

Key Note Address, April 19, 2012 Vienna, Austria
OSCE Supplemental Human Dimension Meeting
on combating racism, intolerance and discrimination in society

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Good afternoon. I would like to thank the OSCE for the invitation to address the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on combating racism and intolerant behavior through sports. I want to extend a special thank you to the Chairmanship in the Office and to the ODIHR director, Ambassador Janez Lenarcic, for extending the invitation to me to speak here. Our challenge at this meeting is to define and understand contemporary manifestations of racism, intolerance and discrimination in society and seek innovative practices in sports for combating identity-based hatred and violence.

Before proceeding, please allow me to say a few words about myself. I am Joia Jefferson Nuri and I address you today as a public policy communications strategist from the United States. I assist NGO's and political and community leaders in developing the most effective messaging and methodology to seek workable solutions to these issues. In the exploration of ways to find common language I have travelled to South Africa, Zimbabwe, Brazil, Venezuela, England, France, and throughout the United States.

I hope to show you the connection between sports and the ongoing race debate in the United States.

Statements of defiance to the social constructs of racism through sports have a long history in dictating the inherent power of sports to galvanise people around broader social issues and concerns. In my home country, professional sports were off limits for Black men until the 20th century. Sports represented the same complete segregation that was the legal norm in the rest of society. Professional Baseball, the National Football League and professional boxing would not allow Black men to compete. In the early 20th century legendary heavy weight boxer Jack Johnson started a chain of events that would not only begin to reshape American sports but American society and culture.

In 1908 two sports dominated the American landscape: baseball and boxing. Both sports drew large crowds and every sports writer knew that to get readers they had to cover baseball and boxing. To be the heavy weight champion is one of the greatest honors afforded an athlete. Jack Johnson was a confident Black man who vocally expressed his opposition to the racist laws that defined America and also proudly proclaimed his superiority over any other fighter (black or white). This bravado rustled the feathers of American culture and sports journalism. There were cries encouraging someone to come forward and quiet Jack Johnson. In 1910, the white undefeated former heavy weight champion James Jefferies came out of retirement to fight Johnson. The racial tension was so high the day of the fight that guns were banned from the arena where the fight was being held.

In 15 rounds Jack Johnson defeated Jefferies. History records that the outcome of the fight triggered violence against Black men by whites all across the United States. Historian Ken Burns reports that Johnson's victory over Jefferies had dashed the white communities long held belief that Blacks were inferior and incapable of defeating a white man in a sport. The ramifications of the Jack Johnson

victory and his continued success for more than a decade also held political ramifications. The question among whites arose: if a Black man can win at sports what other feats was he capable of? The success of Jack Johnson in a boxing ring opened the political dialogue in the United States for a bigger discussion about race and equality. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP, was formed in the years of Mr. Johnson prominence in sports.

Today, nearly 100 years later, the NAACP stands as a pillar of political thought in the US on race.

Sports are a thread that weaves itself through our lives and represents not only our heartfelt attraction to competition but is also a barometer of our society's beliefs about race and other forms of intolerance and prejudices.

Years after Jack Johnson, as the world was sliding into global conflict for a second time, the Olympics, the oldest sporting event took place in Berlin. In 1936 Adolf Hitler hoped the games would showcase German supremacy in sports and thus support his political objectives. A 23 year old African American track and field athlete named Jesse Owens became the most successful athlete in the games. He won four gold medals in five days. This was a huge blow against Hitler's Nazi propaganda as well as a victory in the fight for race equality globally. But despite his victories in the Berlin Olympics, racialized segregation faced by Jesse Owens when he returned to the U.S.: You see Owens was only allowed to ride the service elevators in the New York City hotel where he was being honored.

In the 20th century, two more times would a boxing champion be the world's most recognizable representative of the continuing battle around race. In the 1936 a soft spoken African-American boxer named Joe Louis was defeated by Germany's Max Schmeling. Schmeling's victory over a Black man was touted by Nazi officials as proof of their doctrine of Aryan supremacy. For their rematch in 1938 the Nazi party sent representatives with Schmeling to New York City.

All over the world activists were fighting the global battle to end colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean as well as segregation in the United States. Their numbers were small and their voices could barely be heard over the cultural, governmental, and societal institutions that held Blacks as inferior or as US Supreme Court Justice Roger B. Taney wrote in 1857, "The negro has no rights which the white man is bound to respect". But now the activists would be heard loud and clear

In 1938, more than 70,000 people came to Yankee Stadium in New York to see the fight between a descendant of slaves and a German national fight for the heavy weight championship of the world. The fight was broadcast to millions of people around the world in English, German, Spanish and Portuguese. The fight lasted two minutes and four seconds. Joe Louis knocked Schmeling out and was proclaimed the heavy weight championship of the world. A title he held longer than any other champion in history.

My father told me stories about that night. He was a young man in Pennsylvania. He said that Black people gathered in bars and churches and homes and listened on the radio. After Joe Louis defeated Max Schmeling he said there were cheers and laughter from every corner of the Black community in Pennsylvania and around the country. Black people saw Louis' victory as their own. The defeat of Schmeling was affirmation of their own abilities and humanity.

Unfortunately, my father tells me, that a racist portion of the white community took the defeat of Schmeling badly. Black men were beaten and killed that night by mobs of white men who also believed Louis' victory represented a paradigm change in race relations.

Sports and sporting figures force us into a truth telling that we can avoid on many other stages. The grandness of sports and the glaring light we shine on it makes it hard to hide the dirty little secret of racism. Muhammad Ali held that spotlight on us and forced us into a conversation about war and race that altered the way the US dealt with both for a generation.

Thirty years after Joe Louis' defeat of Max Schmeling, the charismatic heavy weight champion of the world Cassius Clay, who we now know as Muhammad Ali, converted to Islam and refused to be drafted into the US army and be sent to Vietnam to fight. As a penalty for his defiance, he lost his boxing licence and with it, the right to fight. He also lost millions of dollars and his reputation was tarnished in most circles. The media attacked him. Politicians condemned him as being un-American and a traitor.

Muhammad Ali stood for a just and inclusive society. He refused to fight for American 'freedom' abroad when as a black American he was not free. Despite being at the top of his field, in 1960's America the Jim Crow segregation laws limited where he could live, eat and educate his children. When asked why he did not enlist in the Army and go fight in Vietnam like thousands of others of US citizens, he replied, "I Ain't Got No Quarrel with the VietCong... No VietCong Ever Called Me Nigger." The anti-war movement in the United States, and around the world, gained a strong voice in the battle to end an unjust war and the civil rights movement drew strength from this athlete who stood as a man demanding his humanity.

After World War II America's most popular sport at the time, Baseball, integrated. Jackie Robinson broke the Baseball's "color line" when he played his first game with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. Jackie Robinson's outstanding character and unquestioned talent as an athlete challenged the basis of segregation. In following years, the civil rights movement in the United States became more vocal and gained strength from the integration of what was then called "America's past time". The new demands were also fuelled by the Black soldiers' contributions to the war efforts.

Civil Rights lawyers such as Thurgood Marshall, who later served on the Supreme Court, and young leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. created strategies to support the integration of all public services and facilities. The 1950's saw a concerted effort by lawyers and activists to eliminate segregation laws in schools, public transportation, and housing.

In 1968 the ultimate challenge to racism by black athletes happened at the Olympic Games in Mexico City. Tommy Smith and John Carlos stood before the world accepting their medals with fists held in the air giving the black power salute. Like Muhammad Ali, they became intentional symbols of defiance. They stood bravely demanding their nation honor them as men and not just sports figures.

Sports have played a significant role in breaking down the barriers of race, discrimination and intolerance. But this is a double-edged sword. While, as I have pointed out, sports is the measuring stick by which we can so often measure racism, it is also a mechanism that is used to cast Black men as physical brutes who are only capable of major career success on a playing field or in a boxing ring. In large measure the most famous and successful Black men are athletes or entertainers. The belief that Black men have dominant physical abilities dates back to dehumanizing images of slaves and colonized Black men doing physical labor.

Advertising executive Tom Burrell, author of the best seller, Brain Washed, asserts that racism is a marketing strategy that has created images of power and inferiority that we have all bought into for generations. If we accept this premise, it is important for us to reverse the images and behaviors that support that lie. At the heart of the problem is ignorance of each other and fear of change.

From grade school through college Black children are pushed to be athletes because of what is commonly called their 'natural ability'. Throughout my own studies I knew many Black students who were told not to waste their time dreaming of law school. They should play sports. Today college athletes are leaving college early to pursue a professional career. There is little regard to getting the best education to prepare for life. Sports are a short cut to success. This continues to be a dangerous precedent.

I had the privilege of attending a previous SHDM here last November. I heard the moving keynote address by Ms. Doreen Lawrence who told the story the violent murder of her son, Stephen, at the hands of bigots. He was standing at a bus stop. He was just standing there. He was stabbed and killed. She took us through an emotional journey of hearing of her son's murder, the failure of authorities to respond to her pleas for justice in a timely manner and the courage it has taken for her to mount a fight for justice for her son, all Black children and mothers all over the globe. Thankfully, she finally received some justice with the subsequent guilty verdicts and sentences handed down to two of the alleged attackers of her son.

I am a mother. My daughter is a young adult. A decade ago when she became old enough to go out into the community without me, the fear began. The marketing campaign of racism that paints my young black child and her male friends as threats fills me with the fear that potentially Doreen Lawrence's sad story will one day be my own. The constant bombardment of reductive images of black people as entertainers, athletes or criminals is pejorative and must be questioned.

My child and her friends are not entertainers or athletes thus many conclude: they must be criminals. I sit in fear each time she leaves the house that a simple traffic stop, a small argument, or a misunderstanding will result in major injury or her death. I listened to Doreen Lawrence with tears in my eyes because I fear her story will become my story not because my daughter will do something wrong but simply by the fact that she is young and black in a world where her life does not hold the same value of the children of other races and ethnicities.

This story of race and violence is currently playing itself out in the United States and on the front pages of newspapers around the world. A 17 year old African American named Trayvon Martin was walking through a gated community in Florida. Trayvon was wearing a hooded jacket and baggy pants, common attire for young people in the U.S. An armed neighborhood watch captain, a middle aged white man, shot and killed him. George Zimmerman did not kill Trayvon Martin because of what he did but because of his race and age. The watch captain was arrested 50 days after the killing and only after an international outcry and the appointment of a special prosecutor by Florida's governor. Unfortunately, as noted by many European newspapers, this is a common story in US history – the devaluing of black life and the failure of government agencies to enforce the law when faced with the conflict between a white man's recollections of the events versus a black life.

In my own life the constant fear that goes with being black played out just a few weeks ago. I have spent my life trying to combat the slings and arrows of racism by getting a good education, building a successful career and establishing some level of financial security. This has afforded me international travel and a home in a well-heeled neighborhood in suburban Washington, D.C. I love my home and I have come to know my middle class white neighbors well. But two weeks ago my daughter's best friend came to visit. He is a 22 year old, 6'2" black man with a very large, deep voice. Tom is a lovely young man who wears the uniform of many young men, baggy pants and a hooded sweat shirt. On this particular evening as the warm spring night drew near he told me he wanted to take a walk through the neighborhood. I was horrified. I feared my neighbors would not respond well to seeing a young Black man walking in the neighborhood alone at night. I did not think he would be shot but I was quite certain someone would call the police. I walk my 125 pound Akita through the neighborhood twice a day for the past 7 years. My neighbors sometimes only recognize me because I am with the dog. I told Tom to take the dog with him so the neighbors who see him as benign. They know the dog and with the dog they would look upon him kindly. If he were Kobe Bryant or Michael Jordan he would be safe. But as an average Black person in America he lives every day under the threat of harm.

As he walked away from the house with the dog on a leash my eyes filled with tears. Why do I have to send a dog to protect a black man? Why can't black men move freely through my community or any community without fear of attack? Who are we members of the human race that even today we buy into the supreme marketing strategy of racial inferiority and intimidation? I

stood there on my street, lined with perfectly manicured lawns, and felt the same fear and anguish of every black mother on earth.

We see images, attach a historical value to them and respond accordingly. Constant media images of black men committing crimes and white men as the CEO reinforce the notion of power and inferiority. After generations of mis-education our most daunting task is the change perceptions. In the age of high speed internet the images come at us faster and with more power than generations before us. What role does popular culture---television, movies, music videos,--play in the continuation of racially charged images?

What role could the internet and popular culture play in shaping a new paradigm of perception of race, gender, and people from different cultures?

I am part of an industry that crafts marketing images. I work with my clients to define the problem; assess the full situation; set goals, make a plan of execution and create an implementation plan. What would the future hold if communications strategists, film makers, television producers, publishers, and government leaders were given a decade long assignment of countermanding the racist marketing scheme that has been the under penning of racism and xenophobia? Crossing all borders the charge to these professional image-makers would create a truth that reflected the world we live in today. And the world we are building for tomorrow. What if we change, alter our perceptions of each other? Changing the false perception of race would give the survivor space to grow and alleviate the threat felt by the perpetrator.

In the US, successful athletes are often treated as deities. We worship and adore them. They embody our best hopes for ourselves. Today a successful Black athlete can be immune to the explicit burdens of racism. He or she is welcomed in any venue or neighborhood. But the transformation of the Black athlete into being a full, free citizen has not translated to Black people in general. How can we work together to assure that this elite privilege is offered to our children and every world citizen?

As government leaders, you are also communications strategists who have the power to change the imagery and thus change minds and hearts. What is your commitment to changing the thought pattern? How do we join forces across the globe and craft a common language for dealing with hatred that will have implications everywhere?

This is not an easy or short term fix as you all know. But the process has to come from a place of love and caring for both sides of this bloody equation. In conclusion, be it slavery, colonialism, or modern day racism there is a historical continuity of race and racist policies that we are responding to. The methods of handling the hate crimes have to reflect and respect the historical continuity and quickly move forward to address to eradicate it. We must use the technology at our disposal and empower everyone to change.

Thank you so very much for this opportunity to address this body. Thank you for allowing me to share my views.