” (p. 109). She further suggests that, Black women during this time did not have access to vast financial fortune in the same way as white philanthropists. She suggests that their ways of “giving of time and effort and commitment to racial uplift work—including providing protection for young Black women—and their endless struggle to create living space for segregated, often illiterate, unskilled, and impoverished Black Americans were as valuable” (110). Not only is this activity perceived as philanthropic; Naples (1991) suggests that there is a political dimension to the actions of these women although “most women used the term civic work to define the diverse actions they engaged in as community workers” (485). In

terms of examining the contributions of poor Black women, this work recognizes their civic and community work as political activism.

## **Methodology**

A condition that facilitates the obscurity of research on poor Black women is the dearth of original source material where the voices of economically disadvantaged Black women are featured. This work uses a critical indigenous methodology, which according to Denzin and Lincoln (2008), “uses methods critically, for explicit social justice purposes. It values the transformative power of indigenous, subjugated knowledges. It values the pedagogical practices that produce these knowledges, and it seeks forms of praxis and inquiry that are emancipatory and empowering” (p. 2). Here the focus is on the creation of knowledge that empowers populations that have historically been excluded and “takes into account the colonial/power dimensions of the political/epistemological relationship between the indigenous cosmos and the Western world” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008, p. 136). The experiences of US Black women, as a result of occupying the bottom rungs on a number of social hierarchies, are unique. This uniqueness requires an alternative epistemology which reflects their positions on these hierarchies and recognizes the legitimacy of the voices of lower-class Black women.

In the development of epistemological approaches, the social sciences embrace positivism, which suggests that there is a truth that can be obtained by applying the scientific method. Kincheloe and Steinberg (2008) posit that this approach is a sociopolitical process that delegitimizes alternative ways of knowing and at the same time reflects who in our society has power: “The power struggle involves who is allowed to proclaim truth and to establish the procedures by which truth is to be established”(p. 144). Collins (2000), in her discussion on the development of a Black feminist epistemology, suggests that there is value in examining the lived experiences of Black women through a qualitative methodology. In addition, Few, Stephens and Rouse-Arnett (2003) suggest that “the use of qualitative methods, particularly interviews or narrative documents, has been instrumental in informing researchers of the various dynamics that shape sexuality, race, and gender interaction” (Few, Stephens and Rouse-Arnett, 2003, p. 207). How social scientists views marginalized populations, who occupy the bottom rungs of the various social hierarchies, benefits from the use of oral narratives.

The narratives used in this research were a part of The Black Woman Oral History Project. In response to Dr. Letitia Woods Brown's request to collect the life histories of Black women, the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College collected the oral memoirs of Black women. According to Ruth Hill, editor of the project, the oral narratives that were included are from women who were perceived to have "made substantial contributions to improving the lives of African-Americans and all people" (Hill, 1991, p. xi). The Rockefeller Foundation funded this project, which began in July 1976, with the support of the Advisory committee of the Schlesinger Library. There are sixty-eight narratives in this project and many of the women interviewed grew up in poverty and yet made significant contributions to their particular field. The two women, whose experiences are highlighted here, are no exception; their narratives are included in this analysis because their experiences are unique in that although they grew up in poverty, they spent most of their lives actively involved in community building. This provides a counter narrative to the Black Women's Club Movement, which highlights to contributions of middle-class Black women, excluding the voices of the poor, in their efforts to build community.

The analysis of each narrative will focus on the content by exploring the common themes

that evolve in the experiences of both narrators. Used here is a comparative analysis based in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) to explore the applicability of Black feminist theory to the lives of Black women. Through a careful examination of each of these oral narratives, similarities as well as differences are identified. This approach is similar to those employed by others doing research using oral histories (Etter-Lewis 1993; Lukes 1983; Rocker & Abron 1996).

### **Introduction to Narrators - Audley Moore**

“I have one objective, with ‘em for freedom” (Moore, 1991, p. 145), this is a recurrent theme within the work of Moore. Moore was born in 1898 in New Iberia, Louisiana, to Ella Henry and St. Cyr Moore. She is the oldest of four children. Her mother died when she was five and she was sent to live with her grandmother and later moved in with her father. Her father’s death left young Audley Moore with the tremendous responsibility of raising her siblings. Through her many experiences, she joined and organized various community institutions. As she discusses her involvement in community service the idea of freedom is a common theme. There is a single purpose in her organizational memberships; some she joined because it gave her access to Blacks, and others she created in an effort to bring Blacks together; however, the overall theme is freedom. After her father’s death when she was twelve, as the oldest of three girls, she was responsible for taking care of her siblings. In addition to being the sole caregiver for her sisters she organized neighbors to provide for the Black recruits of World War I, when she found out that the Red Cross serviced only whites. Other civic involvement came as a result of her exposure to Marcus Garvey; she first heard him speak in New Orleans in 1919 and through the knowledge gained, she established the African-American Cultural Foundation, through this organization she began instituting Garvey’s ideas. Her exploration of Garvey’s work inspired her to travel the nation looking for a place where Blacks were ‘free.’ She landed in New York, where she began organizing Blacks.

Her self-education began as a young woman and continued throughout her life. In her studies she came across a Methodist encyclopedia that indicated that a race of people who had been colonized had 100 years to state their dissatisfaction or they would be considered content with their lot. This discovery led to her second nation-wide tour attempting to organize Black people around the idea of U.S. reparations for Blacks in America. This traveling culminated in 1962 when she filed claims for reparations with the U.S. government on behalf of Blacks in America.

### **Charleszetta Waddles**

Charleszetta Waddles, the eldest of seven children, became the sole breadwinner of her house at twelve, and married at thirteen. She was ordained a minister in 1956 and founded the Perpetual Mission for the Saving of All Souls, which served the poor community in Detroit, a mission founded on religious principles. Much of her life-work is completed through this mission. She uses a biblical verse, Matthew 25: 31-46, which suggested that it is the responsibility of the Christian to feed and clothe those less fortunate. Through the creation of this organization, Waddles develops various community programs that attempt to meet the needs of the people.

The Perpetual Mission for the Saving of All Souls began as a group of women who got

together for prayer meetings then decided that they would form an organization. Waddles notes “we were all poor women with a house full of children, most of us—and I felt that you are never too poor to help someone” (Waddles, 1991, p. 73). As a result they gathered clothes and food to be distributed to those in need. She recalls that the first person that came to them for help was a member of the group. “She was a woman with thirteen children and her husband was ill at the time, and she was behind in her house payments” (Waddles, 1991, p. 73-74). The group did not have money to give her, so they agreed that they would give her food, so the money that she would have used to buy food she could use for rent.

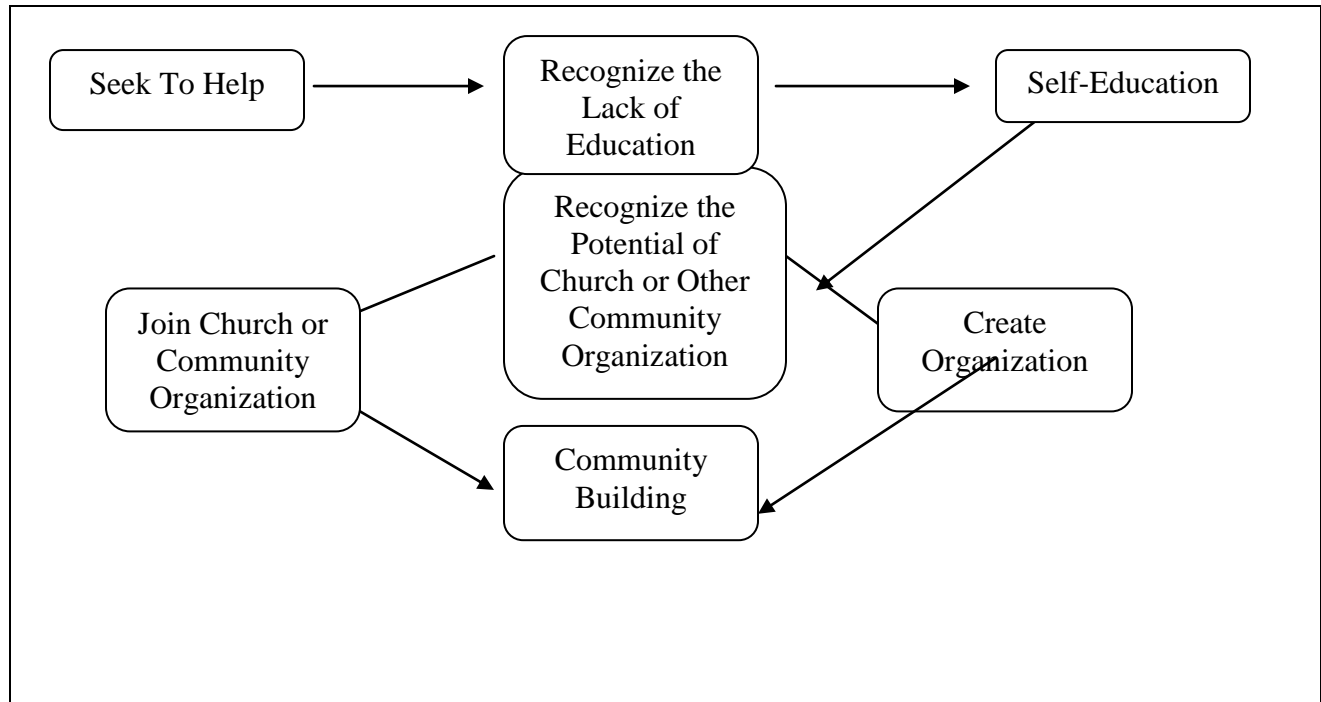
As the mission continued to develop, and depending on the needs of the community, the goals and resources provided by the mission changed: “You see, the needs change from time to time... Since we are an emergency services program, I like to keep abreast of what the needs are” (Waddles, 1991, p. 76). This organization provided clothes, shoes, wedding gowns, caskets for funerals, and the necessities that are not covered in governmental programs. Government programs, are limiting; she argues that the resources that she provides are different in that her goal was to help people ‘come up out of the ghetto’; this is only possible if an organization is flexible in attempting to meet the needs of people.

### **The Path to Community Involvement**

Three major themes evolved in the analysis of each oral narrative. The first theme, evident in the lives of these two women, is that both lacked formal education. Each of these women educated herself in order to be of service to the larger community. This self-education came, in some form, through their study of the Bible. The study of the Bible is connected to the second theme, their belief that the Bible should be used as tool to meet the everyday needs of the people; this is referred to as the ‘social gospel.’ They believed that religion should be used to better the community, and they had a strong desire to use Biblical ideas to serve their community. The final theme is connected to their community participation. Each of these women serves her community; they either create organizations or join pre-existing community organizations. It is in their involvement in these organizations where much of the community building occurs.

There is a process that both women used in order to serve the community. This is summarized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Community Building Model**



According to this model, there is a clear path to which both of the women in this project subscribe. Both had a desire to help the community, they recognize that a lack of formal education might hinder their ability to assist, so they educate themselves. In order to ensure that their efforts reach the masses of people, they recognize the power that religion and other community organizations held in their communities, and they participate in those that they believed are consistent with their goals. Either they join or create community organizations/churches that forward their beliefs, in the instance where they joined the church they moved up in the hierarchy in order to reach the largest number of people. This process of community building is completed in the activities of each organization. Conceptualized in the next section is an exploration of how this process is manifested in the context of each woman's experience. This process for both women begins with the acknowledgement that they lacked formal education.

### **Lack of Formal Education**

Explored here is each narrator's limited experience with the formal educational system; each was forced to leave school due to financial duress. Both are expected to contribute to the family's economic well-being by obtaining jobs outside the household. Waddles gains additional family responsibilities when her father dies. While living, her father had been a barber who had all 'white trade' (he only serviced white men). For this reason the family lives well, without additional income from the mother, and all the children are able to attend school. Upon her father's death, as the oldest child, Waddles becomes responsible for caring for the ailing mother and her younger siblings. At the age of twelve she assumes the role of the sole breadwinner at home.



I'm sure that had he lived, my life possibly would have been different because I was an A student. I was interested in school, I had no real need to think about quitting. I wasn't in the category of being grown, so it just changed because when he passed (her father), and at twelve years old, I was a maid, it was fine, and I'd leave and come home. But the minute I got out of being a maid and went to a factory at thirteen that changed the whole scene (Waddles, 1991, p. 91).

Audley Moore's experience echoes Charleszetta Waddles; she went to school through the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and later dropped out to care for siblings. "When papa died, taking care of my little sisters and everything. I found myself missing school, or washing their clothes and ironing them, getting them ready for school and so on, so I found myself going to school late and finally I just dropped out. I dropped out in fourth grade" (Waddles, 1991, p. 117). Although each lacks formal education, each pursues knowledge fiercely and became educated through self-study. Waddles discusses becoming informed about services that are available in the community; this desire arose out of her commitment to the community. In discussing Black participation in the census she states: "you know, I went to learn so that I could encourage my folk to learn, so that we can help whomever we can. But I believe that somehow if we can just only get it across to people, not to overthrow anybody, but to be an asset, to anybody" (Waddles, 1991, p. 97). This effort to gain knowledge as a form of empowerment is consistent with the self-educational work of Moore. She spends considerable time in the Communist party as an organizer. She suggests that she was made to feel as if she wasn't able to contribute because of her lack of formal education. This experience prompts her to begin considerable study. "It was very, very hard, when you're searching and you can't explain yourself, you don't have the development enough, the educational background" (Moore, 1991, 137-138). Her studies lead her to study the Bible; she and her sisters critically analyze the Bible and its implications for Blacks. Moore, in discussing her examination of the Bible, states:

We three sisters, my dear, just had to begin. Sit up night and day, night and day, searching that Bible—not reading, searching—studying it to see where we were in that Bible. We had to examine God, Jesus with all them whites on his board of directors at that Last Supper! In a Black man's territory (Moore, 1991, p. 137).

This work requires great critical thinking and research skills, yet Moore doubts her educational experiences to the extent that she begins searching out Black intellectuals to seek knowledge on the condition of Blacks in America. "I talked to DuBois, I talked to Walter White, I talked to Mrs. Bethune, I talked to oh, let's see, everybody that had education. I thought people who had education should know, so if they told me somebody had some learning, I'd go to them, you know" (Moore, 1991, p. 138). Her experience with the Black intelligencia of this time was less than what she desired. This could be attributed to her low regard for her educational experiences; "I was always conscious, over conscious of my lack of learning, that I didn't belong with those people who had learning" (Moore, 1991, p. 139).

Both Charleszetta Waddles and Audley Moore illustrate desires to serve the people in their communities. However, neither of these women had formal education beyond the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. This lack of formal education would not be a barrier to which they would succumb, they understood the value of education and each began a process of self-education. The contributions

of these women dispels the notion that formal education is required in order to effectively serve the community. This educational process is supplemented by their recognition of the power of religion and the significance of the social gospel for meeting the needs of the people.

### **The Social Gospel**

Audley Moore and Charleszetta Waddles actively participate in community organizations; through their participation in these organizations, their commitment to the Black community is made evident. Both of these women are involved in either previously existing organizations or in organizations that they created themselves. The one organization that both are involved in is the Black church. Interestingly, both have a common expectation that the Black church has a special role in serving the Black community. Charleszetta Waddles suggests that the church's responsibility is to motivate and empower people.

I think the inner-city church should be the motivator. They have control of more people than any other person, people who listen to them. And I think that somehow they need to understand that history is not enough to motivate people to reach out. I think they should take that Scripture and teach it as I've learned it. That as a man is thinking means as a person's thinking. Thou shalt decree a thing and it shall be established, it means just that. Not just words ever written, but words that can empower (Waddles, 1991, p. 83).

She further argues that the church in the Black community is stuck on ritual and not doing enough to help with 'solutions to problems in this world today.' She states, "I believe if you are establishing a religious outlet, a direction for people in the urban areas, then you should mold your activities that they might encompass not only the spiritual but the physical needs of people" (Waddles, 1991, p. 72). This social gospel informs the work of her mission and shapes the organization of the mission in a number of ways. Primarily, her vision of the role of the Black church proves critical in the development of the goal of the mission. She suggests that the vision for developing the mission is connected to the biblical passage Matthew 25: 31-46: "'When I was hungry, you fed me; when I was naked you clothed me,' et cetera, and used that as our, should I say, goal to do some of the things that we felt was needed in our community" (Waddles, 1991, p. 74). The very basis of organization for the mission is biblical, but it highlights the social service focus of the gospel. This she believes is possible in that "God is still giving man the freedom of creativity to create what is needed for solutions to problems in this world today" (Waddles, 1991, p. 72).

Audley Moore uses religion differently, but all in an effort to serve the community. Religion is a vehicle she uses to reach people in order to meet their needs. She makes this point clear when she discusses her connection to Christianity. She has problems with the way that religion is practiced, but she realizes that it could be used to serve her purposes:

I no longer had any faith in Christianity. Long ago, long ago I put that down, but I had to become all those things in order to go to the prisons, go to the death house, you see, and when you meet with the people who were scheduled to die and everything, they allow you to go. You're a bishop you can go; the police brutalized somebody, you can go in the hospital that night, you're a bishop, you

understand? You don't have to wait till visiting day tomorrow or the next day. So it's an advantage. So that was why I got it, no other reason (Moore, 1991, p. 145).

She explains her lack of connection to Christianity, as a faith, being connected to the actions of the Pope. She notes "when the Pope blessed the ammunition to kill the Ethiopians, the three of us, three sisters, came out of the Catholic church" (Moore, 1991, p. 143). Other criticisms are similar to those of Waddles; Moore argues that Christians are not doing enough to meet the needs of people; she suggests "if you had Christianity, you'd be living together, working together, taking all the little urchins off the street" (Moore, 1991, p. 143). In addition to the actions of the Pope, the inability of the church to accept social responsibility for the poor troubles her.

Both Waddles and Moore create churches and missions or joined existing churches all in an effort to reach the community. Both identify the church as a vehicle that could reach the masses, yet they also recognize that there needs to be a social gospel that came through as the message that the church relays to its constituents. However, churches are not the only vehicle used by Moore and Waddles to communicate their message. Both women are active in other community organizations, either those they create or join, which are designed to serve those whose needs had not been met.

### **Community Organizing**

These narrators are part of various organizations because they believe that they could make a difference in their communities. This sentiment is best expressed by Audley Moore. When questioned about her membership in various community organizations, she replies:

Listen, in the struggle, I had to affiliate with everything and everybody, everything my people belonged to. When the Elks or the Masons, when they split, I had to belong to both sides of the split, 'cause I refused to be split. I have one objective with 'em for freedom, and I joined everything my people... sometimes I suffered through their meetings, all the time I suffered through, I'd go to the conventions, they're not dealing with nothing basic, they're not...and honey, I just suffered through that. But I got to be there with them. I got to be. So I joined everything. Mama belongs to everything you all had; everything you have, I belong to it (Moore, 1991, p. 145).

Moore exemplifies the commitment that both felt toward the Black community. Their membership in these organizations extends beyond attending meetings and paying dues; but it is an effort to get closer to the people in the Black community. Moore is committed to the liberation of Black people and, in an effort to facilitate this, she felt it necessary to affiliate with "everything and everybody."

Moore is particularly interested in organizing Black people. Wherever she moves, she attempts to bring Black people together to discuss their common concerns. When she moves to Harlem in 1922 and she hears about the "Bronx Slave Markets," where Black women go to be hired as day workers; she is appalled at that condition. She is so upset with the condition that she became committed to organizing Blacks in Harlem to address the inequalities she saw. She

remembers “calling my people together. I didn’t have a program, I just knew we ought to be united and what did I say? For us to say yes at once or no together” (Moore, 1991, p. 127).

Examining the narrative of Audley Moore, it becomes evident that she joins or assists in creating a significant number of organizations, ranging from the Communist party in the 1930s to the Universal Association of Ethiopian Women, of which she is the founder and president. What is clear is that once she discovered that an organization is not moving in the direction that she believes led to the liberation of Black people, she quit. Here she discusses her resignation from the Communist Party.

In 1930 I joined the Communist Party and it gave me an in-depth understanding of capitalism, which I had not known that I was under, a capitalist system. It taught me the science of society, an analysis of the imperialism and of socialism, and for that I’m grateful. Although in 1950 I resigned from the communist party because I realized it was no longer moving in our best interests, and there were certain forces within the communist party that was racist, definitely racist, racist to the core (Moore, 1991, p. 123–124).

Although she acknowledges that she expanded her knowledge of capitalism as a result of her involvement in the Communist party, she recognizes the changing direction and that it was not furthering her goals. She is adept at recognizing the changes in society and when these changes warranted changes in her methodology.

Moore organizes around assisting those who were marginalized and those who did not gain the attention of the larger organizations. She discusses her reasons for organizing the Harriet Tubman Association. This group is created after she heard that there are some African students working on their doctorates who had died of malnutrition, “so I opened up and had a big soup kitchen in the street for African students after school, to come, and I’d put on a pot of stew, or beans, every day, and they’d come” (Moore, 1991, p. 137). Here her service involves assisting those marginalized populations with a basic necessity. Again she shows her concern for those populations who had not drawn the attention of those larger organizations.

Charleszetta Waddles acknowledges that she has been approached about joining a number of organizations, but she decided against participating, for fear that it would take her away from her focus. She understands the importance of these organizations; however, she believes that she needs to be outside these organizations.

And I’ve come to realize that there must be somebody outside that political arena that’s doing something. Because within that political structure, there may be human programs, but because they magnify one party or whatever, or to boost the particular political group, whatever, but the spirit of what it’s all about, it’s not really there. You know, and people are just numbers, and dollars, and cents. And I found out enough about it to know that I’d better stay out here, and hopefully I can encourage somebody else to be out here, outside of that particular thing (Moore, 1991, p. 97).

She makes an interesting comparison between the work that she does in the community and the work of governmental organizations. She clearly illustrates how the vision of the Perpetual Mission complements the role of government in providing for its citizens. When asked about the

efficacy of governmental programs in meeting the needs of people she posited, “If you just want to keep them alive, so to speak, well this is fine. But if you want people to come up out of the ghetto, if you want people to reach out and be somebody, then there is more that has to be done” (Waddles, 1991, p. 80). She argues that what makes her mission different is the flexibility; “our purpose is to have the kind of place that you can come to under any conditions. We are more like the liaison, the mouthpiece for people who don’t know” (Waddles, 1991, p. 78). This allows for the creation of a thirty-five cent restaurant and with the institution of food stamps, through social services, to discontinue this service.

## **Conclusions**

Waddles and Moore are not content with merely creating culture and providing for families and communities. These women realize that the welfare of the Black family and the Black community is profoundly affected by American political, economic, and social institutions. As a result of the interdependency of these social institutions, these women not only create organizations within their own communities, they also protest inequalities as maintained within existing social institutions. A number of mechanisms are employed by both Moore and Waddles in their public activism, ranging from the private, individual actions within their homes to the more organized group behavior within churches; this is consistent with Collins (2000) discussion of oppression and activism; “Black women use a variety of strategies to undermine oppressive institutions. These strategies occur in three primary settings: political and economic institutions, Black extended families, and the African-American community as family” (p. 146).

Both are actively involved in community building activities, either they create organizations or they join pre-existing organizations. The analysis of the narratives of each of these women indicate that there is a process (See Figure 1) in which each woman participated; which is connected to their lived experiences. Although both Audley Moore and Charleszetta Waddles lack a formal education, this did not hinder their efforts at community building. Both women pursue knowledge, as they recognize that this is necessary to help the Black community. It was this pursuit of knowledge that led to their desire to share what they have learned with others in the Black community. Audley Moore is so committed to the knowledge gained that she traveled, at great personal expense, across the country to share the information she learned. Both Audley Moore and Charleszetta Waddles use their knowledge of the Bible to help the community, in that they both embrace a “social gospel” to reach the masses. This social gospel involves meeting with people to address their social and physical needs. The creation of social organizations in the community serves as social networks for those within the Black community. They use these organizations to improve the communities where they live.

The work of these women constitutes activism in the face of oppression as indicated by Collins (2000). Both Waddles and Moore actively develop oppositional identities in an effort to undermine oppressive institutions. This is evident in Moore’s work in the prisons as a bishop. Although she views both of these institutions, the church and the prison system, as oppressive she is able to manipulate each for the benefit of her community. Waddles recognizes the limitations of government social services and is able to supplement, through her mission, the resources available to people in her community.

The women discussed here are examples of women who were involved in various civil rights activities; they experienced and witnessed inequities on the basis of race, class, and gender

and fought back through organizing. They committed themselves to the betterment of their community at the expense of their personal lives. The examination of the lives of these women sheds light on the work of poor Black women. It also illustrates that there should be a greater commitment to uncovering the stories of others like Moore and Waddles, who were able to take very little and make a way out of no way.

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