

Racial, Gender and Economic Justice



centerforconstitutionalrights
on the front lines for social justice

Center for Constitutional Rights

The Center for Constitutional Rights is dedicated to advancing and protecting the rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Founded in 1966 by attorneys who represented civil rights movements in the South, CCR is a non-profit legal and educational organization committed to the creative use of law as a positive force for social change.

CCR uses litigation proactively to empower poor communities and communities of color; to guarantee the rights of those with the fewest protections and least access to legal resources; and to train the next generation of civil and human rights attorneys.

Formed in order to work hand in hand with people's movements, CCR has lent its expertise and support to a wide range of movements for social justice. We are dedicated to defending the right to political dissent, combating the mass incarceration of both citizens and immigrants, ending discrimination that is based on gender or sexuality and struggling against government abuse of power.

For decades, CCR has pushed U.S. courts to recognize international human rights and humanitarian protections – and we have had groundbreaking victories that established the principle of universal jurisdiction in this country and extended human rights standards to abuses committed by corporations and other non-government groups.

The Center for Constitutional Rights was the first organization to fight for the rights of the men held at Guantánamo Bay and has been at the forefront of the battles to end the use of offshore prisons; to end the practice of “extraordinary rendition” and torture; and to restore the fundamental right of *habeas corpus* and due process under the law.



Racial, Gender and Economic Justice

CCR was born out of the Civil Rights movement, and racial, gender and economic justice have been cornerstones of our docket throughout our history. From pioneering pro-choice and anti-domestic violence cases, to fighting employment discrimination and racial profiling, CCR finds innovative ways to challenge the status quo and support activists and movements engaged around these central questions of injustice.



Fannie Lou Hamer speaking at a Democratic National Convention meeting on behalf of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, 1964

Racial Justice

The struggle for racial justice in the South was the impetus behind the formation of the Center for Constitutional Rights. It began with a challenge to the seats of five Mississippi Congressmen by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). CCR's founders initiated litigation challenging Mississippi's discriminatory voter registration practices, resulting in the election being set aside. Our victory in this case helped convince Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act.

Since that time, CCR has continued its deep commitment to confronting the legacy of slavery in the United States. For example, in the late 1970s CCR worked with activists around the country to organize a national Anti-Klan Network and filed the first lawsuit against the Ku Klux Klan, winning over \$500,000 for Klan victims and securing a sweeping injunction against their campaign of assault, intimidation and harassment.

CCR has worked closely with activists to fight school segregation, racial profiling, environmental racism, workplace discrimination and the racist criminal justice system through litigation, education and organizing work. For example, our case *Daniels v. City of New York* forced the notorious NYPD Street Crime Unit to disband. We strive to complete the unfinished civil rights movement, targeting economic injustice and other modern-day manifestations of racial repression.

Gender Equality

CCR filed its first major women's rights case in 1969, when women's rights litigation was still largely uncharted territory. Our 1972 landmark case, *Abramowicz v. Lefkowitz*, was the first case of its kind in the nation. It was the first challenge to criminal abortion laws that focused on women's rights as opposed to doctors' rights, sparking similar challenges in other states that created precedent for the Supreme Court's decision to legalize abortion in *Roe v. Wade*.

Our case *NOW v. Terry* created a precedent for establishing buffer zones around abortion clinics to protect women from harassment by members of "Operation Rescue." CCR also filed *Harris v. McRae*, to challenge the Hyde Amendment federal restrictions on the use of Medicaid funds for medically necessary abortions and played a critical role in developing what became federal guidelines against sterilization abuse. The Center continues to be active in the struggle for reproductive justice.

CCR's challenge to the constitutionality of New York City's forced maternity leave policies for teachers resulted in the 1978 landmark Supreme Court decision in *Monell v. Department of Social Services*, which created the right to sue municipalities in federal court for damages in civil rights cases.

In winning the first appeal of a murder conviction based on what is now called "women's self-defense law," CCR played a pioneering role in combating violence against women. Our early work in this area highlighted the degree to which criminal law was shaped by

male experience and acknowledged that juries should consider the defendant's personal experience, including a history of sexual abuse and discrimination.

The Center's commitment to advancing women's rights has also impacted international law through our contributions to establishing women's rights as human rights, and, specifically, establishing rape and other forms of sexual violence as war crimes, crimes against humanity and a tool of genocide.



Landmark Cases

Mississippi Challenge (1965)

Challenged the seating of members of Congress who had won in racially discriminatory elections. Helped convince Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act.

Dombrowski v. Pfister (1965)

Supreme Court decision recognized federal jurisdiction to stop states from using criminal law to intimidate civil rights workers. Established that such intimidation had a “chilling effect” on First Amendment rights and was unconstitutional.

Palmer v. Thompson (1971)

Fought racial segregation in public swimming pools. Argued that the State should act affirmatively to end racial discrimination; lost in the Supreme Court. Public swimming pools were allowed to close rather than integrate.

Abramowicz v. Lefkowitz (1972)

Challenged New York State law restricting abortion; served as a model for lawsuits throughout the country challenging restrictive abortion laws.

State of Washington v. Wanrow (1977)

Won the first ever appeal of a murder conviction on the grounds of a woman’s right to self-defense against harm to self or child.

Monell v. Department of Social Services (1978)

A successful challenge to forced maternity leave policies, this case forced local government accountability for unconstitutional acts for the first time and created the right to obtain damages from municipalities through the federal courts.

Aikens v. Abel (1974)

Represented steelworkers against their union leadership and management when the two sides signed an agreement that prohibited the rank-and-file from striking.

Harris v. McRae (1980)

Challenged the Hyde Amendment restricting poor women’s right to federal Medicaid funding for abortion. Although lost in the Supreme Court, this case activated political efforts to retain state funding for abortion.

Crumsey v. Justice Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (1982)

Revived a 19th century statute to win the first damages case against the KKK and secured an injunction against their campaign of assault, intimidation and harassment.

NOW v. Terry (1988)

Established precedent for a buffer zone around abortion clinics, where anti-abortion “Operation Rescue” campaigners could not harass or intimidate women seeking medical services.

County Redistricting Cases (1990)

Ensured that electoral redistricting complied with federal standards set by the Voting Rights Act in more than a dozen cases brought in the South.

NY Campaign for Telephone Justice (2007)

Successful campaign to end the illegal and exploitative collect call rates charged to the families of prisoners in New York State prisons.

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