



Excerpt of Letter from Pauli Murray to A. Philip Randolph



On August 21, 1963—one week before the march—lawyer and civil rights activist Pauli Murray wrote to A. Philip Randolph, the prominent labor and civil rights movement leader and head of the March on Washington.

“I have been increasingly perturbed over the blatant disparity between the major role which Negro women have played and are playing in the crucial grass-roots levels of our struggle and the minor role of leadership they have been assigned in the national policy-making decisions. It is indefensible to call a national march on Washington and send out a Call which contains the name of not a single woman leader.”

“The time has come to say to you quite candidly, Mr. Randolph, that ‘tokenism’ is as offensive when applied to women as when applied to Negroes, and that I have not devoted the greater part of my adult life to the implementation of human rights to now condone any policy which is not inclusive.”

Anna Pauline “Pauli” Murray (1910-1985) was an American lawyer, civil rights activist and priest. In 1940, Murray and a friend were arrested for sitting in the whites-only section of a Virginia bus. This incident motivated her to become a civil rights lawyer and advocate for women’s rights. Murray became the first African American to earn an S.J.D. (doctor of the science of law) from Yale University. She served on the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women from 1961–1963 and co-founded the National Organization for Women in 1966. In the 1970s, Murray joined the Episcopal Church and became the first African American woman to be ordained as an Episcopal priest. Throughout her adulthood, Murray struggled with sexual and gender identity issues, and a number of scholars have described her as transgender. In addition to her civil rights activism, Murray published two autobiographies and a book of poetry.