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Na'ilah Amaru is on a mission to help people who have been marginalized build political power.



Na'ilah Amaru (right) accepts the 2023 Excellence on a Campaign for Women Serving Women award from Women in Government Relations.

At the 2016 Democratic Convention, where she formally nominated Hillary Clinton for president, Na'ilah Amaru spoke about growing up as an immigrant and the adopted daughter of two mothers, serving in the Army during the Iraq War, and then serving her country as a policy adviser and political advocate.

"I returned from Iraq deeply committed to restoring the faith of America's promise for everyone," she told the cheering crowd.

Now an independent political consultant and a Political Science Ph.D. student at the Graduate Center, Amaru says she is on a mission to help people who have been marginalized build political power.

Previously, Amaru served as a policy adviser to former Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed, legislative aide to the late U.S. Congressman John Lewis, and executive director of the New York City Council's Black, Latino and Asian Caucus. She has spearheaded winning electoral and issue campaigns at the local, state, and federal levels. And she currently leads the local, state, and federal advocacy efforts of Women Creating Change, a nonprofit committed to empowering women through civic engagement.

She is committed, she said, to ensuring that public policy addresses the needs of diverse constituencies, and her many successes have earned her widespread recognition.

Last year alone, she received several accolades for her lobbying and its impact. She won the Excellence on a Campaign for Women Serving Women Award from Women in Government Relations and a Top 20 in 2023 Advocacy Award from the Advocacy Association and Roll Call, and she was named one of the 100 Top Lobbyists for the Grassroots by the National Institute for Lobbying and Ethics.

“As women of color, our work is so often erased or dismissed that when our impact is acknowledged, it is a deep breath for the soul,” she said. “I don’t do this work for the accolades, but for the purpose of changing lives for the better by using public policy as a tool.”

Getting a doctorate is another way to enhance her work, she says. Already, she has three master’s degrees, including an M.S. in urban affairs from Hunter College. At the Graduate Center, she plans to study ways that grassroots coalitions can gain the influence needed to impact public policy and policymakers.

“My scholarship might help broaden and deepen theories explaining how everyday citizens can engage in participatory democracy and have more power in influencing the agenda-setting process,” Amaru said.

As a doctoral student with substantial career and life experience, she is learning to enjoy her curiosity-driven journey, she said, and she advises fellow students to do the same.

“The process of challenging myself to learn to think a different way, while at times is frustrating as I struggle with new concepts, is pushing me to grow into a political scientist,” she said. “I take it one day at a time and eventually will reach the destination; I will be grateful for the lessons learned along the way.”