

Revolutionary Mothering and a Family Centered Movement



By Chioma Oruh
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I am a first generation American, a Black mother living in Washington, DC, raising two Black sons and co-parenting with their dad who is a person with disability. We're not together; so for all intents and purposes, I'm a single mom. But I think that term is misleading because no one person raises a child; we do it in community and to the best of our abilities, together.

Because of my intersectional identity, I think it's sometimes hard for people to learn from me, particularly around ableism and how it devastates and impacts people's access and ability. That's why I always revert back to organizing. I may not always be the best spokesperson because I benefit from ableism while at the same time talking about disability rights. I'm able-minded and I'm able-bodied, for the most part. I consider myself part of a disability, social entrepreneurship community, whose self-advocates are serious about putting their innovative ideas into the world, defining their space, and finding value for things



that are typically seen as charity. There is a lot of cutting-edge work that's happening within the disability space. A lot of the things that we celebrate, the rights that are celebrated, are so well articulated within the aspirations of the disability movement.

From Disability Rights to Disability Justice

I'm honored to be a part of the disability justice movement. I love being a mother of neurodiverse children. My kids are my strength, not my weakness. I want to humanize them: people with disabilities; Black people with disabilities; Black boys and Black men who are disproportionately impacted and are more likely to have a negative police encounter; Black girls with disabilities who are least likely to be seen for the beauty they possess and the power they have to offer to the world. When we talk about the school-to-prison pipeline, when we talk about the disproportionate

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number of Black kids with disabilities that are suspended, expelled, and pushed out, we know these things to be true. But where within the education space is there an authentic, honest addressing of these issues? The education space is truly the most regressive space and it's allowed to remain that way, unfortunately.

People with disabilities in general are marginalized; Black people, poor people, and immigrant people with disabilities are disproportionately marginalized. We need to move from a disability rights movement, which is largely a middle class movement, to a disability justice movement that addresses racial disproportionality.

You think you know the world. But until you walk a mile in a disabled person's shoes, you don't know. I think that ableism is not really processed or unpacked, which lends to a survival of the fittest way of organizing. You have to be the best, the sharpest, the brightest, the first, the one with the

neuro-diverse way of engaging and organizing, surviving, living, and struggling.

We have legal rights that the disability rights movement has created; but we still don't have justice because we're Black and we're Brown and we're from the South and we're poor. So we are attempting to make our case using an intersectional lens. Our goal is to create waves all across the country.

Birthing a New Kind of Organizer

I did Peace Corps during the era of the Iraq War. I started following the anti-war movement from Benin in West Africa where I was stationed. We felt imperialism very strongly during those years. I did a lot of organizing around that when I came back to the US. I worked with the American Friends Service Committee on the African Initiative where we would connect local issues that were impacting the Black community to issues that were impacting the Global



bright idea, the one with the great tactical strategy, the one that's out there and in the forefront. It's not only extremely disorienting in terms of how power works, the different kinds of power and how they're appreciated. We also leave behind a lot of brilliant people and intelligence that can contribute to justice - when we don't unpack ableism and when we don't create space for people and a

South. That's actually what motivated me to go to graduate school, to better understand militarism and imperialism.

I decided to go to graduate school to study international relations. My master's degree is in African studies, my PhD is in political science. In the middle of that journey as a student I met my partner who was an organizer and had my first son

in 2010. It was a very stressful time because he wasn't speaking on time.

We were trying to figure out what was going on. He was 18 months old and wasn't saying any words. But he was doing amazing things in some areas even when he had severe deficits in other areas. He started walking at nine months and was able to pick up a pen and draw a full face and a body by 18 months. He was really brilliant at some things.

These were classic signs that I know as autistic now, but at that time it was an anomaly. It was a process and a journey. That journey of figuring out what is going on, how to get help, and what to do about it, birthed a new kind of organizer in me. My decision was to get political once I found my feet. Even before I found my feet, I still had to get political.

I started engaging in this obsessive quest to understand why my life was so crazy and what was happening with my family and my kid. I decided to bring some of my other identities into the work. In my dissertation on the rape crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo, I talked about mothers and pre-colonial or primordial matriarchy theory. At that time, I was just thinking in general about how the force of mothers can impact any social movement and historically why that was the case in continental African movements.

Revolutionary Mothering and a Family Centered Movement

There's a book called [Revolutionary Mothering](#), which makes a distinction between motherhood and mothering. In the American imagination, motherhood looks like a 1960s commercial of a white suburban woman with 2.5 kids. But mothering has historic roots in the struggle of the Global South and in the othering of the female experience.

Mothering makes a difference in terms of social engagement, especially within the African Indigenous mind where mother is supreme. There

is literally a word in Igbo, Nneka, that means Mother is Supreme. I try to organize mothers, not to the exclusion of fathers, but understanding that principle. The mothering principle is extremely important and is not included enough within the intelligence of our systems, which are largely patriarchal.



Fundamentally the mother is a source of power. We need to reorganize how we think about her role in the movement without masculinizing her. I don't need to become a man to be a leader in a movement. I can respect masculinity and be feminine. Motherhood is your strength, but in our society it is also your weakness. I can't do all the things that an organizer who is childless can do. I can't make the same advancements in my career or my life because that's how our society is set up. But I can give power where I actually have it, where I am influencing a whole generation. I'm influencing my kids and all the children that will come out of my kids. That recognition needs to become part of how we organize, how we think, and how we move.

You don't have the checks and balances without a matriarchal system. We cannot find the future of democracy without putting the woman and the child in the center. And that is the family in the center.

A Family Centered Movement

In my consultancy, I take on disability projects and educational projects, and I also try to do work

around health. I always try to do it through a family centered space. I'm working on the school health system with [George Washington University Center for Health and Healthcare in Schools](#). My work is to help define family engagement within a school behavioral health expansion and the multi-tiered system of support that we're building in the District of Columbia.



We build on the community school model to include the school health model, which is inclusive. It is not a special thing that special people go to get special things from. It's a space where you have a multi-tiered system of support, which means you have to find a way to properly identify and address intersectional needs through evaluations and assessments, through programming, through engagement, and through collaborative work that's truly collaborative. That is the intention of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Parents have so many rights because the IDEA act realizes that you're not going to come to a solution for a child with a disability if you don't include their parents. The justice piece is what happens when your rights are not respected, even as the law articulates it.

When you challenge the school-to-prison pipeline and say "counselors not cops," that looks like the school health system. It's a working system where kids can receive help no matter where they're located; and they can be identified and receive it equitably and without stigma either. It

takes a blend of health policy and education policy to be able to make this kind of connection and change, which might seem small, but it's a huge thing for struggling families.

I do this work also through a family centered lens. When we look at inequity, we know that the people who are most impacted are low-income, usually single parent households, although we also know that many two-parent families are struggling too. They were not able to feed their kids during the global pandemic and they're still struggling to do so.

The family centered movement is not just about Black parents. The family centered movement is for all families, but it is rooted in Indigenous African intelligence. The movement doesn't always know that, but that's where it comes from. You have to put the family at the center of policy.



It is the mother who bears the brunt of a lot of the poverty that comes out of the disability space. When a family is hit with a new diagnosis, it's the mother that makes a sacrifice for care without the financial support necessary to meet that sacrifice. We as Black mothers of children with disabilities know that the next step for disability justice is on us. The movement has not vocalized our experience. We're actually quite objectified. People love to talk about us; they love to talk about poor families. But there's no visibility to what our experiences actually are.



We don't do this from a woman-only space, we do this as a mother-first space, as a family centered movement. Family is at the center, and we support and uphold all the dynamics of what family can and should mean in the 21st century. We recognize the diversity of mothering. We have a queer grandmother that is part of our group, and we also learn a lot about her struggle as a lesbian grandmother, raising her grandchildren.

The John Brown Test

White people who get into the work of racial equity or racial justice need to be willing to make sacrifices. I learned about this “John Brown test” from a Black woman scholar. What sacrifices are they willing to make to make this happen? We don't need people telling us how to inform and organize our movements. We need people who are going to struggle with us, fight with us, win with us. The most authentic solidarity work within the educational space for majority white teachers and white parents is to interrogate how resources are hoarded in the white community and how those resources being hoarded are disproportionately

impacting other communities, particularly the Black community.

If that work isn't happening, where white people are dealing with other white people on these tough questions, where there's some redistribution of wealth, then that's not true solidarity. If redistribution of wealth is not on the table, it's not authentic.

I blame the unions for some of this too. While I am a self-identified socialist, and I believe very much in workers' rights, we need to have honest critiques of whiteness and the labor movement. We must unpack the whiteness in the labor movement as it impacts education policy, which we know is systemically discriminatory around Black intelligence, Black history, Black minds, Black lives, and Black kids. There's an automatic resistance to acknowledging that our teachers are part of how discrimination passes down from generation to generation.

When we talk about the school-to -prison pipeline, when we talk about the disproportionate number of Black kids with disabilities that are

suspended, expelled, and pushed out, we know teachers play a role in this. Where within the education space is there authentic, honest addressing of this issue?

I don't necessarily believe in blaming, but I think if we're going to challenge the system, the John Brown sacrifice applies very neatly in education advocacy. If we're going to win some sustainable policies around racial discrimination and around students with disabilities, we can't have this cap on how we think about the problems that we face.

Mothers Ground the Movement

Political education is my gospel: know better and know more. If you think you know an issue, study more and study collectively. I say this in the most non-ableist way possible, that we have to be sharper in how we know and how we move collectively. I support the generation that is protesting now, the young people who are literally out here because adults have betrayed them, have abandoned them, and have left movement work just for them to do. But I fear that they come out here with the least amount of knowledge and information on tactics and strategies of the lessons of the past, what didn't work, what did work, what ideas move forward, what ideas should be debunked.

I don't know if that kind of rigor is happening in the kind of movement building we're doing right now. We are in a world of hashtags, not disciplined action. That's why I work with mothers. I understand one thing about a mom: no matter her station, she's not just going to come out and take action without some thought. She's going to do her very best to make sure that whatever you're telling her to do makes sense for her family and her life.



Chioma Oruh is a family caregiver, community organizer, and public scholar. She is a family-centered consultant with [Chi Bornfree, Inc.](#) and is also the founder of the nonprofit organization [FixPat](#), which provides wellness support and community programming for multiple generationally impacted disabled families of young children in Washington, DC, navigating early childhood education, healthcare, and other social systems. She also serves on the Coordinating Council for School-based Behavioral Health with the DC Department on Behavioral Health. Chioma teaches in the Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development. She lives in the Fort Totten area in Washington, DC, with her two sons and mother.

