

Urban Justice Center

Sex Workers' rights and Human Trafficking

<https://www.urbanjustice.org/2020/11/09/kamala-harris-is-our-new-vp-and-that-holds-different-meanings-for-people/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

On Jan. 20, Vice President-elect Kamala Harris will make history as the nation's first woman of color to be sworn into the second-highest office in the land. The history behind Harris' election has been momentarily eclipsed by ballot count delays, a days-long period of intense anticipation, and ongoing public tantrums by the sitting president, but amid the chaos, women of color everywhere are reflecting on what the victory means to them, both personally and as a people.

That Harris was chosen to be on the ticket with Biden was a major statement in itself, especially considering she was [his biggest opponent](#) on the debate stage during the primaries. A Black and Indian woman vice president succeeding an administration hell-bent on eliminating rights for marginalized groups makes the victory even sweeter for those who have been disheartened by the racist, divisive rhetoric over the last four years.

She understands the issues that affect people of color and Black women and Indian women in particular in a way that someone who doesn't come from those backgrounds wouldn't understand, said K. Tempest Bradford, a speculative fiction author and creative writing teacher. I think that's a good starting place. She does not think that women are less important than men, and she doesn't think that white people are superior to people of color, and given what we have been through for the last four years, even just having that is important.

Harris has left a lasting mark in every elected position she has held, from her role as district attorney of San Francisco and her six years as California attorney general to her tenure as a U.S. senator. Now people are anxiously waiting to see what level of influence she'll have on both the Biden presidency and the country as a whole.

To me personally, [Harris] reflects a lot of the values that I have been hoping for and expecting in the country, Dixon Dixon Diallo, the founder and president of [SisterLove](#), an organization that aims to improve the lives of Black women through reproductive justice advocacy and HIV/AIDS education. Her representation is just one part of the bill that's due to us for the mental, physical, and emotional labor that we put into the work around making sure that the people we need to represent us and our issues are elected into office. We're finally being recognized for the powerful people that we are.

Harris' performance at the vice presidential debate where she repeatedly said [I'm speaking](#) to Vice President Mike Pence after he tried to interrupt her multiple times was met with cheers by women of color everywhere, [who related to](#) being patronized by dismissive white men. For Dixon Diallo, who has been on the front lines fighting for human rights, justice, and equality, that was a familiar moment.

I was grateful that she very intelligently, very matter-of-factly, but also very strongly stood her ground and did not get run over by this ultra evangelical misogynist, she said. But at the same time, we know that Black women have the potential to even be more powerful and strong in defending ourselves when we're in those kinds of positions.

Dixon Diallo is hoping for the same level of assertiveness once Harris takes office, especially when it comes to holding Biden accountable for issues surrounding racial justice.

She's gonna have to help him figure out his language, make sure he stays in his lane around certain things, and focus on what he says and how he says them, she said. There's a certain cultural humility that he's going to have to embrace and I expect that she will be able to do that and she will probably do that without needing to be pushed by the rest of us.

When it comes to addressing racial disparities, the vice president-elect [has said](#) she believes public policy should be formed with the goal of creating equity. Financial equity, a major barrier holding back many people of color, is one goal members of the Black community hope she'll forcefully work to achieve.

While Vice President-elect Kamala Harris embodies the diversity of our multiracial democracy, we know there is more work to do to secure a future that works for all of us, said Dr. Michael McAfee, president and CEO of PolicyLink, an organization that strives to eliminate poverty and create an equitable economy. The fact remains that [100 million people](#) one in three of us are experiencing chronic financial insecurity and are locked out of the potential for economic prosperity due to decades of persistent racial and economic inequality. The fight for equity continues, even though the White House will soon look more like our nation. Personally, I look forward to working with VP-elect Harris to finally realize the promise of equity.

Harris will have to prepare for a different level of politics compared to other incoming vice presidents. Since a woman has never before held a position of this level in the U.S., the amount of bias and microaggressions Harris will encounter as vice president still remains to be seen.

Sherry Sims, the founder of the [Black Women's Career Network](#), an organization that works to support the professional growth of women of color, said she hopes to see Harris address this treatment and vocalize her experience in real time, rather than waiting to discuss it once she's out of office.

I definitely want [Harris] to shed more light to what it's like to be a Black woman working in that space, Sims said. I'm hoping that at some point in her career, there's a conversation about it because I know myself and a lot of other women would like to hear what that experience is like.

All eyes will be on Harris to see what she does when she takes office, but Sims says she hopes to see Harris continue to be an unapologetically strong woman of color who speaks up when it's right.

I see [Harris] as very outspoken," said Sims. "Now that she's on the playing field with the big boys in a whole nother way, I hope that we can see that that's strength. I think it's inspiring for us as Black women to see that."

While the election results have brought giddiness and excitement from people who are thrilled to witness a woman of color hold such a coveted position, they have also brought some mixed reactions from communities that have been harmed under Harris leadership.

Harris has fended off attacks on her record since she announced her candidacy in January 2019. As San Francisco district attorney, she established an [LGBTQ hate crime unit](#) and was an early supporter of same-sex marriage. But while Harris has [strong support](#) from the LGBTQ community in general, her relationship with sex workers and [the trans community](#) has been complicated. In 2015, [she fought to block](#) gender-affirming medical care for trans people in prison, a move that has followed her throughout her time on the campaign trail. Harris has taken [full responsibility](#) for this failing, but for many, she still has a long way to go to earn their trust.

Kamala Harris is no friend to trans women black trans women and a[n] always-cop, I don't support her at all, said activist and [G.L.I.T.S.](#) founder Ceyenne Doroshow in [an Instagram post](#) in August.

Harris also called a 2008 proposition to decriminalize sex work [ridiculous](#) and incorrectly claimed that it contributes to a rise in the transmission of HIV. In addition, she has worked [to shut down websites](#) that helped sex workers vet potential clients.

The victim narrative and rescue mentality that most Democrats take around sex work is not helpful, said RJ Thompson, a human rights lawyer, longtime sex worker, and director of the [Sex Workers Project](#). We do not need to be rescued, we need our human rights protected.

During her time in the U.S. Senate, however, Harris has had a [much more progressive record](#) than in her previous positions, indicating that her stances on key issues could be evolving.

It gives me hope in terms of political strategy that [Harris] may be coming around and becoming more progressive, but it gives me pause of what her true values and her true convictions are, just like the vast majority of politicians in this country would give me pause, said Thompson.

Thompson, a critic of Harris prosecutorial record, still acknowledges the importance of her nomination and victory.

I recognize that to many people in this country, representation is very important, he said. And as an organization that shares the values of anti-oppression and believes that white supremacy and patriarchy are deeply, deeply ingrained in institutions in this country, we understand why it's historically significant to have a woman of color, a Black woman, a South Asian woman, in a high-level position like this.

Thompson said he wants the new Biden administration to understand that sex workers have the best policy solutions for their lives. He hopes to work with the administration toward full decriminalization of consensual adult sex work, eliminating stereotypes of sex workers, and creating better outcomes for sex trafficking.

We, as sex workers, can speak for ourselves, he said. No policies should be created at the state or federal level without a vast array of input from people of different identities and different sectors of the sector trades, from street-based workers to strippers to people in the porn industry to massage providers.

The Biden-Harris victory is especially meaningful to the people in the Indian village where Harris' grandmother was born. People in the village have been [praying at the local temple](#) since she was chosen as the vice presidential nominee and have posted signs of support for months. Women living in the village also [released a video](#) last week with a sign that sent their good wishes. Once the race was called, [victory celebrations erupted](#).

Harris' election is a historic moment that shouldn't be overshadowed by the discord and chaos from the ousted administration. No matter Harris' background or political affiliation, this is a powerful time for women of color everywhere, and many want to sit for a moment and enjoy it.

I expect [Harris] to be a reminder vocally, physically, in presence, and otherwise of a debt that's been owed to Black women who have delivered this [victory] for the party and for the country, as we always have and have never been recognized or compensated in the policies, in the services, in the programs, and in the representation that we have earned, said Dixon Diallo.

Similar to Dixon Diallo, Bradford is also excited about what's to come.

I'm kind of feeling the way I did at the beginning of the Obama presidency, said Bradford. I just have a lot of hope that somebody who shares some of my identities is in a position of power. I know that the president and vice president can't 100% change everything all by themselves on the turn of the dime, but just knowing that there's somebody who shares some of my identities represented in that place means that there's going to be change.

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