



MN NOW State Board
P. O. Box 912 • Burnsville, MN 55337
National Organization for Women: Six Core Issues
Racial Justice • Freedom from Violence • Constitutional Equality
Economic Justice • Gender Equality • Reproductive Rights

June 12, 2020

Toni Van Pelt
NOW President
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Washington, DC, 2005
pres@now.org

CC: Christian Nunes, NOW Vice President
Gina Austin Fresh, NOW Heartland Board Representative
Barbara Miller, NOW Heartland Board Representative
Jocelyn Morris, NOW Heartland Board Representative

Subject: **Minnesota NOW Calls for NOW President Toni Van Pelt to Resign**

Dear Ms. Van Pelt,

The Minnesota Chapter of the National Organization for Women (MN NOW), has lost confidence in your ability to lead our national organization and we demand that you resign from your position as NOW President by June 19, 2020 at 4:00 p.m. EST.

Specifically, your lack of understanding of the racial justice issue, your inability or unwillingness to learn and grow in this area, and your continued privileged behavior is holding our organization back from fulfilling our mission and damaging our reputation as an Equal Rights Organization.

MN NOW is fully participating in the Racial Justice movement that has been most recently highlighted by the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer and we demand that our national leadership and organization reflect and embody our Racial Justice core issue. We must be an organization that welcomes and promotes People of Color and Indigenous Peoples and one that allies with their agenda of equality in all aspects of our society.

MN NOW members first became concerned with your leadership on this issue at the 2019 National Conference when your behavior chairing both workshop breakout sessions and the plenary general session was discriminatory against young women, women of color, and transgender women. Your treatment was not even-handed or fair, it was discriminatory and unacceptable. Our observations are fully outlined in Appendix A at the end of this letter.

Our next concern rose when we became aware of Kim Sontag's Facebook post. The post showing a photograph of a black man and a bicycle indicating that the bicycle was stolen, with no supporting evidence, and giving his location showed a lack of judgement with racist

overtones on the part of Ms. Sontag. The possible consequences of harm being done to this individual cannot be discounted. Clearly this behavior is a violation of our Racial Justice core issue. Ms. Sontag was rightly called out on this post by Vice President Christian Nunes, yet Ms. Sontag defended her position rather than admit her behavior is grounded in white supremacy and racism. Minnesota NOW has repeatedly called for accountability from NOW leadership on this incident. We have yet to receive a satisfactory response from you. See Appendix B for a complete account of our communication on this issue.

After the brutal murder of George Floyd, National NOW sent out a press release with the headline: "I Can't Breathe - We All Can't Breathe" This headline is insensitive because it implies that the discrimination we are subject to as white women is equivalent to the years of oppression and violence that has been perpetrated against people of color. It's a mistake that shouldn't have been made and shouldn't have to be explained to the President of NOW. MN NOW is embarrassed by this co-opting of Mr. Floyd's last words. See Appendix C.

More recently, we have been made aware that MN NOW is not the first NOW chapter or members to be concerned with racial discrimination occurring within our leadership. Specifically, a 2018 Letter of Concern drafted by NOW employees and interns outlined a series of concerns regarding the discriminatory practices in the NOW national office. Several instances of racist behavior on your part were documented and claims of a hostile work environment were made. These employees resigned rather than continue to work for NOW. A copy of the 2018 Letter of Concern is included as a separate document with this letter.

We are also aware that your former Vice President, Gilda Yazzi, who is an Indigenous person has filed a lawsuit against NOW claiming racial discrimination and retaliation.

Minnesota NOW has received your communications apologizing for your behavior, offering plans for change, and promising racial justice training. See Appendix D. Unfortunately, this has not translated to a change of your behavior or a recognition of privilege on your part and in the meantime we continue to alienate our allies and members of color.

For these reasons, it is the opinion of Minnesota NOW that the organization would be better off with a different individual, preferably a woman of color, at its head. Minnesota NOW is convinced there is a real possibility of meaningful and transformative change in our society on the issue of Racial Justice, and we want to be among those leading the charge. We've lost confidence in your ability to lead NOW. We ask that you don't cause further damage to NOW's reputation as an Equal Rights Organization and we demand that you resign from your position as NOW President by June 19, 2020 at 4:00 p.m. EST.

Working towards racial justice,



M.Kathleen Murphy
Minnesota NOW Vice President on behalf of the MN NOW State Board

APPENDIX A

National Conference

The following is 2019-2020 Minnesota NOW President Joan Boone's account of Toni Van Pelt's behavior at the 2019 National NOW Conference.

Breakout session: A fellow MN NOW member and I attended a breakout session in which you were the presider. During the session, a group of three young feminists requested to speak on the topic of sex workers, specifically what sex workers are in today's society. As one of the three started to speak, you immediately interrupted and said their definition of sex workers was wrong and that you would hear no more from them on the topic. One of the feminists attempted to continue to speak and again, you, with disdain and emphasis clear in your voice, interrupted and shut the door on the conversation. Not only did you not allow them to continue to speak, you did not allow any sort of dialogue so that they could have their voices heard. I was horrified at this display of power and control on your part, as was the MN NOW member who was with me.

Resolution session: On the last day of the conference, a session was held where NOW members could offer resolutions for consideration. You presided over this session. MN NOW members in attendance were shocked and dismayed as we watched you interact with young feminists, LGBTQIA+ and women of color members who came to the microphone to present their ideas. We watched, and listened, as on several occasions, you dismissed them immediately from the microphone for not following the proper procedure, including holding up the wrong color card, not having had their written resolutions transferred from the back of the room to the front, and not stating the appropriate, and required, verbal statements announcing their intention. We then watched as you proceeded to accept all such missteps by members who were middle-aged, white feminists. Many of these members also came to the microphone with the wrong color card, had not had their resolutions properly moved from front to back etc. – but instead of being interrupted and ultimately dismissed, you allowed them to speak and even stated to one member: “Oh, that’s okay. Go ahead.” Your unequal treatment, and aggressive manner, towards the women of color, LGBTQIA+ and young feminists displayed ageism, sexism and racism. Your behavior was disrespectful and discriminatory.

APPENDIX B

Kim Sontag Facebook Post

Kim Sontag, employed as the NOW Communications/Media Specialist who reports directly to you, posted the following image, captioned by herself, on her personal Facebook page. (Of note, the white circles on the image were apparently not added by Ms. Sontag.) Ms. Sontag posted this in May 2020. We had just heard about the killing of a black man, Ahmaud Arbery, for the crime of running through a white neighborhood. And we had seen the video of Amy Cooper wielding her privilege as a white woman against a black male bird-watcher in Central Park. However, the NOW Communications Specialist should be well aware of the dangers associated with the unsubstantiated claims of white women that a crime has been committed by a black man. Ms. Sontag's post is indefensible.



Immediately after posting, many comments were made by several NOW members, including NOW Vice President Christian Nunes. The comments asked Ms. Sontag to explain her rationale for assuming this young black male had stolen the bike, requesting her to be accountable for this assumption. Ms. Sontag continued to suggest that this man had indeed stolen the bike.

The posting of this photo and subsequent comments by *any* member of NOW would be concerning and troubling. To have this be done by an employee of NOW, a white woman, whose role is to be the communications expert, became an immediate topic of discussion for many of us in Minnesota. MN NOW's concern was (and continues to be) that the post, and Ms. Sontag's continued defense of the post, violates our core issue of racial justice, including that we stand against all forms of racial profiling.

On May 19, 2020, the state presidents received a message from you regarding the issue. In the email you stated the following:

- Kim is a valued employee of NOW.
- Kim's action is regrettable, but is being handled.
- NOW has had, to date, only one day of racial justice training, as the remainder (of the training) had been halted due to COVID restrictions

The following day, the 2019-2020 President of MN NOW, sent you the following response:

“Toni, Thank you for sending this (the email from May 19) out. I am appalled and mystified as to how someone who believes in our core values could even come close to post what Kim did, racial justice training or no. When a leader, or member for that matter, provides such a post it is quite troubling and puts so much of what we are working toward at risk. I trust that you will continue to keep the state presidents updated as to the process that is being taken to “deal with” this highly deplorable situation. In turn, I trust that the state presidents will keep their members apprised of the situation at hand, and what NOW’s immediate, and long term, responses are.”

To date, MN NOW has not received a response from you regarding any actions taken to address this situation. In light of this, and combined with the murder of George Floyd that occurred in Minneapolis, MN on May 25, 2020, our MN NOW President sent the following email to you on June 3, 2020, and copied it to all state presidents as well as the NOW Vice President.

“Toni, I am writing to you today in follow-up to the email I sent to you regarding the disturbing post that Kim Sontag had placed on Facebook regarding a young black man who was repairing his bike. I am concerned that I, nor any other state NOW president, has heard from you as to how this situation has been “dealt with” at National. It is apparent that Ms. Sontag continues to hold her position at National, as she is our contact for RSVP’s to the National Board meeting. This further amplifies the need for those of us who are state presidents to know specifically what actions and remediations have been completed that allow Ms. Sontag to continue her employment at NOW. This is not a personal request, as I, as well as other state presidents, have been in active communication with our respective state members – and they deserve to know the following:

- 1. How is it that a person can hold a position at National and not know about our core issue of racial justice?*
- 2. Once the post was discovered how did you, as the President of NOW, who is promoting all six of our core issues, handle the situation?*
- 3. What has happened since the day of the post? What can we, as state presidents, tell our members to encourage them to not only continue their membership as members of NOW, but to actively recruit women of color to join our organization?*

In light of recent events here in Minneapolis, MN – events that have now ignited racial justice issues across our country and around the world, the situation is amplified even further. I ask you to offer a response as soon as possible so that we may be as consistent with our communication with not only our members, but our communities: that NOW has a core issue of racial justice, and that we stand behind it.”

To date, MN NOW has not received a response from you.

On June 8, 2020, at 2:57 p.m., you sent an email to all state presidents and Vice President Nunes. The subject line reads: *“for your information – please send me your questions and concerns directly so I may respond.”* In the body of the email you state:

“Even though it is common wisdom that the first lie is all that folks believe, I believe that NOW members appreciate fairness, knowing the facts and due process. I have not been able to defend myself as the president since my first concern is to protect NOW from harm. Since others have clearly broken confidentiality which is required by our bylaws and Roberts Rules in place to protect the organization, I am now able to speak openly in many cases. I intend to respond to falsehoods that have been made and repeated about me. Please send me directly your questions and concerns. I look forward to clearing the air and telling the truth. Thank you in advance for your fairness and consideration.”

Just minutes later, at 3:02 p.m., the following question was posed to you by the state president of Georgia (via reply all):

“Are you firing Kim Sontag?”

To date, you have not replied to the query, nor to previous emails asking for clarification of the handling of this situation.

APPENDIX C

June 4, 2020 Press Release

On June 4, 2020, you sent out a [press release](#) to all members of NOW with the headline: “*I Can’t Breathe*” – *We All Can’t Breathe*.” This release came out just ten days after the murder of George Floyd, during the time when states across the country and nations around the world were mourning his death and collectively responding to yet another injustice for Black people. During the course of Mr. Floyd’s last moments of life, he repeatedly stated “I can’t breathe,” as the white police officer pressed his knee into his neck. The insensitive nature of changing his last words to words that incorporate all of us is inappropriate and again, is a blatant disregard of NOW’s core issue of racial justice. Within the body of the press release you state the following:

“When George Floyd was choked to death by murderous police, we were reminded that those at the top of the power structure of white privilege, racism and discrimination continue to deprive citizens of oxygen, freedom and opportunity. We stand with the demonstrators who hold up signs saying “I can’t breathe” because we are also choking on injustice and oppression—inequities that have been a disgraceful part of our culture for years.”

Though you do acknowledge the idea of white privilege, your comment “. . . we are also choking on injustice and oppression” indicates an ignorance, that you have no knowledge of the experience of a black person, current and historical, in the United States. Your press release came on the heels of a MN NOW Board meeting where we made the goal to step aside as white women of privilege and work towards understanding and intersecting with the women of color in our community. MN NOW feels our statements and movement towards inclusiveness and understanding is in direct alignment with NOW’s core issues of racial justice, constitutional equality and economic justice. In contrast, your press release blatantly violates those same core issues.

APPENDIX D

June 5, 2020

On June 5, 2020, you sent a letter via email to all State Presidents. In the letter you apologize for the harm caused by your words and actions and indicate that you want to, and will, do better. You further state that black women and all women of color must be heard, and that you will listen. You also indicate that you are open to exploring the following:

- Hiring a full-time staff member dedicated to increasing diversity throughout NOW
- Conducting virtual racial equity trainings with our entire membership
- Conducting town hall meetings for our grassroots to be heard
- Launching a campaign to work towards the implementation of NOW's resolution for police accountability and transparency with the use of force
- Preventing voter suppression, based on race in upcoming elections

An attachment to the letter from Slevin & Hart, P.C., outlines the actions taken by NOW regarding the termination of former Vice President Gilda Yazzie. Within this letter, the actions the Oversight Committee took at that time are outlined, including hiring a human rights consultant to work directly with Gilda Yazzie and hiring a specialist in conflict resolution to explore the hostile work environment at NOW. The letter from Selvin & Hart, P.C. states that Ms. Yazzie was terminated for not being able to meet the expectations of her position, and that the consultant found no evidence of a hostile work environment. The final result of the investigation led to the termination of Gilda Yazzie on April 26, 2019. As we know, the employees that wrote the letter dated June 7, 2018 were not employed at the time of this investigation. In other words, the very employees who raised the concern were not interviewed as to their experience working under your employ.

In addition, it appears that all action items taken during the course of the investigation, were targeted specifically toward Gilda Yazzie, rather than to you, as the President of NOW, or to the organization as a whole.

What is not discussed are the charges made regarding *your* behavior and your response.

June 9, 2020

On June 9, 2020 you sent an email to all state presidents. Your email was a response to a state president asking for your feedback to the 2018 Letter of Concern. In your response, you indicate that racism was an issue prior to you taking office, and that it was your goal to establish a racial justice task force to address the issues. You state that your first Vice President, Gilda Yazzie was not able to meet the expectations of her position. You also indicate that Gilda Yazzie and the accountant, another woman of color, set out to organize the staff to be against you. You further state, and I quote: *"This led to validation in their minds of racism encouraged by Ms. Yazzie. Ms. Yazzie worked to destabilize the office staff . . ."*

Your response continues to trouble us. We are concerned that Gilda Yazzie, and other persons of color who reported directly to you, felt they were discriminated against. And once again, in this response, you do not acknowledge your behavior, take no ownership of the issue at hand, and offer no hope for the membership of NOW regarding steps you have taken, or plan to take, to change *your* behavior. **This is unbecoming of a sitting President of NOW.**