

USA: Turning the Women's March Into a Mass Movement Was Never Going to Be Simple

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The reason goes to the heart of inclusive, democratic movement building.

For the last two years, come the middle of January, between 3 and 4 million people have massed in the streets of the United States in an outpouring of raw anger and disgust with the Trump administration. They've marched in Chicago and Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Dallas, New York and Charlotte, and hundreds of cities in between, creating a shared feeling that, together, it is possible to beat back the Trump threat.

Still, from its earliest, explosive expression, it's been unclear what would become of the Women's March. While the euphoria of resisting Trump raised the expectations of the millions who participated—for the first time in years, it seemed that a new women's movement was possible—large questions loomed. The largest of these: How to transform the massive mobilizations of 2017 and 2018 into a social movement that could connect local activists to one another while melding them into national networks that could respond to the attacks flowing from the Trump White House? And how also to move beyond declarations of resistance to map a shared path forward—and to do so in a way that is both inclusive and democratic?

As the third anniversary of the Women's March approaches, the political tensions that underlie these considerations have boiled over and split the movement. A stark example of the acrimony pervading the Women's March is that there will be two women's marches in New York City this year—and two national networks coordinating these and other marches across the country. One march is being organized by Women's March Inc., the national organization that has spearheaded the marches in DC and served as the umbrella for the larger movement; the other is being coordinated by the Women's March Alliance, the group that planned the New York iterations of the march in 2017 and 2018; this group is working in tandem with March On, which is the second national network coordinating marches.

If all this seems confusing, it is—as are the reasons for the rift, which seem to splinter and sprawl depending on what you have read and when you have done your reading. But what is clear is that, from the very beginning, the march was riven by conflict, particularly around the question of inclusion.

Recall the moment: The country had just been rattled by an election in which 53 percent of white women voters had cast their vote for Trump; at the same time, the initial organizing of the march largely excluded women of color. It was a discouraging start, and in response, black and brown women from around the country insisted that their participation was contingent on the meaningful representation—and involvement—of racially and ethnically oppressed women. With the arrival of a new set of co-chairs—Linda Sarsour, Tamika Mallory, Carmen Perez, and Bob Bland—the march

began to move in this direction and has continued to do so: The New York offshoot of this year's march has announced that it is "highlight[ing] the leadership of black women, immigrant women and women of color as part of the national #WomensWave." But the challenge of putting the focus on the women most targeted by Trump remains.

Meanwhile, other fractures have opened up, particularly, as *The New York Times* reported last year, around questions of "[priorities and tactics](#)." Among the differences of priorities and tactics: The Women's March, according to the *Times*, had committed itself to wide-ranging social-justice activism, while the women of March On wanted to focus on winning elections, particularly in red states.

Still, most of the media attention concerning the cracks in the Women's March have focused on accusations of anti-Semitism among some of the leadership. In late December of 2018, *The New York Times* published an article with the headline "Women's March Roiled by Accusations of Anti-Semitism." In that article, Vanessa Wruble, one of the original organizers of the 2017 Women's March on Washington and the founder of the splinter national organization March On, [accused her co-organizers](#), Tamika Mallory and Carmen Perez, of marginalizing the concerns of Jewish women; others in the article accused Mallory and Perez of making anti-Semitic statements.

Mallory and Perez have both denied making anti-Semitic statements; both have repeatedly condemned anti-Semitism. But the article further inflamed outrage that had erupted earlier in the year when Mallory attended a public event in February 2018, where Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan made anti-Semitic and homophobic comments, and after which she praised him on Twitter. For critics, these stories have become definitive proof of anti-Semitism as an animating feature of the four most prominent leaders of the Women's March.

Accusations of anti-Semitism are always serious, especially in our current political climate where anti-Semitic innuendo—from right-wing dog whistles about "globalists" to their obsession with billionaire philanthropist George Soros—finds an audience in the nation's highest office. This toxic coding has lured the neo-Nazis, white nationalists, and other white supremacists from the shadows and unleashed waves of physical attacks against Jews and their places of worship. The most savage of these attacks was the heinous massacre of Jews in worship at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, last fall.

At the same time, and particularly in the case of Mallory's embrace of Farrakhan, what seems simple and straightforward can, in fact, be enormously tangled and complex—and far more complicated than a simple shared belief in his ideas. For decades the Nation of Islam (NOI) has developed a reputation in black communities as a chastened alternative for some to the crime and chaos that is produced by a shortage of resources and historic lack of investment. Mallory has said that her relationship to the NOI began after the father of her child was killed by senseless gun violence. This would make Mallory like tens of thousands of other African Americans who are attached to the NOI because of the organization's history of providing empathic support to black people who are otherwise rendered invisible or disposable. In working-class and poor black neighborhoods across the United States, the *Final Call* newspaper, the bow ties, and bean pies of the NOI are symbols of racial solidarity.

Farrakhan's nauseating blend of anti-Semitism, homophobia, sexism, and transphobia are certainly reactionary and have no place on the left. But for many African Americans, the repeated demands to denounce Farrakhan personally and the continuing conflation of the NOI's work in black communities with the hate politics of Farrakhan, from many people who otherwise have no relationship to or interest in black people, are disingenuous, at best.

A stark example of this came in the days leading up to the Women's March when Mallory and Bland appeared on the talk show *The View*, where the two were grilled by Republican co-host Meghan McCain about anti-Semitism. Once again, Bland and Mallory denounced anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry, but McCain demanded a "condemnation" of Farrakhan. McCain, it should be said, is a self-described "hardcore conservative" who is against abortion and for "border security." She also claims that self-identifying Republicans should not be viewed as racist just because Trump is the leader of the Republican Party—a nuanced perspective she is unwilling to extend to Tamika Mallory when it comes to Farrakhan. The difference, of course, is that Trump, unlike Farrakhan, is actually president of the United States and has authored policies that have harmed immigrants, African Americans, women, and poor and working-class people across the country. It speaks to the troubled nature of the attacks on the leadership of the Women's March when the party of Trump gets to credibly weigh in.

So where does this leave us? And where do we—and the multiple women's marches—go from here?

As the day of the march approaches, there have been vital conversations and hopeful signs of renewed solidarity. While the Women's march co-chairs have continued to decry racism and bigotry, and continued to meet with Jewish women's organizations and amending the march's United Principles to include a formal opposition to anti-Semitism, a core of progressive Jewish activists have redoubled their commitment to the march. This is the hard work of coalition-building in action.

Indeed, if our objective is to build a multiracial women's movement that is truly representative, then there is much to be embraced in the model that the Women's March has painstakingly begun to build. While some critics argue that this model involves taking on too many issues, this betrays an old and stagnant view that helped to marginalize black and Latina women from feminism in an earlier age. Trump's attacks on immigrants and his cruel deportation policies have a disproportionate impact in the lives of immigrant and black women more generally. Police abuse and violence in black and brown communities are women's issues that cannot be placed on the back burner or treated as optional extras in the emergent women's movement. If we don't confront and include these abuses, we risk having a "women's march" that simply becomes an abstraction in the lives of poor and working-class women of color.

But even in focusing on issues perceived to have nothing to do with women—Palestine for example—there is a larger point to be made about coalition building and solidarity. Strategically, it begins with an understanding that in order to build the kind of massive opposition necessary to not only defeat Trump but the politics of *Trumpism*, activists must look to connect movements not only on the basis of intersecting interests but also in solidarity with one another. That is, even when a group is not directly affected, it should respond or be asked to respond anyway, because an injury to one is an injury to all. Or as activist Angela Davis said in a speech at the first Women's March in 2017, "Women's rights are human rights all over the planet and that is why we say freedom and justice for Palestine."

But this does not mean that there will not be different emphases or significant disagreements within a women's movement. It also doesn't mean that there would not, inevitably, be different politics leading to different strategic and tactical choices being made. This happens in every social movement. But the biggest challenge to this development is not whether you side with March On or the Women's March, Inc.; it is the lack or even absence of genuine, democratic debate and argument necessary to ultimately determine a direction for the movement. Those discussions must be intentionally organized in the spirit of marshaling the widest input from those who make of the ranks of this emergent and new women's movement. In the absence of those discussions, those with the

greatest concentration of resources are left to decide and speak for the movement itself.

And this is ultimately where, despite their significant differences, March On and the Women's March, Inc., ironically converge. There are significant tensions over strategy, but these are not as sharp as their proponents would suggest. March On likes to cast the Women's March, Inc., as wild activists, while describing its own objective as "marching to the polls." But the Women's March described their campaign in 2018 as "power to the polls," with their eye toward turnout for the midterm elections last November.

More important, both are organized as nonprofit organizations that rely on funding to pay staffs and organizers, thereby professionalizing their participation in much of the activism they are engaged in. It is a model that ultimately prioritizes the expertise and experience of its professional staff, executive director, and overseeing board over the public it typically only calls upon to attend its actions. What is not clear is how and where the people who attend the actions are able to then play an active role in shaping the politics, strategy and tactics of the movements they are called upon to populate but not direct.

This approach perceives the public as passive, awaiting marching orders, while the dynamism of movement building is left to a professional layer of staff and organizers. It also leaves top-heavy organizations susceptible to political attacks and often unprepared to ward them off. This may make for large scale, annual mobilizations, but this is insufficient for building a grassroots social movement aimed not at the low-hanging fruit of electoral change but the much greater challenge of social transformation.

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