



UN Testimony by Joanne N. Smith, Founder,
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Human Rights Council
Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent
Thirtieth session
23–27 May 2022
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"We are the change that we seek" - The Role of Agency and Activism as a Catalyst for Children and Youth of African Descent.

Testimony by Joanne N. Smith,
Founder, Girls for Gender Equity

INTRO

- Good afternoon, thank you for having me and for focusing our attention on the role of agency and activism as a catalyst for children and youth of African descent.
- My name is Joanne N. Smith my pronouns are s/her. I am a Black lesbian, a first-generation Haitian, and the President of Girls for Gender Equity, an organization I started 20 years ago at the age of 26.

I founded Girls for Gender Equity to interrupt the erasure and silencing of Black girls joy, abundant potential and righteous resistance -

My assignment was to unapologetically name and center Black girls', femmes, and gender-nonconforming youths' wholeness and advocate for the cultural and political shifts required to ensure that they take up space, feel safe, and successfully live up to their full potential with minimal harm and barriers.

Through a Black feminist lens, Girls for Gender Equity builds the political power of young people and meets them where they are in their youth development stage. We believe we can and must center the needs of Black girls and gender-expansive youth in policymaking in order to build a truly equitable future. We must also be able to meet them in their youth development stage because too often Black youth are adultified and treated as being more mature than they actually are by a reasonable social standard of development.



- We witnessed this in three cases in early 2021 where police officers assaulted Black girls, pepper-spraying a 9-year-old in Rochester, NY, body slamming a 15-year-old in Osceola County, FL, and tasing a 16-year-old in central Florida. DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC THAT HAS TAKEN THE LIVES OF OVER 1M People to date
- That adultification is what allows schools to discipline Black girls 10 times more than their peers (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda (2015)), suspend Black girls 6 times more than their peers (""), and arrest Black girls 4 times more than their peers. (Morris, Epstein, & Yusu 2017).
- African-American girls constitute 14 percent of the general population nationally, but 33.2 percent of girls detained and committed.¹

In America, Black women and girls have a long history of resisting oppression and being active agents in undoing the systems that serve to keep us in a constant state of disenfranchisement

- Although women gained the right to vote in 1920, Jim crow laws severely curtailed Black women's access to the polls.
- We were systemically denied the right to vote, but resisted these efforts and Black women organized their own suffragist movements, after being denied full participation in white Women's suffrage spaces. And we continue to lead the voting rights movement today.
- Black women were central to the creation and sustainability of the 20th Century Civil Rights movement. While figureheads like MLK and Malcolm X, are given a wealthy share of credit for the mobilization, strategizing, and overall success of this historic fight for freedom, it would have NOT have been the movement that it was without the organizing and grassroots activism of girls and women like 15-year-old Claudette Colvin, Septima Clark, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hammer and Ella Baker.

Were it not for the Children's March on May 2, 1963, where thousands of students skipped classes and gathered at Sixth Street Baptist Church to march to downtown Birmingham, Alabama to protest segregation in the Jim Crow South. Hundreds were arrested and carried off to jail in paddy wagons and school buses. Images of children being blasted by high-pressure fire hoses, being clubbed by police

¹ Human Rights Project for Girls, *The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls' Story*, available at https://forwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/documents_Sexual-Abuse-to-Prison-Pipeline-The-Girls-Story-2015.pdf.



officers, and being attacked by police dogs appeared on television and in newspapers and triggered outrage throughout the world. Despite the violence, children continued to march and protest in an organizing action now known as the Children’s Crusade.

The civil rights act was also passed after acts of white supremacist terrorist bombing of the Black 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama on Sunday, September 15, 1963, claiming the lives of four little girls, Carole Robertson (14), Addie Mae Collins (14), Denise McNair (11), Cynthia Wesley (14) and two Black little boys in the aftermath. May they rest in peace.

Children have paid the highest price for human rights and justice throughout history and it hasn’t stopped today.

We say the names of Aiyana Stanley Jones(7) Atatiana Jefferson (28), Rekia Boyd (22) Breonna Taylor (26) Renisha McBride (19), Ma’Khia Bryant (16) all who contribute to the rallying cry #SayHerName so that the public consciousness doesn’t forget that Black girls and women are systemically murdered at disproportionate rates too and deserve to be fought for.

It’s not lost on me that today marks the two year anniversary of the Murder of George Floyd, may he rest in peace.

It is also the two year anniversary for the heroism of Darnella Frazier, the 17-year-old who filmed Floyd's restraint and murder on her cell phone then loaded it to social media for the world to witness another Black lynching.

She is another Black girl activist who’s teenage years were robbed of innocence because of state sanctioned violence - Her nor her 7 year old cousins innocence or fragility is a consideration when it comes to taking Black life.

She will forever endure the internal and public trauma of witnessing a murder by police, testifying for the police conviction and fearing retaliation amongst everything else that she has to overcome at her youth development stage.

And even as Black girls show up for community justice they endure intracommunity violence while negotiating the carceral violence.

- Among students, 11% of Black girls in a national high school sample reported having been raped. ²

² *Id.*



- 82% of Black transgender and gender-expansive youth have been verbally insulted because of their identity, 41% of transgender and gender-expansive youth have been physically threatened because of their identity.³
- We are an intergenerational organization because we know that this work requires all of us. The physical, psychological, social, and economic development of girls and women, particularly Black girls and gender-expansive youth, is critical and must be done with the past, present, and future in mind. As we build the future, we draw lessons from our ancestors while learning from the innate wisdom of our young people.

AT GGE WE BELIEVE

- We have to dream and work towards a future where Black girls and gender expansive young people are truly valued and have all they need to succeed and thrive.
- We believe Black girls and gender expansive youth need and deserve to live in a world that values them.
- We believe reshaping culture and policy to invest in and support Black girls and gender-expansive youth is the moral and economic imperative of our time.
- We know that by affirming and investing in the leadership of communities who have long been ignored and sidelined by public policy, we as a nation can bring to life our values around opportunity, dignity, and justice for all.
- Agency is the key to equity. Community agency and agency by the people closest to the issues facing our world can turn into bottom-up policymaking, which is the only way for us to transform the lives of all disenfranchised people in the world.

WE ARE NOT THERE YET BUT WE FIGHT TO GET THERE

³ Human Rights Campaign, *2019 Black & African American LGBTQ Youth Report*, available at https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/files/assets/resources/HRC_2019_Black_and_African_American_LGBTQ_Youth_Report-FINAL-web.pdf?mtime=20200713134037&focal=none.



Throughout the life span of GGE, young people ages 11-24 have protested against sexual violence, at Black lives matter rallies, at local policy hearings, and they've provided over one hundred live and virtual testimonies for the City, State, and Federal government

PAR. In 2007 Black girls and girls of color at GGE co-led participatory action research to address the way that they are impacted by sexual harassment and in the work place

The work led to a documentary from the lens of Black girls being and how community views catcalling that won best Youth Documentary at the Roxbury Film festival, a coalition for gender equity in schools to shift the culture around sexual harassment and implement title IX coordinators, a book Hey, Shorty!: A Guide to Combating Sexual Harassment and Violence in Schools and on the Streets that shares our process and offers tools to other young people leading the charge to end sexual violence.

It even led to the Black girls from GGE being featured in the Anita Hill documentary as they led workshops for other youth in schools and shared their experiences of sexual harassment and violence and ways to combat it.

PushOut. In an effort to address zero tolerance policies that often caused girls who fought back against sexual harassment to be punished, Black girls began sharing their stories around School Pushout and the racial bias that they experience. The School Girls Deserve is a report and the result of a participatory action research (PAR) process with over 100 New York City public school students. The policy strategies articulated in the report are the framework from which we build all of our policy advocacy at GGE:

- Invest in Holistic Curriculum and Pedagogy;
- Decriminalize Learning Environments;
- Create Safe and Supportive Learning Environments; and
- Create Resourced and Dignified Schools.

In 2016 we partnered with Black girls across the country at the Black Girl Movement conference, to advance issues and legislation important to the welfare of girls of African descent. We created the Black Girls Bill of Rights, which asserts a vision of policy and cultural change that will ensure future generations of Black girls and gender expansive youth will flourish in the classroom, across the media, and in the halls of power.

We were featured in the Film Pushout by Scholar Dr. Monique Morris to end the Criminalization of Black Girls in School



- Listening to Black girls, We created The National Agenda For Black Girls Central to our Agenda is the Black Girls to name and center Black girls and advocate for the cultural and policy shifts required to ensure their success. The National Agenda for Black Girls believes we can and must center the needs of Black girls and gender-expansive youth in our national policies for a truly equitable future.
- We have co-designed policy with Black and gender-expansive youth and created opportunities for them to be at local, state, and national policy-making tables. For the White House Council on Women and Girls during the Obama administration and now for the Council for Gender Equity during the current Biden administration.
- Engaging in 5 WH listening sessions
 - Leading and moderating listening session centering Black Girls
 - Themes: Black girls + gender expansive youth, Systems Impacted Youth, Young Parents, Latinx Girls and Youth, Trans and LGBTQ youth, Muslim, Arab, Middle Eastern Girls and Youth
- Day of the Girl Panel Participation with the UN
- Partnership & Youth Organizing Training with Center for Law & Social Policy (CLASP) creating “A New Deal for Youth” campaign
- Youth-led Community Empowerment (Communities for Police Reform) “Redefining Safety” Town Hall

Act: On March 24th, 2021, GGE’s first-ever piece of legislation passed in the New York State Assembly. This is a historic moment for Black cisgender and transgender girls, non-binary, and gender-expansive young people of color across the state of New York.

Over the course of 100 years, girls of color in New York have been punished, imprisoned, and put on probation for “incorrigibility,” a catch-all term describing the ways young people resist race and gender “norms,” and advocate for themselves and their own survival. New York State Assembly bill A5873, “[The Incorrigible Bill](#),” intends to end the labeling of young people as “incorrigible” in Family Court. This is a term that functions to single out girls of color for existing beyond expectations of stereotypical “feminine” behavior and label youth as “uncorrectable” or “unreformable.”



- Through our different programs, we are making space for young people to self-actualize and cultivate their voices. At the core of all the various programs we run, we want the young people who walk through the GGE doors to come away understanding that their experiences and ideas matter. And not only do they matter, it's how they can change the world.
- We believe that only by making Black girls and their needs a national priority will we see progress on the issues that affect them the most: education, incarceration and gender-based violence.
- We are fighting for Black girls and gender expansive youth so that they will become successful and thriving adults who are able to live in flourishing, vibrant communities that welcome and celebrate their lives and contributions.
- As an intergenerational organization, the staff at GGE sit at a dozen campaigns tables including Movement for Black Lives M4BL Advancing Patriarchal Violence table that invited us here today.
- Youth write opeds, host podcasts, teach ins, townhalls, research and reports.

5 LESSONS FROM OUR WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE THAT HAVE HELPED US TO BE SUCCESSFUL INTERGENERATIONAL ADVOCATES OF CHANGE

1. Young people are experts in their experiences.
2. Young people deserve to be compensated for their labor, they were born into this injustice.
3. Our job as adults is to help create and support the conditions for youth to succeed with their campaigns.
4. Every single social justice movement has been led by young people.
5. When Black girls and gender-expansive youth are centered in organizing campaigns, it makes for better outcomes that support all communities at the margins.

And in the words of comrade and scholar Brittney Cooper,

“Racial justice is incomplete if it does not include, center and foreground the experiences of cis and trans women and girls of color.”



CONCLUSION

For far too long, Black girls and gender-expansive youth have been sidelined, scapegoated, and abused. The United States does not value Black girls and gender-expansive youth. We see this today in how Black girls are treated by in the media, schools, police, health providers, employers, philanthropy, and more. Working towards their and our collective liberation is exhausting - especially when acts of violence in Buffalo, shootings in places of worship and schools that are supposed to be safe havens for children.

- The work of the young people at GGE has taught me so much over the years. They are a huge reason so many of us are still here fighting for Black liberation in a world that has shown us that capitalism and domination are what wins. The youth lend us hope because of their radical imaginations, energy, and strategy. They also show us that joy within the movement is essential that connection to the community is what will sustain us and that love is at the core of our demand for justice, a love for our community and a love for ourselves. They are leaders of tomorrow and leaders of today.

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Action:

Black Girls need the civil rights protections that allow them to thrive and succeed through public education without the constraints of racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia.

Based on the United States Bill of Rights, we've created the Black Girls Declaration of Freedom and Humanity. It declares the rights and privileges that Black girls and women deserve in order to thrive in our contemporary society. Created in partnership with Black girls across the country, to advance issues and legislation important to the welfare of girls of African descent.

Every Black girl deserves:

- The right to education and information about African and Black history.
- The right to express our Blackness however we define it without judgment.
- The right to be safe and have our physical, emotional, and mental health honored, protected, and nurtured.
- The right to real sex education, contraception, tampons, and pads.
- The right to agency and control over our own bodies in every space.
- The right to justice and reparations in response to harm and sexual assault when police officers murder people of color.
- The right to play and have fun.
- The right to community, sisterhood, and support from other girls.
- The right to BE—exactly who we are, free from stereotypes and insecurity, our full, unique selves.



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The adoption of the Black Girls Bill of Rights (Black Girls Declaration of Freedom and Humanity) supports a cultural and narrative shift that is essential to the safety, health, and prosperity of Black people in America. Black girls become Black women and Black women are the heart of the progressive electorate. Government must invest resources, policies, practices, strategies, and leadership that no longer ignores the issues faced by Black girls and young women.

As a co-founder of the Black girl freedom fund I'll name that *"Even in the face of the insurmountable odds Black girls and young women face in America, we are making tremendous strides and contributions in this country. Imagine what 2030 can look like if we invest \$1 billion in Black girls and young women over the next 10 years."*⁴ I'm Uplift this call to action from the Black Girl Freedom Fund.

Visit Girls for Gender Equity at GGENYC.org - Look into local grassroots organization working towards Black liberation and carry with you a lens of inclusivity as you pass policies, make declarations and commit dollars. Ask, how will this support the liberation of Black youth and Black girls and gender expansive young people in particular.

⁴ Black Girl Freedom Fund - <https://1billion4blackgirls.org>