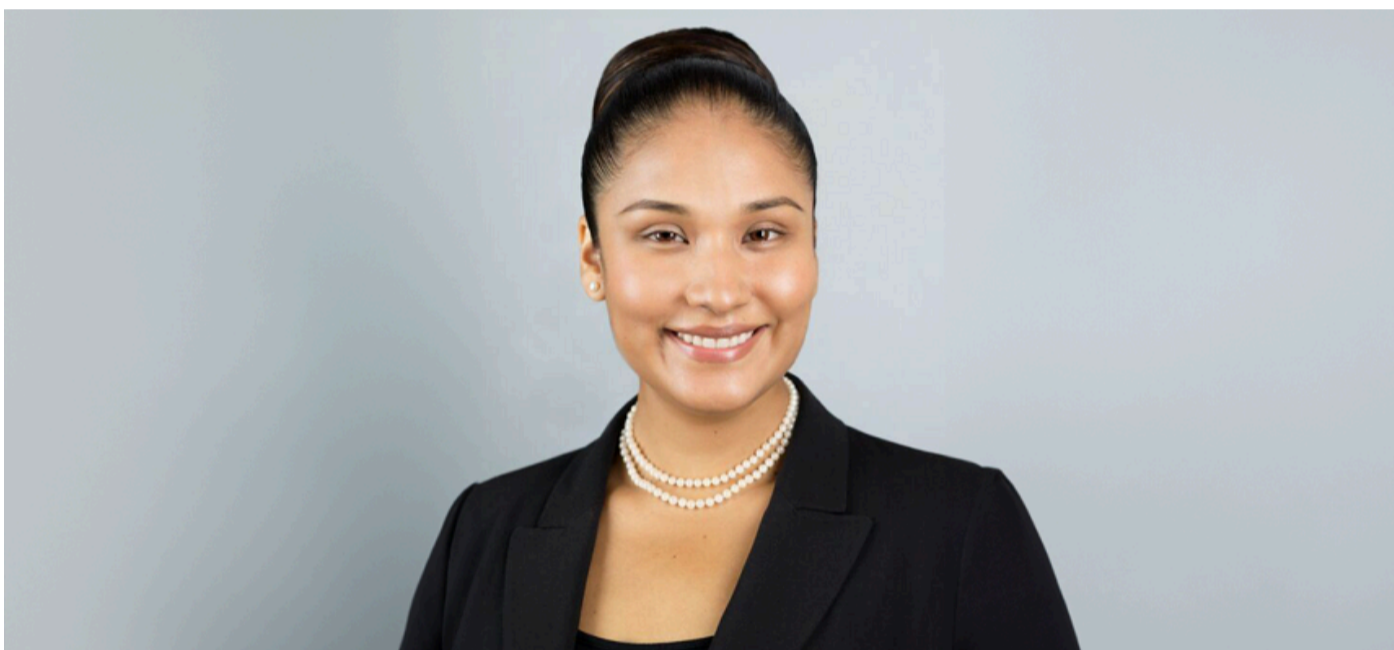


Aiming to turn a longtime women's organization into an advocacy force

An Interview with Na'ilah Amaru, Women Creating Change's new head of policy, advocacy and government relations



Na'ilah Amaru is head of policy at Women Creating Change (IMAGE COURTESY OF NA'ILAH AMARU)

By **TIM MURPHY** | **NYN Media** | **MARCH 9, 2024**

In 2019, the more than century-old Women's City Club of New York, which has long occupied itself with matters of civic interest in New York City, changed its name to Women Creating Change and rewrote its mission to focus on bringing underserved women into civic engagement.

But more recently, it also decided to become a player in New York state's and city's policy and budget advocacy landscape – and to those ends, in January it created the new role of vice president of policy, advocacy and government relations for seasoned strategist Na'ilah Amaru, who served in the Army in Iraq in the early 2000s and has since served served as policy advisor 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 also spearheaded winning electoral and issue campaigns at the local, state, and federal levels. (She was even selected to **nominate** Hillary Clinton for president on behalf of the Democratic Party at the 2016 DNC.)

Atlanta native and Harlem resident Amaru spoke with New York Nonprofit Media about her journey from the military to political strategizing, what she's up to in her early days at WCC and how the organization aims to work in partnership with interest groups lacking money and power to become part of the legislative and budgetary conversation (which also happens to be the topic of her dissertation for the political science PhD she's currently earning at CUNY's Graduate Center).

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Na'ilah, thanks for talking to us today. To start, can you walk us through a typical day?

Sure. I live in Harlem. I wake up around 5:15 a.m. and begin my day with a six- to eight-mile run on the treadmill at my gym, which is a habit from my Army days. Then I come home and eat breakfast, which is the Whole Foods brand of Raisin Bran. I don't drink coffee or tea and I don't drink alcohol either. I'm a pretty boring person! (laughs) And while I'm eating breakfast, I'll watch NY1 and scroll my phone for the news of the day. Then I shower and dress. We have an office near Bryant Park, but I work from home most days. Some days I have to be out in the field, which usually means Albany or City Hall. Then I attack the day, which sometimes means a strategy meeting, or a coffee meeting with someone I'm trying to build a new partnership with, or going to a hearing on a particular issue.

What about evenings?

On any given night I'm usually in class or at the library studying for class, or I'm at an event supporting different issues.

Why did you decide to pursue a Ph.D.?

To answer, I have to tell you my origin story. I've learned that elected officials don't pass bills – coalitions do. I've been a part of a lot of different coalitions and I've always been fascinated by their ability or their inability to influence a policy agenda. I've always been a part of social justice coalitions that typically don't have the power to influence. So the purpose of the Ph.D. is to deepen my understanding of how coalitions work. But also, Prof. Amaru is something I aspire to be, and I need a Ph.D. to make that happen.

Why do you think that, often, social justice coalitions lack the ability to influence policy?

Elected officials care about press, money and votes – and if a coalition doesn't provide any of those, then it's not part of elected officials' political calculations. Take the fight for a minimum wage of \$15. Here in New York City, nobody gave a damn about it until the unions decided to support it.

So is the first lesson that all coalitions must have at least one already powerful entity in the mix?

It's helpful, but you have to be mindful that, often, they change the dynamics. They can supersede the original coalition's demands.

Right, okay. So do you mind giving us a short bio?

I was adopted as a baby and raised in Atlanta. I joined the Army three days after high school graduation. I was trained as an ammunition specialist and was one of four women who worked with over 200 men. I joined the military for God, honor and country but also for the G.I. Bill, which has been a game-changer for me in terms of being able to pursue education without going into debt. I served from 2000 to 2004. I was among the first wave of soldiers who deployed to Iraq.

What was that experience like?

I have mixed feelings about my experiences in the military and in Iraq. I'm very proud of the lessons I learned about life and myself – leadership, discipline and living in honor. But the military is also a reflection of society and – you know – made it out and I'm grateful that I did and was able to move forward in my life and hopefully build a legacy of making a difference for people.

Can you talk more about what skills you attained in the military that you have carried over to current life?

Discipline. I wasn't disciplined until I entered the military. To this day, I still wake up at an ungodly hour just to run. If I don't, then my equilibrium is off for the rest of the day. And all the clocks in my house are set to military time. But the military is also very rigid, and I also learned that sometimes you have to change the course to stay on course.

How did serving in a war zone impact you?

It's taken me years to unpack how deeply it's impacted me. Most importantly, I'd say it gave me the understanding of life and our purpose in it, to live each day as well as we can. Because there were soldiers deployed who didn't make it back home. [voice breaks] I have a responsibility to live a life that I hope is worthy of their sacrifice. And I do that by building a life founded upon giving back. [cries]. I don't sit with [these thoughts] often because I'm so focused on work.

Okay, well thank you for being emotionally open about it. So after the military...?

I realized that my personal mission was to create or expand opportunities for people who felt invisible, and to help communities be active change agents and build their power. That has led me on a very long career moving back and forth between government, issue campaigns, nonprofits. But the common thread has been using public policy as a tool to change people's lives for the better.

Can you go deeper into just one chapter of your career prior to now that speaks to what you're talking about?

As the assistant grants manager for the city of Atlanta, I learned quickly the politics of the budget – that the organizations that have the trust of the people in the community are not necessarily the ones that get government funding. That's where politics come in, which was a hard lesson for me to learn. You have to figure out how to position your organization so that it's trusted not just by the community [but by lawmakers and policymakers], or you'll be left out of conversations when it comes to the budget.

So when and why did you move to New York City?

After I got my masters degree, I worked in D.C. for the legendary John Lewis [who, after his youth as a civil rights leader, was a U.S. Congress member from Georgia from 1987 until his death in 2020]. On Capitol Hill, I learned a lot of important lessons about coalition-building, but I also realized I was miserable, because I had no grassroots connection to D.C. So I moved to New York without a job in 2012. I found a landlord willing to give me a one-year lease because I had good credit and six months of cash saved up. I did nonprofit consulting with my old networks, then eventually I was hired to be executive director of the Black, Latino and Asian Caucus of the New York City Council.

But also what I did not anticipate was falling so deeply in love with New York City. I moved here with no job, no network, and it's still the best decision I've ever made. It's the energy, the people. I'm still in the honeymoon phase. I love that everyone here is living their lives in so many different ways. I can go anywhere at any time and be exposed to a different type of New Yorker.

So this position at WCC was created for you. It hadn't existed before.

My role was created to pivot away from the group's history. It was founded 105 years ago with a social clubhouse structure by privileged women. Now the city is more diverse, so we're focused on centering the needs of women through research, leadership development, policy and advocacy. WCC has never engaged in advocacy or policy the way it's about to. Before, their thing was trainings on civic engagement, which is important but it doesn't move the needle. So my role is to really position WCC as a partner in city, state and federal policy. We'll do that by focusing on a few broad issue areas including economic justice, reproductive justice, safety – which includes domestic violence and child welfare – and environmental justice.

Can you break that down into some specifics of what you're working on?

Right now I'm trying to position WCC within the political ecosystem. We're still in the process of building out our internal team. So over the coming weeks I'll go through the process of identifying [what other groups are] working on these issues, and do they have bills we can support.

But as of today, WCC is not a part of any such coalitions?

That's correct.

But what kind of issues might WCC gravitate to? Such as, raising the federal minimum wage? That's a big ongoing issue.

Absolutely. WCC is an official supporter of the campaign to pass the [Raise the Wage Act](#). I attend their monthly update calls.

Anything else specific like that?

We're supportive of the Black maternal health legislative package [introduced](#) by New York state Senator Lea Webb. And another thing that we support is amendments to New York City's [salary transparency law](#), because currently the pay ranges posted by companies are too broad to be useful. They can be a range of \$100,000, whereas a more acceptable range is \$10,000 to \$15,000.

Okay, so we see that you are still in the early stages of your job, identifying campaigns to align with. What will the rest of your day be like today?

I have three more meetings – one with the mayor's office, about launching the city's [Women Forward NYC](#) action plan, which he [talked about](#) during his third State of the City address on Jan. 24. And the other two meetings are City Council – and state-level conversations to learn more about how WCC can be a resource partner for folks in government in terms of legislation.

How does a group like WCC, which has never really lobbied before, become a player in that space?

I'd reframe that. I myself am not a new player. In my line of work, relationships are a currency and I'm very intentional about making sure I maintain them. My first job out of the Army was as a tenant organizer, knocking on doors and building relationships and trust. I've carried all my relationships with me from job to job. When people say yes to my invitation to coffee or a Zoom, they're saying yes to me because they know me. WCC may be the new kid on the advocacy block, but I'm not.

Okay, great. And finally, what do you do for fun and self-care?

I play pick-up soccer in Prospect Park in Brooklyn on Sundays. And my other thing is visiting museums. There are more than 200 in NYC and it's on my bucket list to visit them all. I've already been to 34.

Do you have a favorite?

I love the Museum of the City of New York. Oh! And every once in a while, I'll go to a poetry slam, which is my first love.