IN THIS ISSUE:
Politics, Violence and Moving Forward

"Give light and people will find their way." Ella Baker
Redefining Violence

by Natalie A. Collier

There was a time, not long after Chris Brown was arrested for the physical assault of then-girlfriend Rihanna that physical altercations were referred to in popular culture as CB. “Don’t get CB’d!” Have you ever heard that someone hit him back? I wasn’t surprised to hear that my father had ever hit her. But I wasn’t surprised to think I expected to hear that my father had groomed my mother before hitting her. He hadn’t bludgeoned her with enough hateful words, completely broken her spirit with insults or taunted her one too many times that things would be different this time and she believed it. It doesn’t mean, however, their relationship and, therefore, our household didn’t have the hallmarks of a turbulent one.

I’ve often wondered what made my mother different than Rihanna, Tina Turner or other women who were hit by their partners. The only difference I can rationalize is that my father hadn’t groomed my mother before hitting her. He hadn’t bludgeoned her with enough hateful words, completely broken her spirit with insults or taunted her one too many times that things would be different this time and she believed it. It doesn’t mean, however, their relationship and, therefore, our household didn’t have the hallmarks of a turbulent one.

“Once,” she said. “We ended up fighting, and that never happened again.”

When I was a little girl, my parents argued a lot. They’d scream and shout, and I’d sometimes sit outside the door and cheer for my mom, as if it were a sporting match. In hindsight, it’s pretty sad. But at the time, I only knew I loved my mom, didn’t care much for my dad, and if they were fighting, I wanted her to win. Winning then, for me, meant she shouted the loudest. Decades later, after my parents had long stopped arguing, gotten divorced, and I was in college arguing, gotten divorced, and I was in college reminiscing on some of my growing up, I asked my mom if my dad ever hit her.

From my years as a journalist and even more since then, I’ve spent a lot of time listening to women’s stories—some told in confidence and others shared freely—about relationships. As I prepared to write this, I’ve thought about my own relationships, and I am convinced the definition of violence is pretty simple, though a battle no easier to win. A violent act demands your silence, subservience or sacrificing pieces of your self. Anyone with whom you interact that causes you to feel bad about who you are is attacking your very spirit. That is the very essence of violence.

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“Once,” she said. “We ended up fighting, and that never happened again.”

I didn’t know what to expect when I so boldly asked her that question. I don’t think I expected to hear that my father had ever hit her. But I wasn’t surprised to hear that my mom had hit him back.

From the Desk Of...

Besides those that are most often recognized (physical, sexual and verbal abuse), other types of violence include:

Psychological violence

Using threats and scare tactics to gain control of a situation or a person (e.g., not allowing access to your personal property, threatening harm to you or one’s self, withholding affection or companionship)

Emotional violence

Talking to or about someone in order that or until they feel worthless, less than (e.g., name-calling, humiliation, using the silent treatment, isolation)

Financial abuse

Stealing, misusing and/or controlling a person’s finances without their consent (e.g., forcing someone to work—or not work—outside the home, not allowing access to bank accounts and opening mail without permission are examples of this)

Spiritual violence

Using someone’s religion or spiritual practice to dominate or control them (e.g., belittling or taking jabs at a person’s spiritual beliefs in order to get him/her to do what another person wants them to)

Cultural violence

Harming someone physically or emotionally because of or for the sake of practices that are part of culture or tradition that legitimate violence, especially toward women (e.g., female circumcision, sex slavery)
The 2014 midterm elections have functionally ended President Barack Obama’s second-term congressional agenda, putting any significant legislative policy reforms on the back burner until 2017. This was not entirely unexpected and is not, historically speaking, unusual. Political scientists have long been aware of the “six-year itch,” the tendency of a president’s party to lose congressional seats during their second-term midterm election. This has been true for presidents of both parties, regardless of their popularity, and the state of the economy. Since Reconstruction, only one president has overcome the “six-year itch”: Bill Clinton in 1998.

However ordinary this phenomenon might have been, its effect on policy issues impacting women of color is likely to be profoundly negative. Comprehensive immigration reform is no longer a significant possibility. No legislation addressing pay disparities, expanding Medicaid or increasing the minimum wage across the board is likely to pass. Supreme Court vacancies are likely to be filled by judicial candidates who do not have a strong record on civil rights issues.

But this election, like all national elections, made history. Some 13 new women will join the 114th Congress, bringing the total number of women in Congress to 104—the highest number in U.S. history. Also significant was the victory of Tea Party Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC), who became the first black candidate to ever win a U.S. Senate election in the South, and Rep. Mia Love (R-UT), who became the first black woman to ever win election to Congress as a Republican. West Virginia state representative Saira Blair (R-Martinsburg) has also become the country’s youngest legislator, defeating a seasoned 66-year-old opponent in the party primary and going on to win the general election shortly after her 18th birthday. These are largely symbolic milestones that are unlikely to have a significant impact on the everyday lives of women of color, but they demonstrate the complex and rapidly changing dynamics of American political culture.

Voters in our own states of Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi also made history in some small but significant ways.

Alabama: Alabama’s Amendment 1 (2014), better known as the Alabama Foreign Laws Amendment, passed with 72 percent of the vote. The primary function of the amendment is to exempt Alabama from international human rights treaties (i.e., “to prohibit the application of foreign law in violation of rights guaranteed natural citizens by the United States and Alabama Constitutions, and the statutes, laws, and public policy thereof”) such as the controversial Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

For the first time in history, the Alabama Democratic Party did not field a candidate for U.S. Senate; incumbent Sen. Jeff Sessions (R) easily coasted to reelection. All incumbent U.S. House candidates who sought reelection in Alabama won their races by wide margins, as did Governor Robert Bentley (R), who was elected to a second term with 89 percent of the vote. Republicans gained seats in both chambers of the state legislature, increasing their majorities in the state House and Senate.

Georgia: Following the retirement of Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R), Tea Party candidate David Perdue (R) defeated Michelle Nunn (D), daughter of long-serving Georgia senator Sam Nunn, for the open seat. Another second-generation candidate, President Jimmy Carter’s son Jason Carter (D), unsuccessfully challenged incumbent Governor Nathan Deal (R). Republicans retained their majorities in both chambers of the state legislature.

Mississippi: After defeating Tea Party challenger Chris McDaniel (R) in one of the nation’s most closely-watched primaries, Sen. Thad Cochran (R) won an eighth term, defeating former U.S. House representative Travis Childers (D). In the days leading up to the primary, Childers came under fire for his affiliation with an anti-immigrant organization that had been identified as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center. All four of Mississippi’s U.S. House representatives, including the Congressional Black Caucus Institute chair Rep. Bennie Thompson (D), were reelected by large margins.

Factoid

Mississippi is one of four states that has never elected a woman to U.S congress.

Source: Center for American Women in Politics at Rutgers University
That’s Madame President to You

by Kim Robinson

WHAT ROLES DO YOU SEE CURRENTLY FOR WOMEN IN POLITICS?

Natalie Cole: I don’t know if there is a specific role women should play; we should be involved in every aspect of the political process, and we usually are. Working on campaigns, I have seen women be key volunteers, fundraisers and deputy campaign managers. It comes naturally for us to support and nurture. Women should be involved at every stage and have a seat at every table that decisions are being made. And not just have a seat but ensure that their voices are being heard.

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO MAKE SURE WOMEN ARE ELECTED OR APPOINTED TO POSITIONS THAT AFFECT AND CREATE POLICY?

Very. If nothing else, there needs to be a balance. There needs to be the vision and perspective that women can bring to policies and issues. We need more women in elected office in Mississippi [and the south, in general]. Of the current eight state wide offices in Mississippi, Lynn Fitch, as State Treasurer, and Cindy Hyde-Smith, as Agriculture Commissioner, are the only females in office. Two out of eight. The highest office a woman has held is lieutenant governor, which is a very powerful seat. When talk of who is running for office in the next election cycle, very few of the names mentioned are women.

Now is that because there isn’t a crop of qualified female candidates out there? No. I think we need to do a better job finding and cultivating those great women out there on why they are needed and what they need to do to be successful and win elections.

DO WOMEN IN POLITICAL POSITIONS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO THE REST OF THE GENDER TO CREATE POLICY THAT CHANGES OUTCOMES FOR CURRENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS?

That sounds like a huge responsibility put in those terms! But, yes, I think women do have a responsibility to those that they serve in general. And, yes, when the opportunity arises there should be an effort to improve the lives of everyone, including women. I think there needs to be a two way street of support. We need to support our female elected officials and, in return, they need lean in.

As a woman, you owe it to those that came before you and those that are aspiring to be where you are, to improve not just their lives, but their chances of reaching their fullest potential. Female elected officials have to learn to reach back and uplift those women behind them and be mentors. So if you are representative of a minority, and you get access to resources, it is your responsibility to ensure that everyone gets an equal share of the pie.

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE STYLISTICALLY WHEN WORKING FOR A MALE OR FEMALE CANDIDATE THAT MAY BE RUNNING FOR OFFICE?

Sure. Messaging is different for women candidates than for men. Women have to be visually appealing. They have to be strong, but not too strong, as to seem domineering. Women have to be smart, and have quantitative successes to prove it. A women needs to show how she can balance leadership and family. That is something that men don’t have to answer for. Women are held to a different standard of what leadership is. The south is very patriarchal, so I think voter’s default is to look for men to be leaders. So how you present a female candidate is different than how you present a male candidate.

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE POSSIBILITY OF HILLARY CLINTON RUNNING FOR PRESIDENT IN 2016?

It’s exciting. She is definitely qualified. It will be interesting to see how other potential candidates test her candidacy. We saw a glimpse of it in 2008 when she put her hat in the ring. Back then, they held no punches, and the Clinton luster found it hard to overcome then-candidate Barak Obama’s fervor. Since then, she has gone on to be Secretary of State, and that foreign policy experience is golden. In 2016, it will be interesting to see who all jumps in the race. An Elizabeth Warren candidacy—and this is all rumor—is just as intriguing. Women have a lot to look forward to, to be engaged in, and to get involved with.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO INCLUDE?

There is much work to be done in. I hope more women get involved in the political process. I know may women out there driving policy for elected officials, and my hope is that some of them will eventually decide to run for office. We need diversity of voice at the state capitol. I encourage all those that have a passion for service and a want to serve, to reach out and become a part of the election process. Join a campaign. Volunteer with grassroots effort that you feel strongly about. Nothing changes if we sit on the sideline. Women, we need your brains at the table!
“The state of our union is strong.”
We love to hear these words are what each year from our nation’s leader. Even when cracks in the foundation are obvious, we expect for our leader to proudly boast that America is still America, the preeminent global leader that is able to challenge contenders like China. From the “We are Marshall” playbook: “We are AMERICANS!”

Why do we look forward to the State of the Union Address?
Article II, Section 3 of the United States Constitution states “he shall from time to time give to the Congress information of the state of the union, and recommend to their consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.” We look for our leader to assume accountability for decisions made in the past, present and even in the future; we look to our leader for inspiration; we look forward to hope and opportunity. President Obama’s State of the Union Address was definitely filled with hope and hints of opportunity. He noted, “What I believe unites the people of this nation, regardless of race or region or party, young or old, rich or poor, is the simple, profound belief in opportunity for all.” Hope and opportunity were two vehicles ensuring civil rights for Blacks. Yet, hope and opportunity seemingly continue to escape women of color, especially black women.

Upon Closer Examination
If a woman is to become president, would we have to change the Constitution? Notice the use of the pronoun he? The rights of women are literally hidden in plain view. Is it surprising that women do not earn equal pay as their male counterparts for equal work? The president noted the gender pay gap, but did not offer any in-depth analysis. According to the American Association of University Women (AAUW), Asian and white women bring home more money each week than Latina and black women. Black women earn somewhat better than Latina women as they earn 64 percent of white men’s earnings, while Latina women earn 53 percent. As President Obama pointed out in the State of the Union Address, women tend to hold lower-waged jobs, and this is especially true of black women. As long as minimum wage continues to be below a living wage, the earning gap presents complex challenges for black women, their families (including their extended family) and the communities in which they live. Black women are much more likely to be single mothers and, conversely, are more likely to provide kinship care, while they’re also called upon to be caretakers for an elder parent or relative.

Hope and opportunity escape many black women, as they, according to AAUW, are less likely to complete high school or college than their white female counterparts. Consequently, more and more black women are squeezed out of the pathway to upward mobility. Is a “My Sister’s Keeper Initiative” on the horizon? Where is the young women of color initiative? Women have made significant strides, as the president demonstrated in his speech, yet there is tremendous space for growth.

The Consequences of Oprah
A friend of mine once lamented, “Oprah makes it challenging to be a black woman.” The successes of a few black women, like Oprah, reinforce the myth of meritocracy, essentially, that hard work alone, you can achieve your dreams. “Yes, hard work can open doors,” she explained, but you have to know people in those positions to even get that chance. Beyond that, black women are less likely to graduate from high school or college than their white counterparts. What trade or vocational programs make them as competitive in a global market?

Are there programs designed with women in mind?
Yes. It’s possible the United States can learn from the South, particularly Mississippi, in this instance? The Moore Community House’s Women in Construction program in Biloxi trains women from under-resourced backgrounds for construction careers. The women who have completed this program have gone on to jobs that have allowed them access to higher paying jobs that were once off limits to them. (It is worth noting here that the Mississippi Economic Policy Center’s analysis of US Census American Communities Survey data in 2012 found that construction is the only industry that pays men and women equally, despite gender.)

The president is right when he says that it is wrong that women earn 77 cents on the dollar a man earns. What is also wrong is the disparity of pay between genders. The gender pay gap is real, has real consequences on the lives of children, families and communities. The pay gap across gender is also deserves discussion and action. If women are going to receive equal pay for equal work, we must start by making those twins—hope and opportunity—available to all of our sisters. Only then will the state of our union truly be strong.
In Telugu, my mother tongue, there is no word for brown. In many languages spoken on the Indian subcontinent, brown as a word is associated with earth. To describe it as a color, we use “rust,” “color of wheat,” “color of earth,” etc. There is no word for brown. But I, in America, as a South Asian woman am a brown woman—a category that simply does not exist back home.

As Sumi, Selina, Deepa, Jayeesha—a few South Asian friends of mine—and I gathered in New Orleans for the first time to get to know one another, we were struck by the absence of a word that aptly described a part of who we are. We spent the weekend cooking, shopping, eating, doing mandalas, meditating and writing, and I thought more deeply about what had brought me to that purpose-filled space.

I am Dalit, Christian, feminist and the single mom of a 12-year-old boy child. I teach English to undergrads at the historically black Jackson State University in a predominantly black city. My reflections included the reality of my brownness that is often tokenized and patronized as a poster person for diversity. The questions I have been grappling with such as staying true to myself and being intentionally in community in Jackson came full circle when we consciously embarked on the journey to address our own South Asian privileges, oppressions, caste identities and our overall identity of brownness that allows us the liberty to navigate movement and mainstream spaces.

Since my time together with my friends, I’ve started attaining better clarity about my commitments to building black/brown solidarity and envisioning how I can stand in and use my Dalitness, feminism and faith to call out and undo the impact of heteropatriarchy and caste-ism within me and in the community. Further, how do I initiate these conversations with my son, who is growing up brown in this country?

Through the cultural comfort of being in a South Asian feminist sister circle, we birthed the Matti Collective. Matti means earth, dirt, soil in Telugu. It’s the word for brown ... for us. With these thoughts, concerns and laughter over much food and gossip of culture, we committed ourselves to being sisters. This collective that enables truth-telling, however tough, is growing on us, particularly me, as I move through my life, embrace others with love and make efforts to be accountable to my community.

As the collective and I move forward this year, I am reminded of the power and privilege my brownness has in this part of the world, in spite of the historic oppression my Dalit background brings with it (even to this day). This new year brings with it the challenges that each one does: bringing myself and the complexity of my identity to the spaces I’m in, not denying my privilege and simultaneously acknowledging my caste oppression. It’s complicated, challenging, and this brown girl and her sister friends have a lot of work to do. Happy New Year to us ... and you!

You can follow Noel’s journey and musings about life and human rights and lots of other stuff on Twitter @NoelDidla.

DID YOU KNOW?

“The Dalits, also known as the “untouchables” and “outcastes,” make up nearly one quarter of India’s 1.2 billion society, with population estimates of 250 million people. The Dalits are history’s longest standing oppressed people group.” Source: dalitnetwork.org
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Real Love: I Choose ME
by Young Woman Fellow

I’ve learned that love has no true definition. There’s no guide, manual or instructions to love other than to be like God.

At 17, this was the only love I knew, so I took it, and ran with it all—the good and bad. Then one day his love hurt a little too much for me to forgive. We began fighting and with my stance wrong, I lost the fight and, at seven months pregnant, my growing baby.

It was then and still can be an unbearable thought. But I realize this: I am an overcomer. The daughter I was robbed of the chance of meeting deserved love, and honestly, I don’t know that I was equipped to give it to her then. Since that relationship ended, my life has still been far from picture perfect, but through it all, I have learned what love is from my past relationships. I’ve learned what isn’t enough, is and isn’t OK and what I’m worth. And, most importantly, the only way to assure that our relationships with others are loving ones is to love ourselves. I’m learning to.

He Hit Me
by Jeanette Miller

He hit me. Ashamed, I did not tell you.
He hit me. “You don’t get to hit me.”
He hit me. Again.
He hit me. Through tear-stained glasses lenses, I recognized the choices that brought me here.
Too late.
He hit me. His friends and family stood near; watched.
He hit me. In a crowd of people, I was alone.
He hit me. He’d made me feel safe.
With a deep breath, I drove away he was in my car, threatening.
Frozen by fear, I knew this would not be the worst of it.
And then I found my strength and made my way to safety.
When I called crying and barely understandable, you stayed on the phone with me, until I was home. Safe.
And then I told you, you came to me with concern angry with me for putting myself in that situation.
When I wore deep stains of bruising to my birthday dinner a month later you knew.
He’d hit me. Then he called to wish me “Happy Birthday!”

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I’ve learned that love has no true definition. There’s no guide, manual or instructions to love other than to be like God.

Through conversations across the past year, I realized I’ve never let my story be known, and I’ve never thought of myself as an overcomer of violence. But the truth is, in high school, I was in an abusive relationship. I never considered it that because I loved him, and that’s all I was exposed to. It was normal, and I figured if I fought back, I wasn’t actually being abused ... or raped, for that matter. After all, how could your boyfriend rape you? And what if I wanted to have sex too but didn’t verbally consent because I had other things to worry about like where I was going to lay my head that night, the baby growing inside my stomach and I needed rest.

Last minute VALENTINE’S DAY

He hit me. With a deep breath, I drove away he was in my car, threatening.
He hit me. Frozen by fear, I knew this would not be the worst of it.
And then I found my strength and made my way to safety.
When I called crying and barely understandable, you stayed on the phone with me, until I was home. Safe.
And when I told you, you came to me with concern angry with me for putting myself in that situation.
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WHO’S WHO?

Each month, look here to learn a little about fellows of the Unita Blackwell Young Women’s Leadership Institute.

NAME
Dominique Evans

HOMETOWN
Camden, Alabama

GRADE
10th

ASPIRING GOAL
To be a traveling nurse

ROLE MODEL
My mother. She inspires me to be a better person. She adopted me and 21 other children.

INTERESTING FACTS
I love singing in the church choir. I’ve been singing with them for 3 years.

FAVORITE SONG
Fantasia “Lose to Win”

HOBBIES
Softball and Cheerleading

FAVORITE COLOR
Purple

FAVORITE MOVIE YOU COULD WATCH OVER AND OVER
Madea Goes to Jail