

“If you don’t go, nobody else will.”

Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s Crusades Beyond Lynching

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In the autumn of 1909, Ferdinand Barnett, the Illinois assistant state’s attorney, informed his wife, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, that a lynching had taken place in Cairo, Illinois. In response to her husband’s insinuation that she would need to go to Cairo the next morning, Wells-Barnett resisted, noting both the inconvenience and the struggles she had faced in the past. It was at this point that thirteen-year-old Charles Barnett said, “Mother, if you don’t go, nobody else will.”¹ Facing the double victimization that came with being a black woman in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the outspoken journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett had been answering this very call to action throughout her entire life. As she released painfully honest articles about the most controversial issues and voiced support for much-needed radical reform in several sectors of life, she did indeed take the risks that no one else would. While the aspect of her work that has received the most acclaim throughout the past century is undoubtedly her anti-lynching crusade, Wells-Barnett also helped facilitate the advancement of black women specifically. By bringing to light the hidden pain that black women endured, assisting in the fight for suffrage as well as other women’s issues, and setting a strong, real-life example of a black woman working for progress, Wells-Barnett made invaluable contributions to the cause of black female empowerment.

Born in the heart of the deep south in 1862, three years before the passage of the slavery-ending Thirteenth Amendment, Ida B. Wells-Barnett grew up during one of the most chaotic periods of Southern history—Reconstruction. Her father, James Wells, was the son of a slave and her master. Because he was the master’s son, James Wells always received special treatment when compared to that of his fellow slaves, and he even served as his father’s apprentice. Together with his wife, Elizabeth Wells, he instilled in his eight children, of whom Ida Wells-Barnett was the oldest, the value of education. For much of her childhood, Wells-Barnett excelled academically and lived a relatively privileged life. When she was a teenager, however, a yellow fever epidemic claimed the lives of her parents, and Wells-Barnett almost immediately assumed the role of parent to her younger siblings. She supported her family as a teacher in her hometown of Holly Springs, Mississippi, for a few years, and then moved with her youngest siblings to the Memphis area to continue teaching.²

Wells-Barnett’s public life began as she was riding a train out of Memphis. Despite paying for a first-class ticket, the train’s conductor asked her to move from the ladies’ coach to a smokers’ coach. Wells-Barnett refused to move to the lower-class coach and instead got off of the train and filed a lawsuit against the railroad. Initially, the Memphis circuit court ruled in Wells-Barnett’s favor; however, less than three years later, the Tennessee Supreme Court overruled the circuit court’s decision. This was the first time in her life that Wells-Barnett began to feel that the law, even when it was well-enforced, would not always protect all citizens.³ Following this event, Wells-Barnett rapidly found herself more and more involved in several distinct struggles for justice.

Wells-Barnett’s lifelong struggle against lynchings has become known as her most important civil rights legacy. Primarily through her journalism, Wells-Barnett uncovered the truth about lynchings, insisting that only a minute percentage of the lynchings that took place in the South were carried out for the reasons that were claimed. Instead, white supremacist mobs used charges such as the rape of a white woman to cover the real causes, which were often based on petty and/or pride-based motives. While this is generally accepted as fact today, at the time it was both a groundbreaking revelation and an inflammatory claim. In addition to her regular articles in the newspaper she owned—*Free Speech*—she also wrote longer pieces that have been collected in the book *On Lynchings*. One such work, “A Red Record,” serves as an “interrogation of historical record-keeping as a significant factor in the perpetuation or cessation of lynching,”⁴ insisting upon the necessity of truth. In “A Red Record,” Wells-Barnett cites both the scale and the brutality of lynchings, including

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¹ Dorothy Sterling, *Black Foremothers: Three Lives* (New York, NY: The Feminist Press, 1979), 105-106.

² Ida B. Wells-Barnett, “A Red Record,” in *Selected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett*, ed. Trudier Harris (New York, NY: Oxford University Press Inc., 1991), 6.

³ Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Alfreda Duster, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells-Barnett* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1970), xvii.

⁴ Ericka M. Miller, *The Other Reconstruction* (New York, NY: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000), 30-31.

some very specific, graphic examples. Additionally, she calls on her fellow justice-seekers to actively work in opposition to lynchings through the use of such strategies as raising awareness of the true nature of lynchings, participating in organizations that worked toward anti-lynching goals, and highlighting the hypocrisy of southern and American values in light of lynchings.⁵ It was extremely dangerous for Wells-Barnett to write what was then such an incendiary booklet, so much so that “the *Memphis Commercial* later regretted ‘not having lynched the saffron-colored speakeress’ before she left town with her facts on lynching.”⁶ It is for her honorable acts of courage against lynchings that she is best known.

Wells-Barnett put great emphasis on racial violence against black women, an issue that did not receive much coverage by other reformers. When people think of a lynching, they typically envision a black man as the victim. However, as Wells-Barnett pointed out, black women also encountered violence on account of their race. The emphasis that Wells-Barnett placed on these particular cases is demonstrated by a section of “A Red Record” that describes an incident in which three men and a woman were accused of arson. Given a fair trial, they most likely would not have been found guilty; however, the four prisoners were lynched before they were given the opportunity to defend themselves. An appalled Wells-Barnett wrote, “. . . if the Nineteenth Century has shown any advancement upon any lines of human action, it is pre-eminently shown in its reverence, respect and protection of its womanhood. But the people of Alabama failed to have any regard for womanhood whatever.”⁷ In this incident, Wells-Barnett demonstrates strong emotions regarding the treatment of black women in society.

The section of “A Red Record” that is composed of lynching statistics further emphasizes violent racial injustice against black women. In this selection, Wells-Barnett devotes an entire subsection to lynchings of women. Of the three cases in this subsection, the names of two as well as their alleged offenses are unknown.⁸ Clearly, these cases had been largely undocumented prior to “A Red Record.” By setting off a separate subsection for women that had been lynched, Wells-Barnett highlights not only the fact that women had been lynched, but also that these occurrences had previously been kept under cover.

Within the context of her anti-lynching crusade, Wells-Barnett also brought to light a hypocrisy in the South’s view of sexuality. She is famous for showing how uncommon it was that a black man who was lynched for the rape of a white woman was actually guilty of rape.⁹ Instead, in most cases, the lynching was either unrelated to rape or came as a result of consensual sex between a black man and a white woman. This in itself was an enormous revelation, but she followed this argument with another of equal importance: the double standard that existed because black men were lynched for “raping” white women while white men almost always went unprosecuted for the rape of black women. In “Southern Horrors,” Wells-Barnett gives several particularly grisly examples of white men raping black women. In one of these, three white boys assaulted and raped a young black girl; in another, a white man that raped a black child left her with physical injuries so terrible that she died two months later.¹⁰ Exposing these painfully sickening stories, Wells-Barnett demonstrates both the hypocrisy of Lynch Law and the hellish environment in which many black women found themselves in the South.

Wells-Barnett’s contributions to the advancement of black women were not limited to the sphere of journalism: she was also an active participant in struggles for equality. One arena in which she did this was the women’s suffrage movement. Wells-Barnett viewed suffrage as a key to her more practical aims, such as the elimination of lynching and social equality regardless of race or sex. In the 1890’s, she began to work with Susan B. Anthony on the issue. However, Anthony frequently refused to allow African-Americans to participate in the suffrage movements that she led. Specifically, she never allowed any blacks to join her National American Woman Suffrage Association. To Wells-Barnett, these decisions demonstrated a lack of concern for whether or not black women would be granted the vote. Therefore, Wells-Barnett harshly criticized the decisions that Anthony made in reference to black women and looked elsewhere for support of women’s suffrage. She even created a new organization, the Alpha Suffrage Club, which was specifically designed to be a black women’s society devoted to the suffrage movement. In the 1914 Chicago alderman race, this organization was key in the election of an African-American candidate.¹¹ In short, Wells-Barnett insisted upon the inclusion of black women in the fight for suffrage. Such insistence resulted in the creation of an organization that achieved considerable success in its endeavors, and, perhaps more importantly, demonstrated black women’s capability in a world in which they were

⁵ Wells-Barnett, “A Red Record,” 248-249.

⁶ Patricia A. Schecter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 88.

⁷ Wells-Barnett, “A Red Record,” 220.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁹ “Ida B. Wells Barnett.” *Notable Black American Women*, Book 1. Gale Research, 1992.

Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale, 2010. <<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>> (April 2010).

¹⁰ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, “Southern Horrors,” in *Selected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett*, ed. Trudier Harris (New York, NY: Oxford University Press Inc., 1991), 26-28.

¹¹ Jeff Hill, *Women’s Suffrage*, (Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics, Inc., 2006), 138.

viewed as the lowest of the lower class.

Wells-Barnett's participation in reforms like the suffrage movement was supplemented by her role in different women's clubs. During this time, women used clubs to influence their communities, as they were excluded from most official roles. Wells-Barnett was a tremendously strong leader in a number of clubs, including some that she herself organized. Upon seeing the efficacy of women's clubs in England after a trip to Europe, Wells-Barnett made several speeches in both New England and Chicago advocating women's clubs.¹² Shortly thereafter, Women's Era Clubs were formed both in Boston and Chicago. In 1893, the Chicago Women's Era Club was renamed the Ida B. Wells Club in her honor, which serves as a testament to the great influence that she had within the establishment. Also, in January of 1913, she founded the previously mentioned Alpha Suffrage Club in Chicago, which served as a vehicle to political involvement for black women. Then, in 1927, Wells-Barnett joined the National League of Republican Colored Women's Clubs, and later that year established the Third Ward Political Club, which would work under the motto "For Women, of Women, by Women."¹³ This slogan highlights the organization's focus on bringing to fruition the promise of women's empowerment. It was for her leadership in so many of these clubs that she earned the nickname "Mother of Clubs," as she was first called by a fellow clubwoman, Sadie Adams, in 1927.¹⁴ Through her organizing efforts within these clubs as well as her participation in other women's societies of a similar kind, Wells-Barnett encouraged black women to embrace the opportunity to hold roles of influence within their communities.

During this era, women's clubs served as a path to political power. Until 1920, women nationwide were not permitted to vote. Even after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, however, women—especially black women—were still excluded from most public positions due to both overt discrimination and financial barriers.¹⁵ Nonetheless, they were able to hold an active political role through the organizational power of women's clubs. Wells-Barnett took this opportunity to heart. Through her Alpha Suffrage Club, she offered support to African-American political candidates, which was instrumental in many electoral victories.¹⁶ It was during this period that women, particularly black women, faced the most resistance in their attempts to influence political affairs, due to the fact that they had so recently been granted the right to vote.¹⁷ Therefore, the support structures provided by women's clubs, like those founded by Wells-Barnett, were essential to the progress that black women made at the time. Simultaneously, Wells-Barnett herself served as a role model and provided encouragement to black women by making speeches and campaigning, thereby demonstrating the power that black women could possess in the realm of politics. Due in large part to Wells-Barnett's contributions to women's clubs and the solidarity that they provided, many black women were empowered to engage in political life, even if their political action was as simple as going to the polls on election day.

Once women were allowed a place in United States politics, Wells-Barnett not only maintained her involvement in women's clubs, but she also made the most of her new opportunities by running for elected office in 1930. She spent all of that year attempting to rally the support necessary to win a seat in the Illinois state senate, but, as she did not have the endorsement of either major political party, she only earned 585 votes.¹⁸ Nonetheless, her effort demonstrated the promise that the political system might hold for black women, and was thus a form of encouragement to others. While she failed to achieve elected office, she did hold several influential appointed posts, such as National Organizer of Illinois Colored Women for the Republican Party in 1928. Though she may not have garnered the necessary support to serve as much as she would have liked within the political system, she did recognize the necessity of political action, as she felt that "In a period of darkening hopes for African Americans...growing black political power in Chicago and Illinois was one bright light in the night of despair."¹⁹ Consequently, Wells-Barnett continued campaigning for those whom she considered to be the best candidates and working toward political engagement of the black female community through her activism in women's clubs and, most importantly, through her journalism, until her death at age sixty-eight in 1931.

In addition to encouraging black women's participation in community and political life, Wells-Barnett also worked closely with a number of black women over the years and served as an inspiration for them to continue and improve their individual projects. One such woman was Mary Jane Richardson Jones, who held a prominent position within the Chicago community. In 1893, Wells-Barnett asked Jones to serve as honorary chair of the Women's Era Club (later renamed the Ida B. Wells Club), which she had recently helped establish. In taking Wells-Barnett's advice and

¹² William F. Pinar, "The Emergence of Ida B. Wells," *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2006), 157.

¹³ Schechter, 217.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁶ Sadie Iola Daniel, *Women Builders*, (Washington, D.C.: Associated Press, 1970), 284.

¹⁷ Schechter, 200.

¹⁸ Linda O. McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 336.

¹⁹ McMurry, 304.

holding this position, Jones gave the organization prominence within the community. Similarly, Wells-Barnett worked closely with Fannie B. Williams, another Chicago clubwoman who was one of the founders of the National Association of Colored Women. Moreover, her Ida B. Wells Club, in addition to providing encouragement to those women who partook in the organization, promoted the establishment of other black women's clubs within the Chicago area.²⁰ At the same time that Wells-Barnett published information in her newspaper that indubitably served as a catalyst for black women's community activism, her work within women's clubs inspired Jones and Williams—to name only two examples—to work toward their own goals of equality. It is clear that Wells-Barnett's work instigated action from black women in a number of ways, as she played the part of role model, community organizer, and personal motivator to those around her.

Despite all of the unquestionably forward-looking actions that Wells-Barnett took, she was still a woman of her own era. As such, her attitude about women's roles in society was rather ambivalent. First, her own gender identity was not exactly what we would now consider to be feminist. In her diary, she noted the “complicated labyrinth of women's various moods and petty fancies.”²¹ In fact, Wells-Barnett frequently ascribed her moments of weakness to her sex; her profound strength, on the other hand, was not, in her mind, gender-related.²² At the same time, she also did all of the aforementioned things in the name of black women's empowerment. While she clearly felt that women were entitled to the same rights as men, her feelings about gender were complicated by the social structures of the culture in which she lived.

In a similar way, Wells-Barnett's attitude toward her role in society as a mother as well as an activist was filled with guilt. While she was extremely committed to her professional goals, she found her responsibilities as a wife and mother to be more important. In 1897 she stopped working completely for a few years because “she firmly believed in the importance of the presence of a mother in the home during the children's formative years.”²³ Once she resumed her writing, she maintained her reservations about simultaneously working and being a mother, and wrote extensively about such feelings in her autobiography. While these reservations demonstrate an admirable commitment to her family responsibilities, they may also reflect an inner tendency toward the very social structures that her activism, in some ways, intended to combat.

Though she certainly experienced inner conflicts regarding the status of women, this does not diminish the extraordinary work that she did to improve the lives of all women, particularly African-Americans. Her hesitations regarding her gender roles are only to be expected given the period and environment in which she lived, and the actions that she took, intentionally or not, helped to revolutionize social perceptions of black women. For such accomplishments, Wells-Barnett has received some historical acclaim in recent years; most notably, a highly regarded public housing project in Chicago bears her name.²⁴ However, the perception of her role in United States history is minimal, and what information about her that does make it into history textbooks tends to focus entirely on her anti-lynching crusade and neglects the other invaluable contributions she made, such as her work toward the empowerment of African-American women. Given the fact that she was born in an era when someone of her racial and sexual identity would have been forced into slavery and that she grew up in an era when someone with the same characteristics would have been expected to be a domestic servant, she truly made the most of the opportunities that presented themselves to her and found ways to make lasting differences in her society.

²⁰ Daniel, 273.

²¹ McMurry, 63.

²² *Ibid.*, 173.

²³ Barnett and Duster, xxiii.

²⁴ Daniel, 288.