

Dorothy Pitman Hughes's activism offers a solution for the coronavirus gender gap ^[1]

Community-centered activism, focused on child care, would spare women the burdens exposed by the pandemic.

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Women's History Month coincides with the stark reality of the past year: Women have borne the brunt of the caretaking challenge the coronavirus pandemic has created. With children at home and virtual schooling taking over hours of the day, women have left the workforce in record numbers, threatening to roll back the gains propelled by the women's liberation movement 40 years ago. That's why we need to remember those women who also navigated their own obstacles, economic, social and political, while forging a path toward greater equality and opportunity for everyone in their community.

Black feminist activist Dorothy Pitman Hughes is one of those women. During the 1960s, she created child-care and job-training programs and, most important, hope through her community center in New York City. Her story reminds us of the transformative power of community-based activism.

Hughes fought many battles: She raised funds for civil rights in the 1960s, served as a leader in the Black feminist movement in the 1970s and mobilized against gentrification in New York City during the 1980s and 1990s. However, she is best known as a community activist who created a child-care center that served as a hub for political action in the 1960s and 1970s.

Hughes was born in Lumpkin, Ga., in 1938 and raised in a rural African American farming community. She left Georgia in 1957 for New York, where she soon became a social justice activist and child-welfare advocate. From her first efforts raising funds for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a national anti-racism organization dedicated to change through nonviolent action, Hughes turned her attention to the conditions in her West Side neighborhood, which was deemed a "poverty pocket" at the time. Because she also worked nights as a nightclub singer, Hughes spent her days at home where she observed many children in her neighborhood as their parents worked.

She started a community day-care facility for these children, providing support for their working parents. When she started the day-care, she realized that child-care challenges were deeply entangled with issues of racial discrimination, poverty, drug use, substandard housing, welfare hotels, job training and even the Vietnam War.

Under her direction, the West 80th Street Day Care and Community Center became a center for the community to define its needs, fashion its own solutions and even take to the streets in protest. Parents formed the board of directors, community members were welcome to contribute regardless of their credentials, and the center created its own curriculum to meet the needs that the community defined. Hughes recognized that the strongest anchor for local community action centered on children and worked to fix the roots of inequality in her community. Her center offered job training, support for parents and experience in political organizing and community advocacy.

In 1969, a young reporter for New York magazine visited the West 80th Street Center because of its renown as a community hub. Despite its humble surroundings, the reporter recognized that the day-care center was a locus of power, a "neighborhood-changing, life changing" place and described Hughes as a "beautiful Black female Saul Alinsky," because of "her natural gift for organizing." That young reporter was soon-to-be feminist icon Gloria Steinem.

Steinem often credits Black women like Hughes for teaching her about feminism. As a singer and activist comfortable in front of a crowd and willing to lead occupation protests of city offices, Hughes initially persuaded Steinem to speak publicly.

Together they took to the podium, speaking against inequality and injustice, sexism and racism. Hughes pushed the women's movement to address the needs of the working-class, Black and Latino women whom she encountered every day in her community. Domestic violence, the welfare system and child care became the defining issues of her feminism, and Steinem's too.

But the state pushed against such efforts to take control. In 1970, the New York City Early Childhood Taskforce introduced new standards that required invasive intake procedures to determine eligibility for child care and limited enrollment by income. Hughes responded by leading more than 150 parents and children from 40 day-care centers in a sit-in at the Social Services Department Division

of Day Care.

The issue was not just top-down imposition of new rules, but the use of income standards to move the children of working families out of affordable child-care centers, so that welfare recipients could place their children in those centers while they were required to work in city agencies. Instead of low-cost, integrated and community-controlled child-care centers, Hughes saw the state-mandated vision as isolating the very poorest children and punishing their parents.

Federal mandates also posed a challenge for her vision of community-controlled child care. In 1971, Congress considered legislation that would make day care widely available again in the United States. The Comprehensive Child Development Act, approved by both houses of Congress but vetoed by President Richard M. Nixon, once again called into question the issue of community control. Liberals argued for it, as exemplified in Head Start programs, while conservatives cast the measure as the “Sovietization of Our Youth.” Despite Nixon’s veto, on April 12, 1972, the Senate held an ad hoc hearing called the Children’s Hearing to oppose what they saw as regressive features of Nixon’s proposed welfare bill, which would tie welfare and child care together in terms of need.

Hughes testified, bringing six children from the West 80th Street Day Care Center to answer the senators’ questions. The children’s moods ranged from boisterous to bored, but that did not deter Hughes from speaking her mind. She let the senators know that she viewed the welfare bill as a “plan for implementing total fascism” because the work requirements it would impose would force families into a system of government surveillance. The senators were impressed, but the hearing did little for children. Comprehensive federally funded child care became a flash-point in a growing culture war over “family values” and did not make it out of Congress again in the 1970s.

Dorothy Pitman Hughes could not afford to be a single-issue activist — the issues that she and her community faced were deeply interconnected and immediately pressing. Activists like Hughes teach us an important lesson: that powerful social movements were built from the ground up and informed by the complex experiences and needs of ordinary women, men and children.

Fifty years after Hughes told Congress of the need for community-controlled day care, little has been done to create a system of sustainable national child care, and the coronavirus pandemic has exposed the consequences women disproportionately endure because of it. But Hughes’s work shows the path forward: community-based activism that puts local needs first and places meaningful political agency within everyone’s reach.

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