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Nannie Helen Burroughs | Suffrage for Black Women, 1915

Nannie Helen Burroughs, a founder of the National Association of Colored Women, spoke out for black women's right to vote at a time when many white women's suffrage groups excluded African Americans. For Burroughs and other black suffragists, the right to vote was not just a civic duty but essential for eliminating racial discrimination and subservience. In the following excerpt that appeared in the *Crisis*, the magazine of the NAACP, Burroughs presents the case for suffrage for black women.

Explore

Why does Burroughs claim it is more important for black women than for black men to obtain and exercise the right to vote?

How does Burroughs characterize the role of black women in reform movements?

What does Burroughs mean when she says that the ballot is black women's "weapon of moral defense"?

When the ballot is put into the hands of the American woman the world is going to get a correct estimate of the Negro woman. It will find her a tower of strength of which poets have never sung, orators have never spoken, and scholars have never written.

Because the black man does not know the value of the ballot, and has bartered and sold his most valuable possession, it is no evidence that the Negro woman will do the same. The Negro woman, therefore, needs the ballot to get back, by the wise use of it, what the Negro man has lost by the misuse of it. She needs it to ransom her race. A fact worthy of note is that in every reform in which the Negro woman has taken part, during the past fifty years, she has been as aggressive, progressive, and dependable as those who inspired the reform or led it. The world has yet to learn that the Negro woman is quite superior in bearing moral responsibility. A comparison with the men of her race, in moral issues, is odious. She carries the burdens of the Church, and of the school and bears a great deal more than her economic share at home.

Another striking fact is that the Negro woman carries the moral destiny of two races in her hand. Had she not been the woman of unusual moral stamina that she is, the black race would have been made a great deal whiter, and the white race a great deal blacker during the past fifty years. She has been left a prey for the men of every race, but in spite of this, she has held the enemies of Negro female chastity at bay. The Negro woman is the white woman's as well as the white race's most needed ally in preserving an unmixed race.

The ballot, wisely used, will bring to her the respect and protection that she needs. It is her weapon of moral defense. Under present conditions, when she appears in court in defense of her virtue, she is looked upon with amused contempt. She needs the ballot to reckon with men who place no value upon her virtue, and to [mold] healthy public sentiment in favor of her own protection.

Source: Nannie Helen Burroughs, "Black Women and Reform," *The Crisis*, August 1915, 187.

Put It in Context

How do Burroughs's arguments differ from those of white suffragists?