Like many of you, I counted down the moments, with both trepidation and worry, to the reading of the verdict in the Derek Chauvin trial. As someone who has studied state-sanctioned violence against the Black community and who grew up listening to my father talk about how the brutal murder of Emmett Till instilled a deep-rooted fear of white men in young Black boys throughout the South—I do not have much faith in a system that is rooted in white supremacy. As I watched Chauvin’s face as the verdict was read, his look of surprise, in many ways, mirrored my own. Given that less than 5% of police officers who commit unspeakable acts of atrocity against our communities are held responsible, I was not expecting the system to work the way we are often led to believe it is supposed to. I watched as people cheered and cried, exhaled and hugged, and I could not help but wonder what our lives would be like if accountability for police officers killing unarmed Black and Brown lives was the norm and not the rare exception - if Black and Brown lives were not constantly threatened by policing and prisons and so many other oppressive systems. I sat there after hearing the verdict, and though I wanted to exhale, I knew I could not because this was only a small step toward moving us closer to where we need to be so that we can be safe in this country. I was reminded of something that Angela Davis once said after the failure of the grand jury to indict Darren Wilson for the murder of Michael Brown, “There is so much history of this racist violence that simply to bring one person to justice is not going to disturb the whole racist edifice.”

This past year has been challenging for the Black and Brown communities, as we have struggled with both the devasting impact of COVID-19 and the increased reality that we are still fighting to convince the world that our lives matter. We are in the middle of multiple pandemics, fighting to breathe, fighting to survive, and fighting to find moments of peace and joy. The reality, according to Mapping Police Violence, is that more than 1,000 unarmed people died due to police harm between 2013 and 2019 and about a third of them were Black. Additionally, about 17% of the Black people who died due to police harm were unarmed, a larger share than any other racial group and about 1.3 times more than the average of 13%. In 2020, between January and August, police killed at least one Black person every week, and 48 states reported police killings.*

Over the past four and half weeks, there have been nearly 50 mass shootings, including attacks against Asian American and Sikh communities. Since the trial of Derek Chauvin started, approximately 75 people have been killed by the police, including 20-year-old Daunte Wright in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota; 13-year-old Adam Toledo in Chicago, Illinois; and, most recently, 16-year-old Ma’Khia Bryant in Columbus, Ohio.
The system is not broken. It is unfair. It is deeply problematic. It is racist. And it must be dismantled so that we can rebuild something better. As the president of the National Women’s Association (NWSA), I invite you to step with me into the space that has been illuminated by the work of Angela Davis, Ruthie Wilson Gilmore, and Mariame Kaba, among others, to imagine a world without police brutality and where Black and Brown people are treated with justice and equity, and then work like hell with us to make it happen.

This is the moment where we must fight. This is the moment where we must stand. This is the moment where we must hold fast to our dreams for what this country can and should become. We add our voice to the growing chorus of organizations and individuals speaking out in support of the Chauvin verdict, but we are clear that this is not the end of our work but just (yet another) beginning. We know that pain and joy can exist in the same space. We invite you to stop and hold space with us for all of the families who have not received justice but who are, at this moment, finding some peace and perhaps some joy. “Freedom,” as Coretta Scott King reminded us, “is never really won. You earn it and win it in every generation.” We do that by standing together, fighting together, dreaming together, mourning and grieving together, and working to dismantle a white supremacist system together.

In Solidarity,
The National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA)Karsonya “Kaye” Wise Whitehead, President

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