

Research article

Gender violence as genocide: the Rosa Lee Ingram case and *We Charge Genocide* petitionDenise Lynn^{1,*}¹ University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, Indiana, USA

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Abstract

In 1951, the Civil Rights Congress (CRC), under the leadership of William Patterson, submitted a 200+-page petition to the United Nations charging the United States with genocide against Black Americans. The meticulously researched petition documented hundreds of cases of assault, legal lynching (the use of the legal system to deny Black Americans justice) and death that all amounted to a system in which the federal government failed to protect Black Americans against injustice. Sexual assault figured prominently in the petition. This article looks specifically at the case of Rosa Lee Ingram as exemplary of both legal lynching and gender violence that were essential to the argument that the United States was guilty of genocide. For Patterson and the CRC, sexual violence and the threat of sexual assault, as in the Ingram case, was symptomatic of a larger terror campaign that focused on Black Americans, circumscribing their rights, their lives and safety, and confirming a white supremacist system that punished Black male sexuality and claimed Black women's sexuality for its own.

Keywords Rosa Lee Ingram; Communist Party; gender violence; genocide; *We Charge Genocide*; William Patterson

Introduction

On 4 November 1947, widowed sharecropper Rosa Lee Ingram was nearly assaulted by white sharecropper and neighbour John Stratford. Stratford had made advances on Ingram several times in the past, but this time he was thwarted by Ingram and four of her sons. At the end of the incident, Stratford lay dead, and Ingram and her sons were arrested. In a one-day trial, she and two of her sons were found guilty and sentenced to death. Her mother contacted local civil rights officials and word reached the Civil Rights Congress (CRC), a legal organisation devoted to the defence of working people. The CRC engaged a mass movement technique using the media and public pressure to draw attention to the Ingrams' case. It particularly engaged in campaigns against unpunished sexual assault against Black women at a time when other civil rights organisations were wary of any cases involving interracial sex.

In 1951, the CRC produced a petition and submitted it to the United Nations charging federal law enforcement and government agencies with wilful neglect and consent to the genocide of Black Americans. The CRC argued that 'state's rights' and federal policy and indifference allowed local legislative and judicial harassment of Black Americans that contributed to genocidal conditions, including poverty, sexual assault and legal lynching. It insisted that gender violence contributed to genocide and gave state sanction to white Americans killing and raping Black Americans with impunity, creating conditions that threatened the existence of Black America. Ingram's was one of many cases of gender violence that was included in the petition. For Patterson and the CRC, sexual violence and the threat of sexual assault, as in the Ingram case, was symptomatic of a larger terror campaign that focused on Black Americans. It circumscribed their rights, their lives and safety, and confirmed a white supremacist system that punished Black male sexuality and claimed Black women's sexuality for its own. The petition and the case inspired activists in the CRC and other organisations to emphasise that sexual violence against Black women constituted genocide.

Sexual abuse and racism

The petition acknowledged something that many in the Black Freedom Struggle knew, that sex and sexuality had long been used as weapons to justify Black oppression. Historian Timothy Tyson has argued that sex is the crux of America's racist history. Beginning with slavery, the slave economy depended on the right of white men to Black women's bodies, both for control and to reproduce a free labour force. At the same time, white women's sexuality was constructed as untouchable, pure and imperative to preserve and control. Althea Legal-Miller has argued that this bolstered a system of racist, violent social control that failed to punish white men who violated Black women, while even the mere suggestion of sexual relations between a white woman and a Black man could incite violence.¹

Crystal Feimster has written extensively about the Black rapist image deployed by white America to justify its heinous treatment of Black Americans, not only by using violence, but also in its complete disregard for Black American lives. Dismissing an entire population as prone to criminality has secured neglect and harassment as public policy and determined social relationships. The Black rapist stereotype emerged after slavery was abolished and white men felt the need to coalesce their control over Black Americans. Constructing Black men as sexually insatiable and inclined to rape and violence justified legal and extralegal control. Feimster argues that this myth simultaneously secured white men's control over white and Black women's bodies. In this construction, Black women would not be able to enjoy the protection of the state since their sexual appetites allegedly matched that of Black men's. As Legal-Miller has argued, white America justified Black women's rape by claiming it would be impossible to rape someone who was hungry for sex. Conversely, white women's bodies had to be controlled for their own protection from the Black male.²

This social control became so embedded in American racist thought that rape accusations made by Black women were ignored, and white men acted with impunity in securing their right to Black women's bodies. Danielle McGuire has addressed the power of these stereotypes in social and legal contexts in the United States. McGuire argues that it was believed Black men's desire for white women was so insatiable that the primary goal of the civil rights movement was to secure interracial marriage. Because of this association, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was often too afraid to take on cases that involved sexual assault, particularly because they did not always meet the standards required for them to win lawsuits – specifically the need for brave witnesses. As white America

parroted racist beliefs in the superiority of whiteness and the need to avoid diluting race lines, McGuire argued many white men nevertheless engaged in 'nighttime integration'. They would drive around at night to find a Black woman to prey upon.³

The link between civil rights and uncontrollable Black sexuality allowed white Americans to reject calls for equality as simply overtures to equal access to white women's bodies. McGuire highlights the reaction of the State of Alabama to the Selma to Montgomery march to demand voting rights in 1965 as one example of the power of these sexual anxieties. Congressman William Dickerson called the marchers perverts and claimed they used churches for their all-night sex orgies. Some of the marchers, it was claimed, were paid to march with money and unlimited sex. What these baseless accusations obscure is the sexual violence used to discipline Black women. As Allison Berg has argued in her examination of Black women's memoirs of the movement, Black women's bodies were 'central to the meaning of the movement'. As Berg notes, these activists often tried to deploy a 'politics of respectability' to make claims over their bodies and sexuality. Exploring the memoirs of middle-class activists Jo Anne Gibson Robinson and Melba Patillo Beals, Berg argues that they used a 'culture of dissemblance' as defined by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, in an effort to protect some parts of the 'inner aspects of their lives'. But in Endesha Ida Mae Holland's memoirs, Black women's bodies are centred as an essential part of the contest over civil rights.⁴

Berg argues that while memories of the civil rights movement are of non-violent Black protesters facing off against violent police or white mobs, these images elide the gendered forms of violence that were often the motivation for women's participation in the movement. As McGuire has demonstrated, gendered violence often prompted organisation, like in the Ingram case, but it also served as the motivation for women to become involved in the movement. Beals, for example, remembered how a white man stalked her and threatened to rape her in retaliation for the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. But the efforts to present a middle-class image of respectability meant that Robinson and Beals avoided referencing sexual assault and danger. In contrast, Berg argues that Holland's memoir exposes the precarity of Black people's physical safety in a violent nation where white men claimed power over the physicality of everyone.⁵

Law enforcement also used sexualised violence to discipline Black women, specifically those who participated in the Black Freedom Struggle. Legal-Miller has demonstrated that law enforcement tried to undermine Black women's political engagement through 'sexualized' verbal and physical harassment. Activist Fannie Lou Hamer publicly discussed the beating she received after being arrested in Winona, Mississippi, in 1964; her assailants, other Black inmates forced to attack her, pulled her dress up during the beating. She understood it as an attempt to physically, and sexually, humiliate her. For Legal-Miller, the sexualised violence deployed in the 1960s had a long history rooted in slavery and the stereotype that Black women were 'incapable of being raped' because of their hypersexuality.⁶

This history is also rooted in Cold War policy, which made the containment of both Black sexuality and calls for freedom a legal imperative. The white nuclear family and fears that white women's bodies would be vulnerable surfaced as both domestic and foreign policy. To resist communism was to resist nationalising women's bodies and surrendering control of women's reproduction over to birth control advocates and abortionists. These beliefs were embedded in old stereotypes about communism that Americans internalised. As Kirsten Delegard has argued, anti-communism was deeply rooted in fears of feminism, as well as challenges to the white racial order because communists openly advocated anti-sexism and anti-racism. Anti-communists were a coalition of private interests and government agencies committed to suppress challenges to their wealth and control and they did so by reducing demands for equality to calls for nationalising white women's bodies to make them available to poor and Black men. Simultaneously, the civil rights movement was linked to a larger communist conspiracy to usurp white control and usher in a Soviet America. The fear was that feminism and civil rights would lead to unbridled sexual expression, and this was a slippery slope toward socialism.⁷ Anti-communism would ultimately doom the *We Charge Genocide* petition, but the petition necessarily integrated sexual violence as part of the larger history of violence committed against Black Americans.

Sexual assault and genocide

The petition, spearheaded by communist lawyer William Patterson and the CRC, argued that it was law enforcement and the legal system that perpetrated genocide against Black Americans through both its

actions and inaction. Just as the petition was introduced, as Gerald Horne has suggested, Southern segregationists were bolstered by anti-communism, which shifted the focus away from targeting 'Blackness' and instead allowed them to argue they were targeting 'Redness'. By describing the Black Freedom Struggle as Soviet- and communist-inspired, segregationists could mask racist attacks as part of containment. But as Horne contends, Patterson wanted to bring the plight of Black America to the global arena to challenge the US's global image as a liberal democracy. David Helps argues that the petition also demonstrates an early part of the Black Freedom Struggle that revealed 'racialized violence' as part of a 'global racial capitalism' and the use of 'police lynching' in both the colonised world and within the United States. For Helps, this realisation connected movements internationally that had long recognised the connection between independence movements abroad and those in the United States. For Southern segregationists, this only confirmed the Soviet inspiration behind the struggle; but for those within the movement, it expanded their community and brought international attention to Black America's plight.⁸

The petition flipped the traditional narrative and argued that it was within white society that real criminality existed. It detailed the impact of legal and extralegal violence and neglect between the years 1946 and 1951 when on average '32,000' Black Americans died each year because of unequal access to 'healthcare, jobs, education, and housing' that were widely available to white Americans. Though the petition would describe the deliberate killing of Black Americans, the larger argument was that American policy amounted to genocide, not because it set out to murder all Black Americans, but because it was a violation of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. This convention did not require the wholesale slaughter of people but 'killing members of the group' with the intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, racial, ethnic or religious group. By including rape and false accusations of rape, Patterson likened this behaviour to a broader goal to destroy Black Americans. The failure to prosecute rape against Black women, and to use the law to punish Black men with false accusations, amounted to a policy of social, political and legal control that denied Black America rights under the constitution.⁹

In 1951, when Patterson and the CRC submitted the petition, international law did not recognise rape as an instrument of genocide. Legal advisor and judge of the International Criminal Court Chile Eboe-Osuji, notes in his analysis of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, that though it was specifically absent in the convention definitions, the convention language as written in 1948 was not meant to be illustrative. In other words, it did not list all the actions that would or could be included; rather, it created general though 'exhaustive' categories. Patterson and the CRC defined rape and false accusations of rape against Black men under category two: 'causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group'. As Eboe-Osuji notes rape is now recognised as a weapon of war and genocide, but no specific international laws existed in 1951 to define that. Patterson was expanding the United Nations' convention language to include all crimes against Black America as being within the larger framework of genocide.¹⁰ Though many of the incidents listed in the petition focused on police brutality and killings, Patterson also described cases of 'legal lynching'. Legal lynching described the inability of Black Americans to find justice in the American legal system. The Ingram case was a good example of that; she and her sons faced the death penalty for defending themselves. Additionally, the trial did not include Black jurors, nor did they have access to adequate defence and it only lasted one day – preventing any assistance by legal professionals.¹¹

Other cases of legal lynching included the death penalty against accused Black rapists while white rapists of Black women were exonerated, and lengthy prison terms for Black citizens for negligible offences. The actions that invited punishment included refusing sex with a police officer, 'jostling' a white woman, walking into a building, not saying 'yes sir', riding public transportation, demanding good service after payment, walking through a white passenger car on a train, going to the movies, alerting someone on the subway they missed their stop, going on strike, refusing to work in snake-infested swamps, refusing to surrender seats to white passengers, illegally wearing a military uniform (just being a veteran appeared to capture the ire of whites), driving in a white section of town, having a white person in the car, bumping into a police officer, being out after dark, riding in a cab, asking for a drink of water, talking to a friend, returning home from war, running for coroner, rear-ending a car or conversely being rear-ended, being too slow to take a wallet out, having a light-skinned wife, having painful indigestion, deciding to run for office or running for office, chaperoning a school field trip, moving into a white neighbourhood, joining a union, registering to vote and attempting to vote, being at home, being admired by a white woman, being involved in a car accident, belonging to the NAACP, being a Girl Scout, refusing a police order to go to church, applying to take the civil service exam, going to work, refusing to

pay a police 'shakedown', wearing green on St Patrick's Day – the list went on and on. Punishments for these 'crimes' included beatings, burning crosses in yards, arrest, loss of job, estrangement from family and community, homes burned down, refusal of care at white hospitals, blinding and of course death. The majority of those meting out punishments were law officers deep within the Mississippi Delta as well as in full view of the public in Central Park, Manhattan, New York. Law enforcement and the judicial system acted as a unit to terrorise Black Americans, and federal government inaction equalled consent. The petition noted that it was not a Southern phenomenon and argued that no area of the nation was free from racist violence, thus all Black America was endangered.¹²

Rosa Lee Ingram

Horne argues that the Ingram case was one of Patterson's inspirations to compile the *We Charge Genocide* petition and from the beginning he saw it as part of a larger pattern of white access to Black women. He noted that whether it was in South Africa, Kenya, the US or Indochina, colonial leaders tried to exercise their 'will and "divine right"' over a Black woman's body.¹³ Ingram was a 40-year-old widow raising 12 children alone as a sharecropper in rural Georgia. Stratford was a tenant farmer and neighbour of the Ingrams and had allegedly made repeated overtures to her. On 4 November 1947, a fight broke out between Ingram and Stratford. Mainstream press accounts and later academic accounts claimed it was over stray hogs in Stratford's yard. But the communist and Black press and Ingram would later emphasise that she was resisting his advances. The taboo of interracial sexuality likely led to silence from media outlets on what the cause was. It was also not brought up in the courtroom, primarily because the Ingrams did not have adequate defence and accusing a white man of sexual advances would only have engendered more hostility toward the defendants.¹⁴

Ingram and four of her children, Charles (17), Wallace (16), Sammy Lee (14) and James (12), were arrested and held separately. They were accused of beating Stratford to death with a rifle, hoe and claw hammer. Over the next two months, jurisdictional disputes prevented a trial, while the Ingrams remained detained and apart from each other. On 26 January 1948, Rosa Lee, along with her sons Wallace and Sammy Lee, were tried and found guilty. There were no eyewitnesses, thus their conviction was based entirely on circumstantial evidence and statements they made in prison. However, these statements were contradictory. Rosa Lee claimed that it was only she who fought with Stratford, while her sons gave varying accounts of the fight including that there were two fights. This contradictory and limited evidence would lead to Charles's exoneration in a separate trial, while his mother and brothers would be sentenced to death with the same paucity of evidence. Because of his age, James was released.¹⁵

The death sentences captured the media's attention and Ingram's mother, Amy Hunt, began to solicit support and funds to mount an appeal for her daughter and grandsons. The case captured the NAACP's attention, and the organisation arranged for the family's defence. It also raised funds for the care and maintenance of the other Ingram children. Black newspapers also took notice, and the *Atlanta Daily World* and *Pittsburg Courier* followed the case closely. The two-year-old CRC and the communist *Daily Worker* became interested in the case as well. The CRC, headed by William Patterson, engaged in a mass action technique that found few supporters in the mainstream Black Freedom Struggle. Mass action meant regular press coverage, rallies, nationwide speeches, letters and phone calls to elected officials and law enforcement, and raising funds for defence – things that tended to draw unwanted attention to Southern communities. The NAACP feared that this tactic often emboldened communities against the defendants and instead opted to bring the case to the courtroom, rather than a national audience. The CRC had little interest in the NAACP's playbook and wanted to use cases such as that of the Ingrams to expose white supremacy as well as rally white and Black workers behind a common cause.¹⁶

By March 1948, under press scrutiny and now armed with defence attorneys, a hearing was held to consider a new trial. The attorneys Hawkins Dykes, Troy Morrow and A. T. Walden argued that the Ingrams should only have been charged with manslaughter; Stratford started the fight, and Ingram and her sons were only defending themselves. Dykes argued that entering the Ingrams' contradictory statements into evidence was malicious because they were held separately in a 'friendless' place, scared and alone, it was no wonder the stories did not match up. He also argued that the Ingrams were denied legal counsel and were not informed that they did not have to make a statement to the police. The prosecution argued that because the boys claimed there were two fights – the initial fight and one later between two of the boys and Stratford that resulted in his death – that this was clear evidence of premeditation. For the

defence this merely reflected the problems with compelling teenage boys to make statements; none of them could agree how many fights there were and who dealt the death blow. The judge commuted the Ingrams' sentences to life in prison, prompting NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall to announce that the organisation was committed to their defence and intended to appeal the convictions to the Georgia Supreme Court.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the Communist Party and the CRC devoted themselves to raising awareness of the case. By February 1948, the Ingrams' case was regularly featured in the communist *Daily Worker* and the Party played on gender to make a wide appeal emphasising Rosa Lee Ingram's concerns for her children. The *Daily Worker* regularly reminded its reading audience that Ingram was a mother – indeed her youngest child was only 17 months old when she was arrested. It featured Ingram's mother's pleas to provide support for the family, both financial and moral. These pleas certainly played on emotion, but the Party was also pointing out to its white readers the precariousness of the Black American family.¹⁸

By 18 March, a delegation, including Ingram's mother and the communist leader Claudia Jones, travelled to Washington DC to plead for federal interference in the case. The delegation, which reportedly included 100 persons from across seven states, sought an audience with President Truman, but were met instead by Philleo Nash, Truman's special assistant who had influenced him on his military desegregation policy. Nash, who expressed 'personal sympathy', said he would ask the Department of Justice (DOJ). But the DOJ simply stated that it did not have jurisdiction over the case. This is a point central to the *We Charge Genocide* petition; the federal government gave licence to the states to act without any oversight. The DOJ representative A. Abbot Rosen, head of the Civil Rights Section, counselled the delegation to have faith in the state courts and to tell Ingram to 'leave her fate' to them. Whether Rosen was being intentionally obtuse or not is unclear, but as the communists pointed out, he could not have possibly imagined that a Black woman could find justice in a Georgia court. For Patterson, this directly implicated the federal government in the state's agendas to maintain the second-class citizenship of their Black citizens and to reinforce it with violence.¹⁹

Communist Audley Moore travelled with the delegation and confronted Nash on that very issue. She argued that the history of the state of Georgia merited the delegation's fears about Ingram and her sons. She repeated for him that Ingram's two sons on trial with her were 13 and 15 and in one day they were convicted and sentenced to death. Moore tried to evoke some empathy from the government representative when she asked if he could imagine how Ingram must have felt while her sons were toiling away in prison. She insisted that 'our president' answer their demands. She also asked how the federal government could send millions in aid to Turkey and Greece, agreed to in the Truman Doctrine the year before, but could not offer aid nor comfort to the remaining Ingram children left on their own. She admonished Nash that it was a 'simple' thing and a 'human' thing, yet the president refused to provide answers. The delegation highlighted precisely the charges that would make the macabre list of crimes against Black Americans in the genocide petition, that federal government indifference perpetuated poverty, legal lynching and contributed to the genocide of Black America, while it funded overseas incursions and aid. This was part of the Party's growing criticism of the Cold War state; the US invested funds in containing communism abroad while the 'Black conditions regressed'. William Patterson's wife Louise Thompson was also with the delegation, and she pressed Nash for protection for the Ingrams against the Klan; an organisation William Patterson would later claim had the official approval of the United States government and were instrumental in Black genocide.²⁰

Two days after the delegation spoke to Washington officials, the *Pittsburg Courier* ran an article about Stratford's sexual advances. In it, Ingram described how Stratford tried to get her to go into the cotton house to 'have something to do with him', but that she refused. Her refusal, she claimed, was what started all the 'trouble'. She told the *Courier* reporter, Robert Ratcliffe, that Stratford did not try to rape her, he just tried to 'compel' her, but her constant refusal made him angry. Her husband had only died the summer before, but even while he was alive Stratford was an angry neighbour, frequently pulling his gun on the children if they wandered onto his property. It was Stratford who started the fight; he began beating her and her sons felt compelled to protect her. The article noted the very concerns that Patterson would highlight in the petition – that though Stratford was poor, white supremacy 'was his god'. He could harass the family, he could call them by their first names, and demand that they call him 'Mister' and he felt he had the 'right' to force himself on Ingram.²¹

By April, Judge William Harper commuted the Ingrams' death sentences to life sentences; this made them eligible for parole. He ordered the commutation because they were convicted on circumstantial evidence, but this did not convince him to order a new trial. The NAACP attorneys filed

an appeal to the Georgia Supreme Court and by July, the state supreme court upheld the convictions. As the costs of the appeals continued to mount, the NAACP decided they would continue financial support to the family but would try to secure parole or pardon for the imprisoned Ingrams rather than a new trial. By the following year, the CRC, which had been raising awareness about and funds for the case, turned over most of its organising to the newly created National Committee to Free the Ingram Family (NCFIF). The organisation's focus became to secure parole or a full pardon from the Governor or President Truman.²²

The NCFIF had the support of several leading Black Freedom Struggle activists and prominent white Leftists and was led by Mary Church Terrell. Formed in March 1949, the following month an interracial delegation of members travelled to Georgia to visit Mrs Ingram in prison and her children under the care of an older sister. The *Daily Worker* had earlier reported on the conditions the children were left to live in. The children lived in a house that was 'a house in name only', with warped floors, no indoor plumbing, no windows or screens, sleeping four to a bed, with little money for food. Ingram herself suffered a heart attack in prison and was in ill health, as the Party presses claimed, sick from the attack and sick from worry about her children. The *Daily Worker* continued to emphasise Ingram's protective nature as a mother; it printed part of a letter she wrote to her own mother about her worries for her children left behind. This sympathetic portrait was also part of the attempt to raise funds for her children's care organised by the International Workers Order (IWO), a Left-wing mutual aid society run by Louise Patterson. While the NAACP and the IWO raised money for the children, the NCFIF was busy circulating a petition to bring to President Truman to encourage a pardon. It also encouraged other organisations to inform their membership of the case and to collect Mother's Day cards for Ingram in prison. Both the Communist Party press and the NCFIF appealed directly to women to organise around Ingram as a mother, but with the understanding that she was imprisoned because she was a Black mother who laid claim to her own sexuality.²³

Stratford's sexual advances were also central to the communist press and the NCFIF. Immediately after the *Pittsburgh Courier* article carried Ingram's accusations, the *Daily Worker* began reporting on Stratford's advances and pinpointed them as the cause of the entire incident. It described his behaviour as having a 'white supremacy background'. Stratford making sexual demands on Ingram was not particularly remarkable, but his anger at her repeated refusal and her willingness to defend herself was. The NCFIF also featured the sexual aspects of the case in its appeals for support and it noted that her situation would not have been foreign to any woman, white or Black. But Ingram's complete powerlessness, sexually, economically and politically, made her case unique. In an appeals letter, it called on all women to rise up to free the Ingram family and noted that her case symbolised the 'cruel treatment' meted out to Black women. In a flyer that reprinted one of Ratcliffe's articles in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Stratford's sexual advances were featured as the cause of the entire event that would lead to his death. Ingram said that she and Stratford had had some words about her going on a date with him and he told her that if she did what he said she would not live in hardship anymore. But he could not get her to comply, and the last time he tried to make her 'go his way' he got angry, so he hid in the cotton field and the next time that she was alone he attacked her with his gun. She repeated that the whole incident was because she would not 'have him'. It was not something she had any control over, and she lamented that it had led to his death.²⁴

Stratford's constant sexual harassment was all too familiar to women and the case became a major inspiration for Black women in the Party. Cheryl Higashida argues that the Ingram case was one motivation for communist leader and theoretician Claudia Jones to write her 1949 article 'An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman'. For Jones, Ingram's case characterised the 'landless, Jim Crow, oppressed status' of the Black family in the United States. It highlighted the double standard of criminalising Black male sexuality, while Black women faced daily indignities from white men. Ingram's one crime was defending herself against the 'indecent advances' of a white man. Jones emphasised that the woman's class status or position made no difference; Black women regularly faced the unwanted attention of white men. Meanwhile, Black men were lynched as an excuse; she accused white men of 'hiding behind' white women's skirts, claiming chivalry and the need to protect white womanhood from Black men. Policing Black sexuality was about securing white supremacy; protecting white womanhood was merely a pretence.²⁵

Jones argued that Ingram's case exposed the deep divisions within the Left-progressive movements in recognising the plight of the Black woman, and the use of white women as a weapon. It was here in her discussion about Ingram that she articulated the triple oppression of the Black woman based on her

class, race and sex. She argued that the 'Negro question' was prior to the woman question, without Black emancipation, women's emancipation would be impossible. Ingram's case dramatically demonstrated the need to have white womanhood wake up to the intimate connections between their own oppression and that of Black America. Jones argued that it was imperative for white women to organise with Black Americans to secure emancipation for all – until then, it would be impossible. Jones argued that Ingram's case should be brought to the attention of the United Nations. Justice in the American courtroom for Black families was nearly impossible and Jones hoped international pressure would help free the Ingrams because there could be no justice in a Georgia courtroom.²⁶

Appealing to the United Nations

As Jones suggested in her article, it was time to appeal to the world and though it likely would not lead to intervention, it would certainly embarrass the Truman administration. The NCFIF agreed and hoped their appeals to the Georgia Governor and President Truman might have more weight if they brought the Ingram case to an international audience. The NCFIF presented a document, authored by the sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, to the Human Rights Commission of the Social and Economic Council of the United Nations as well as the UN General Assembly and its member states. Though the NCFIF petition did not accuse the federal government of genocide, it did describe the injustice inherent in the American judicial system, an injustice that created unliveable conditions, which left Ingram and her family few choices.²⁷

In the petition, Du Bois wrote that while Georgia meted out the worst punishment for a woman and her children defending themselves against a depraved white man, white citizens were allowed to kill their fellow Black Georgians with the explicit permission of a state apparatus unwilling to punish them.²⁸

The petition highlighted the hypocrisy of the South in its supposed reverence for white womanhood, while it made Black women 'concubines'. It noted that Black women had been used as 'brood mares' to mother 'millions of mullatoes'. The document was straightforward in its accusations that a double standard determined white men's actions towards Black women, while they also made claims to the control of white women's sexuality. But the control of the Black woman's sexuality was not in isolation, that control was secured through forced 'pauperism' that was perpetuated by 'compulsory illiteracy, and disenfranchisement by poll taxes'. The system of white supremacy was an economic, sexual and political system that worked in tandem to perpetuate its grip on power.²⁹

Dayo Gore argues that the NCFIF petition focused its defence of Ingram on a larger 'defense of Black womanhood' and helped to frame a 'radical civil rights politics' within the 'acceptable debates over motherhood and women's citizenship'. She notes that the Ingram case was not typical of the usual 'legal lynching' cases that the CRC had often rallied around because they often focused on cases where Black men were convicted of assaulting white women. The Ingram case was different because it made a widowed Southern Black mother the 'symbolic figure' and pushed Black women's experiences with 'sexualized racial violence' into the public sphere. It also provided a 'validation' of Black defendant's 'use of deadly force' in a case in which a Black family was accused of killing a white man. Erik McDuffie argues that the Ingram case exemplified the 'interlocking systems of oppression' that were spelled out in Claudia Jones's neglect article – the sexual assault of Black women, disrespect of Black motherhood and the disenfranchisement and 'economic exploitation' of Black women. Both Gore and McDuffie agree that the Ingram case helped to 'galvanize' radicals around the specific and unique needs of Black women.³⁰

The petition noted that no political official, from the Georgia Governor to the President of the United States, was willing to take any action on this or other cases of egregious legal misconduct. But it also noted the failure of the United Nations Human Rights Commission to take seriously any cases from the United States that were in clear violation of the nation's alleged commitment to human rights. The commission, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, failed to confront one of its most powerful member nations. And it is no wonder, Carol Anderson notes, that as soon as the DOJ was made aware of the NCFIF petition, it warned the State Department that it could make it hard to convince other member nations that the Ingrams had received a fair trial. The DOJ believed that the petition was influenced by the Soviet Union and feared that the Soviets might bring the case up in the General Assembly. The NCFIF petition was introduced to the UN in August 1949. By October there was a small victory: a Polish delegate mentioned the petition and the Ingram case as a violation of human rights, but this likely only confirmed for the US State Department that the petition was communist-inspired and -supported. By November,

no action was taken on the petition and the NCFIF was encouraging its members and supporters not to give up hope.³¹

America's race problem was deeply embarrassing to US officials and generally reduced to a Southern problem. But it never seemed to rattle the federal government's nerves enough to prompt decisive action at the federal level. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP told the State Department that his organisation was handling the Ingrams' legal matters, but he was certain that the NCFIF was 'communist dominated', which, as Anderson argues, provided the State Department with ammunition to undermine the petition.³² The comfortable ability of the State Department and the DOJ to dismiss these accusations as communist inspired, and the willing collaboration of a mainstream civil rights group to the anti-communist hysteria, demonstrates that the Cold War civil rights movement had to operate with the unstated but explicit permission of the very state that sought its dissolution. But even in the face of anti-communist harassment, Black women radicals continued to push for justice.

Sojourners for Truth and Justice

In 1951, inspired by the Ingram case and Claudia Jones's article on Black women's triple oppression, Louise Thompson Patterson and poet Beulah Richardson organised the Sojourners for Truth and Justice. Richardson had written a poem the same year titled 'A Black Woman Speaks . . . of White Womanhood, of White Supremacy, of Peace', which addressed the very concerns inherent in the Ingram case; the use of white women's sexuality to police Black men while sexual assault against Black women went unpunished. According to Erik McDuffie, the poem was another inspiration for the Sojourners. McDuffie argues the organisation and the women involved were instrumental in publicising Black women's unique oppression and the Ingram case was an important cause that unified the organisation.³³ For McDuffie, it was also a significant inspiration for Black women's activism. The NCFIF was one example, but the Sojourners was an organisation run by Black women focused on Black women's triple oppression.³⁴

In September 1951, Patterson and Richardson issued a 'Call for Negro Women' to meet in Washington DC on the last weekend of the month to meet political leaders to demand an end to legal lynching as well as the Korean War. The 'Call' would reflect the desires of the organisation to address the issues of legal lynching as well as the federal government's unwillingness to get involved – the same issues that would be included in the *We Charge Genocide* petition that would be released only months later. Charlotta Bass, editor of the Black newspaper *The California Eagle*, wrote about the group's plans for the communist *Daily Worker*. She linked the organisation's demands to the women's concerns about the Cold War; while the United States focused on containment abroad, violence against Black Americans went unpunished and unheeded. The US's priorities were imperialist in intent as it kept Black Americans in conditions of poverty while trying to contain people of colour abroad. Ingram and her case were seen as an 'inspiration' and her 'militancy' was 'the symbol of the Sojourners'. Shortly afterwards, William Patterson would submit the *We Charge Genocide* petition to the United Nations, and the Sojourners would be vocal supporters of it.³⁵

Charging genocide

The NCFIF attempt, as well as the *We Charge Genocide* petition, to appeal to the infant United Nations for intervention on behalf of Black Americans was not new. In 1946 the National Negro Congress presented a petition that received almost no attention. The following year, Du Bois received the encouragement of the NAACP to offer up a more detailed accusation against the United States. This one received more attention, but in 1947 the United States was on the precipice of the Cold War and internal challenges to its domestic and foreign policy were seen as treasonous subversion. Du Bois himself would come into conflict with NAACP leadership and was forced out of the organisation in 1948, stopping any momentum his petition had. William Patterson participated in the campaign to bring the NCFIF petition to UN member nations; when that failed, he included the Ingram case in the *We Charge Genocide* petition, which formally charged the United States government with its failure to guarantee Black Americans the rights of citizenship. Though American law already forbade the actions listed in the petition, the government did not uphold the laws and was in violation of its own principles and those of the UN convention, to which it was a signatory.³⁶

Sex, alleged sexual assault and rape featured prominently in the petition; Patterson classified these actions under Article II (b) of the UN convention as mental harm. Stratford's attempted sexual assault of Ingram joined 15 other cases of rape or attempted rape in the petition. Additionally, the petition listed other cases in which someone tried to protect Black women or girls from rape. For example, a sharecropper by the name of Roger Malcolm objected to advances made on his wife by members of his landlord's family as well as 'disposition' of his crops by the landlord. A lynch mob kidnapped Malcolm and his wife and their friends the Dorseys. The mob beat the women and then lined them up and shot them. The Attorney General Tom Clark had six men in custody, but a grand jury refused to indict the men who went free. In another case, a dentist was beaten to death after he objected to two men molesting a young Black girl.³⁷

In only three of the rape or attempted rape cases were the perpetrators punished. One rapist was able to plead to a lesser charge, another paid a fine for an attempted rape. Only one rapist faced significant punishment, a 10-year prison sentence, likely because he raped a 12-year-old girl. In the other cases, the rapist was not prosecuted and in at least one case, the woman who was raped, Recy Taylor, faced retribution from the local community when she tried to get her attackers convicted. Taylor was kidnapped, her clothes were forcibly removed and then six men raped her. At least one of the men admitted the crime, but local juries in Abbeville, Alabama, refused to indict. Rosa Parks, investigating sexual assault cases for the NAACP, worked to help the Taylor family, but they faced so much harassment that they eventually left the state. As Jeanne Theoharis has noted in her biography of Parks, the Taylor case inspired her to focus on issues of gender violence and the near impossibility of Black women to receive justice in sexual violence cases. Parks herself was run out of town when she was investigating it.³⁸

These attempted assaults and rapes, Patterson argued, were part of the larger terror campaign that led to genocidal conditions for the Black American population. But these, coupled with accusations of assault, created an environment of total sexual control over Black Americans. Sometimes there was no actual accusation of sexual assault – in some cases proximity to white women was enough to merit death. The petition included 28 cases of alleged sexual assault, which resulted in 10 state executions of Black men. There were also cases that led to murder or beatings by white men. Two American soldiers were killed because they were seen talking to French girls. William Daniels, a veteran, was shot and killed because a white female clerk accused him of jostling her, and 18-year-old James Harris narrowly escaped being lynched because he was accused of rape.³⁹

Sexual assault, accusations of assault, and other forms of gender violence including murder for proximity to white women, were all part of the American campaign to uphold white supremacy by ensuring total physical, mental, economic and social control over the Black population. While many of the cases listed in the petition involved law enforcement, those that did not had the implicit permission or explicit encouragement of law enforcement. These included cases of unprosecuted white rapists, and false accusations against Black men that led to beatings, harassment, imprisonment and sometimes death. This was all part of the larger genocidal machinations within the United States. It was not spelled out in official policy, but it did not have to be, the federal government's unwillingness to interfere in these cases, or failure to secure indictments against white assailants, perpetuated an environment that met the United Nations standard of severe mental harm against a population of people.

Patterson argued that the cumulative effect of violence against some Black Americans contributed to the mental harm of all Black Americans. He cited an article by Harry Haywood and Earl Conrad that argued 'hour by hour, moment by moment' there was a 'lynching of the Negro's soul' in psychological and 'physical forms' which had the effect of the 'most enduring lynching of all'. This led to a life expectancy for Black Americans that was fully 10 years less than that of white Americans, higher maternal and infant mortality. In addition to the physical effects were the broader feelings of defeatism and emotional and mental battery. The United States government may not have been marching Americans to camps or massacre pits, but it was marching Black America towards physical and psychological defeat.⁴⁰

The Ingram case is only one of dozens Patterson chose to include in the petition. It was a complicated case because a white man did end up dead, but it also revealed the inherent inequalities that Black families faced. John Stratford was killed because he assumed he had the right to Rosa Lee Ingram and a right to harass the entire Ingram family. There were few cases of justice for Black families that would have deterred Stratford from his actions, but there was a plethora of cases of the extralegal behaviour of white Americans that went unpunished. The *We Charge Genocide* petition failed in its one goal to secure intervention on behalf of Black America; part of that had to do with American influence

in the United Nations. But the anti-communist hysteria that came to dominate American policy led to a total dismissal of the petition as a Soviet-inspired communist plot.

The costs of anti-communism

Initially, the Black press and activists responded favourably to the petition. Patterson himself went on tour in Europe to publicise it, while well-known performing artist Paul Robeson introduced it in the United States. But both Robeson and Patterson had garnered reputations as outspoken activists with links to the Communist Party of the USA; indeed, Robeson was sometimes referred to as 'Black Stalin'. He had his passport seized by the State Department to prevent his travels, a move that seriously harmed his career. The FBI monitored both men and was particularly interested in Patterson's speeches about the petition; when he returned to the United States his passport was also revoked. As Patterson would later describe it, every effort made to get the UN Human Rights Commission to consider the petition was 'blocked' by US officials and the nation's allies. He argued that the US had persistently ignored and defied all 'resolutions and conventions' against racism agreed on by the UN and the petition was evidence of that. Patterson though believed that if white and Black workers came together in the United States, that justice could finally be achieved.⁴¹

The Sojourners had an even shorter life, barely surviving a year. The FBI began monitoring the organisation even before it had made its way to Washington. An informant had tipped off the Bureau about the sojourn to DC; by the time the women arrived in Washington, the FBI, Secret Service and the US Army Counterintelligence Corps (CIC) all had them under surveillance. One informant claimed that the organisation planned to march to Georgia and break Rosa Lee Ingram out of prison; this, the informant claimed, was meant to be the starting point for the revolution. Even the FBI doubted that information, but it nevertheless informed Georgia authorities who increased security at the prison and obtained an injunction preventing protests within a mile of the prison facility. The Sojourners *did* declare their intention to march to Georgia in solidarity with Ingram, even announcing it in the *Daily Worker*, but it kept being postponed and never actually took place. In April 1952, the Sojourners sent representatives to the Ingrams' parole hearing and Charlotta Bass reached out to the NAACP to seek a coalition to secure the Ingrams' release. Late in 1952, the FBI noted that the organisation was at a 'low ebb' while many of its members and leaders had to deal with legal issues of their own or their spouses. The Bureau monitored Bass, the Sojourners' last president, until 1956, making pretext phone calls to her home even when she was bedridden with severe arthritis. Dayo Gore argues that the demise of the Sojourners demonstrates the challenge of the 'organized Left's' conception of civil rights to 'mainstream understanding'. The Sojourners was a short-lived organisation, but it publicised Black women's unique oppression and showed that the Ingram case highlighted the perils of Black womanhood in the United States.⁴²

The CRC continued its efforts to work toward the Ingrams' release and the NCFIF renamed itself the Women's Committee for Equal Justice (WCEJ). In 1954, the family went up for parole, but was denied. That same year Mary Church Terrell passed away and organising for the Ingram family moved to different organisations. Under pressure from constant redbaiting, the CRC dissolved in 1956; it had been facing serious financial strain and that year the Subversives Activities Control Board labelled it a Communist front. By the summer of 1957, the press was reporting that Georgia officials were meeting with the Ingram family. By this point, she and her two sons Sammy Lee and Wallace had been in prison for nearly 10 years. The Chairman of the Georgia Parole Board agreed to present the Ingrams' case to the board. All three were serving prison sentences at Reidsville State Prison, but Rosa Lee Ingram's health had deteriorated in prison after two heart attacks, she ended up serving some of her time in a county home for the indigent aged, even though she was only 49 years old. But the Ingrams were denied parole again. Complaints about protests and demonstrations on their behalf had led to the case operating on a 'lower register'. But even without protests, Georgia authorities continued to resist the Ingrams' release, well after they served the minimum years required for parole. In March 1959, the *Daily Worker* reported that the Ingrams were still serving their sentences; it was not until August 1959 that the family was finally freed after serving 11 years.⁴³

Conclusion

As American domestic and foreign policy sought to secure the white family as a bulwark against communist revolution, it ignored that Black families were afforded neither the same respect nor protection. White supremacy demanded absolute control over Black citizens; this secured white America's right to issue violence against their fellow Americans in the form of rape, beatings, burning homes, harassment and murder; this was coupled with poverty, denial of education and the vote, and local, state and federal systems that were unresponsive to the concerns of Black America. At its core, white supremacy focused on the unbridled sexual freedom of white men and their control over the bodies of others, and unfortunately even the international community failed to respond to their pleas for help. The petition and those before it served an important purpose: to highlight the inability of the international community to check the power of the United States in its historical and contemporary indifference to correct racist abuses.

But the organisation around the Ingram family laid the foundation for a feminism that understood women's oppression could not be reduced to essentialist arguments about women's sameness. Rather Black women and other women of colour faced historical and contemporary abuses that white women did not; and sometimes white women were the perpetrators of that oppression. This would influence later generations of feminists and activists who came to understand the intersections of oppression and who today articulate an emancipatory ethos that accounts for various experiences.

Notes

¹Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name*; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*; Legal-Miller, "'The Unmentionable Ugliness of the Jailhouse'", 10–12.

²Feimster, *Southern Horrors*; Legal-Miller, "'The Unmentionable Ugliness of the Jailhouse'", 12.

³McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*, 33–5.

⁴McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*, 217–18; Allison Berg, 'Trauma and Testimony', 84–6.

⁵Berg, 'Trauma and Testimony', 88.

⁶Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 59; Legal-Miller, "'The Unmentionable Ugliness of the Jailhouse'", 12.

⁷Delegard, *Battling Miss Bolshevik*.

⁸Horne, *Black Revolutionary*, 126; Helps, "'We Charge Genocide'", 3.

⁹Patterson, *We Charge Genocide*, xxv; Helps, "'We Charge Genocide'", 1.

¹⁰Eboe-Osuji, *International Law and Sexual Violence*, 159–60.

¹¹Prisoners Relief Committee, Civil Rights Congress, 'Appeal for Freedom of Rosa Lee Ingram'.

¹²Patterson, *We Charge Genocide*.

¹³Horne, *Black Revolutionary*, 118.

¹⁴Martin, 'Race, Gender, and Southern Justice', 252–5; McGuire, *At The Dark End of the Street*, 80–1, 307–8; Civil Rights Congress, 'The Facts of the Ingram Case', 1.

¹⁵Martin, 'Race, Gender, and Southern Justice', 252–5; Civil Rights Congress, 'The Facts of the Ingram Case'; Du Bois, 'Chronology of the Rosa Lee Ingram Case'.

¹⁶Martin, 'Race, Gender, and Southern Justice', 255; Horne, *Black Revolutionary*, 118; 'Georgia Dooms Negro Mother, 2 Sons', 1; 'Save Negro Mother from Chair', 2.

¹⁷Martin, 'Race, Gender, and Southern Justice', 255; Southard, 'Judge Weighs Motion for New Ingram Trial', 3.

¹⁸Lowenfels, 'Please Save my Daughter and Grandsons', 8; 'Delegation to Georgia will Aid Negro Mother', 2-A.

¹⁹Berry, 'White House Refuses to Aid Doomed Negro Mother, Sons', 3.

²⁰Berry, 'As We See It', 2; Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare*, 240.

²¹Ratcliffe, 'He Tried to Go With Me', 1, 4.

²²Martin, 'Race, Gender, and Southern Justice', 259–61; 'Ingram', 6; 'Defer Hearing on New Trial for Ingrams', 11.

²³Southard, 'Eight Hungry Ingram Kids in a Georgia Shack', 1; 'Mrs. Ingram Writes her Mother from Jail', 3.

²⁴'The Ingram Story – America's Shame'.

²⁵Jones, 'An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman', 15; Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 44.

²⁶Jones, 'An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman', 16.

²⁷White Katz to Dr. W. E. B. DuBois.

²⁸'A Petition to the Human Rights Commission of the Social and Economic Council of the United Nations'.

²⁹'A Petition to the Human Rights Commission of the Social and Economic Council of the United Nations'.

³⁰Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 82–3; McDuffie, 'A "New Freedom Movement of Negro Women"', 84.

³¹'Ingram Newsletter'; Martin, 'Internationalizing the American Dilemma', 37–8.

³²'A Petition to the Human Rights Commission of the Social and Economic Council of the United Nations'; Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize*, 160.

³³McDuffie, *Sojourning for Truth and Justice*, 171; Gore, 'A Black Woman Speaks'.

³⁴Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 75–6; McDuffie, 'A "New Freedom Movement of Negro Women"', 86.

³⁵'A Call to Negro Women'; Bass, 'Why We're Going to Washington', 2; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 85.

³⁶Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize*, 160.

³⁷Patterson, *We Charge Genocide*, 64, 77.

³⁸Patterson, *We Charge Genocide*, 80–1, 90; Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life*, 23.

³⁹Patterson, *We Charge Genocide*, 61–125.

⁴⁰Patterson, *We Charge Genocide*, 78, 126.

⁴¹Horne, *Black Revolutionary*, 135, 137, 144; Patterson, *The Man Who Cried Genocide*, 213–14; 'Civil Rights Congress Quits', 8.

⁴²Federal Bureau of Investigation, Sojourners for Truth and Justice; Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 88–9.

⁴³'Georgia Official Hints at Release of Ingrams', 1; 'Georgia Ignoring Ingrams', 2; '11 Year Battle Wins Freedom of Mrs. Ingram', 2; Martin, 'Race, Gender, and Southern Justice', 265–6; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 97–8.

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