
Facing Contradictions: Challenge for Black Feminists

by Beth Richie-Bush

I preface this article by stating that it is written from a black woman's perspective. Although parts of my thesis can be generalized to other third world women, much cannot. Our experiences like our cultures, differ greatly. Furthermore, I recognize, along with my sisters of color, that by choosing to live my life as a black feminist, I do not discount white people or men from the people that I love. Nor do I reject my black sisters who do not identify themselves as feminists. We must somewhere find a common vision and voice with which to do our work.

The tenuous union between black women and the feminist movement pre-dates my involvement in work with either struggle. A decade of unsuccessful attempts at alliance-building has left black and white women at a frustrating impasse: one which seriously threatens our future. What actually began as a natural mingling of racial and sexual politics has developed into a relationship characterized by suspicion, rejection, and bitterness.

Those black women who at times are brave enough to immerse themselves in the white women's struggle for sexual equality claim to have been ignored at best, or worse, attacked. Other black women who have challenged the limits imposed on their lives by sexism outside the parameters of the white women's movement have emerged less mutilated and culturally bruised. However, black women now stand on the outside of the women's movement looking in through clouds of resentment while sexual exploitation is festering in our communities. White women now testify to feeling betrayed and angry that after years of committing themselves to the struggle for civil rights, they continue to be labeled racist by black sisters.

The realities of sexual politics dictate that for black and white women to struggle separately dilutes our potency. We cannot allow ourselves to be stationed against each other as a strategy for diverting our strength. As we stand at the critical crossroads of our time, we must step off of the destructive path of separatist resignation and re-unite on a passage towards liberation for us all.

To begin, white women involved in the women's movement must assume the responsibility of breaking down and radically restructuring this movement which systematically excludes third world involvement. They must destroy the organizations that reek of racism and ignorance. They must reject the notion that individual "outreach efforts" are adequate. No matter how genuine, they are insufficient. Extensive, radical change is required.

The restructuring and rebuilding of the movement must be done with third world participation. Prior to the rebuilding, however, third world women have some work to do ourselves. There are some questions which we need to answer.

1. As black people we have fought a hard and bitter battle. Where do we go from here?
2. How can we connect our lives as racially-oppressed women to the feminist movement?
3. How do we translate our personal experiences into political analysis?
4. How do we transform our personal networks into a powerful political force?

The purpose of this article is to begin to answer these questions and to raise others by relating some of the obstacles I have encountered as a young black woman who calls herself a feminist working in the battered women's movement. My experiences have



led me to some conclusions which I offer for consideration. By sharing I hope that black and third world women will be moved to speak. And I hope that white women will hear our voices. The survival of our battered sisters depends on it.

Recognizing Violence in Third-World Families

I was introduced to the battered women's movement while working in New York City. It is a rare

privilege to be associated with a multi-cultural, third world-controlled agency with strong roots in the community. I had such a privilege for two years as I joined with dedicated workers in service to a predominately black and hispanic population.

The goal of our multi-dimensional involvement with community families was empowerment; to assist families in the development of skills and the accumulation of resources necessary to overcome

the cultural, racial, economic, and political oppression that smothered the community. We saw the family as the only institution truly able to meet and nourish individual needs. The agency was designed to foster independence in the community and to support families fighting back against exploitation, while maintaining their cultural and racial identities. In sharp contrast, most educational, social-service and health-care systems in the community discourage autonomy and self-determination. Being an enthusiast and sharing the commitment to community and individual empowerment, I joined in the work and began to call the community my home.

After a few false starts, I found a way to break the silence. I began to hold regular meetings for women in the community to talk together about positive issues: community strength and survival techniques. Discussions ranged from cultural rituals, such as holidays, to practical skills, such as living on an inadequate allowance. As the passage of time built trust, so it certified alliances and women began to talk about problems in the community and finally about incidents of violence in their homes. Survival techniques and community concerns were expanded to include violence against women. The acknowledgement of the problem

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After a period of time, I gradually realized that some of these strong, culturally-identified families, which we had been supporting so vehemently, were dangerous places for some women to live. Furthermore, the political machine at the forefront of the grass-roots community movement was in fact subtly exploiting women by denying the reality of sexual oppression. As I began to look closely, the incidences of battering, rape, and sexual harassment became obvious.

I found myself caught in a trap, one which I have since learned may have been intentionally set for me. I can now recognize that this "trap" is analogous to the "trap" which many battered women find themselves in. It is the trap of silence. Because of the scarcity of agencies such as mine, I hesitated in disclosing my observations. I was immobilized by denial and sadness. Fear of being cast out by the community silenced me in the beginning. Loyalty and devotion are enormous barriers to overcome.

The world is so hostile to third world people that it seems much less painful to remain quietly ambivalent. I struggled with how to illuminate this dark secret about our homes and ourselves. Disclosure is so easily confused with treason!

brought great joy and many tears. Women freed themselves from the trap of silence.

These triumphant women developed a mighty support network, as all through history black women have done so well. They set out to create an arena in which battered women could meet the community in full voice. A great deal of progress was made in the eighteen months I knew these women. Certainly, there is a long way to go. My point is not to extol their virtues, but rather to relay the message about the trap.

Black women, be forewarned. It is a painful, unsettling task to call attention to violence in our community. You may find yourselves feeling caught by the trap called loyalty. There is already so much negative information about our families that a need to protect ourselves keeps us quiet. Yet, we must not allow our voices to be silenced. Instead, we must strengthen and speak the truths about our families; we must support each other; but we must hear the cries of our battered sisters and let them be heard by others!

The Politics of BMW

In an effort to verify my experience, I looked to

other third world communities. My quest led me to sixteen vivacious women who refer to themselves as "Battered Minority Women," BMW for short. Despite the inaccessibility of mainstream educational systems to members of BMW, these women are extremely well-educated, particularly in terms of political strategies. Their life experiences have afforded them keen insight and expert technique. Their alliance is built upon: 1) a history of being physically battered by men in their homes; 2) the experience of having survived the trauma of a lifetime of poverty; and 3) a strong allegiance to various third world community groups. Most significantly, however, BMW shares a common analysis of the causes of battering, and they agree about the most appropriate response.

The BMW believes that domestic violence is not a problem in black communities. Its occurrence, like substance abuse, crime, and unwanted adolescent pregnancy, are symptoms of living systematically deprived in a society that is designed to dominate and control third world people. (On this point, I concur with their analysis.)

They define battering as the "systematic deprivation inflicted upon third world men by society which, in turn, is inflicted upon third world women." That is, black women are beaten solely because their men are deprived. The response they advocate lies herein.

According to the BMW, black women should involve themselves in the struggle for racial justice in order to end battering in their homes. They consider the only real issue to be racial liberation; the concept of sexual oppression does not exist for them. They assert that there is no inequality of power between men and women, and they reject the notion that they are being mistreated by the men who beat them. Complete responsibility lies with white society. (This summary of their analysis has been confirmed by BMW as accurate.)

BMW members do not consider themselves feminist and negate the need to be part of a larger movement for sexual equality. They provide temporary refuge for the battered women in their community through a safe-home model, demonstrating once again stalwart support for one another. Most of the women they protect return home after the violent episode. BMW proudly acknowledges a high return rate of women to the BMW safe-homes.



BMW is associated with groups in Boston, Los Angeles, Detroit and Atlanta who share a similar philosophy. I have heard their sentiments expressed frequently in quite convincing terms, and suspect that many women are lured by their analysis of racial oppression, just as I am.

I find this disturbing because if the argument is taken one step further, it approaches the theory of the black matriarch. This well-popularized myth suggests the notion of the "strong black woman," willing and able to accept beating in support of her man. The implication is that the role of black women in our families is to receive regular whippings in order to alleviate black men's stress. Clearly, this is a dangerous portrayal.

Undoubtedly, the stress black men must endure is cruel and often overwhelming. The connection this has to black women accepting beatings puzzles me. Who is responsible? And where is the strength in acceptance? It is true that black women have historically been able to secure employment at times when black men could not. Does this make us any less oppressed? Why are we arguing whose oppression is worse?

We must cease this senseless debate. To be black in this society is bad; it's bad for men, women, and children. While it remains critical that black people continue actively struggling against racism and discrimination, it must not be done at the physical and psychological expense of black women. We have paid our dues, and black men must be held re-

sponsible for every injury they cause. Yes, experience has taught black women to be strong and resilient. We must learn that on occasion we must use our strength for ourselves.

The position that BMW advocates concerning sexist oppression is problematic. To negate the notion of feminism in our lives is to deny a critical component of our personhood. There is no such thing as partial liberation. We must demand our share of equality; too long denied.

directly. As a movement, we must work within the system to assure that justice is available to our families. All the while, we must remain alert to the fact that the police may not necessarily respond consistently or responsibly. We must cultivate alternative methods of protecting black women in our communities.

... And the Issue of Homophobia

Black women also need to candidly confront the

While black people must continue struggling against racism, it must not be done at the physical and psychological expense of black women.

Thus, once we choose to speak out against the violence in our families, we may be confronted with serious challenges to our work based on differences in political understanding of women battering. To meet these challenges we must take time to carefully talk, to construct and refine our analysis of violence against women, especially against black women. Even more, we must consider how to work side by side with those who disagree with our conclusions.

The Role of Police . . .

While we study and deliberate about women abuse, it is important for black women working in the battered women's movement to address the special problems associated with having to depend upon the criminal justice system as a vehicle for protection and problem resolution. The criminal justice and law enforcement systems have been the worst offenders in perpetuating violence towards black people.

How can blacks in the domestic violence movement reconcile the reality of police brutality and blatant racism in the criminal justice system with the need for police and court intervention on behalf of black battered women?

I cannot offer answers to these questions, but I suggest that black women confront these issues

issue of homophobia in society, particularly within our communities. Hatred for homosexuals and fear of being associated with lesbian women are both commonly expressed reasons that black women do not identify with the feminist movement. We continue to negate the valuable contributions made by black lesbian women to our culture as well as our struggle for racial liberation. By doing so we have alienated steadfast allies. Black women must assume a leadership role in challenging our communities to put in check institutional and individual homophobic behavior. Currently, it is a decided barrier in our struggle.

To learn of rampant homophobia and deep-seated hatred for homosexuals startled me. To realize that oppressed people sometimes oppress others curiously disturbed me. However, it has helped me allay my confusion and guilt about holding black men responsible for their violent behavior. Black women must be held accountable for the homophobia within our ranks.

Women of Color Institute

The meaning of violence against women in our communities is different from that in white or other third world communities. We need to create time and space for researching a new, more meaningful analysis that is relevant to our lives. This is work we

must do alone with no apologies for not including others. (No one apologized for the long years we have been excluded.) Our community needs something that the white women's movement has not given us, and we should know better than to expect to be given anything. We must do our own work.

This concept was dramatically illustrated at the Women of Color Institute of the 1982 National Coalition Against Domestic Violence meeting and conference. The one day institute, "Building a Colorful Coalition," providing the occasion for assembling our vision and building our voice. By acknowledging our differences, we affirmed our union.

Nearly 100 Asian, Hispanic, Native American, Black and other third world women gathered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to attend the Institute, a true celebration of sisterhood. Certainly, every participant considered it the highlight of the conference. For me it was the highlight of my work in the battered women's movement.

The brilliant organizers of the Institute created an arena where we could strengthen our spirit as third world women and clarify our dream for a violence-free world. The institute and the Women of Color Caucus emerged in a leadership role of the conference, confirming my belief that third world women will be catalysts in bringing about positive change in the struggle for the liberation of all people.

The Challenges Ahead

Black women must also work on the direction of the struggle of the racial justice movement. Let us not be distracted by the progress we have made. Although we have won some critical battles, I have a troubling sense that some of the victories may be leading some of us astray. As we surround ourselves with objects rumored to bring happiness and success, we often forget that most black people do not have adequate resources with which to control their lives. It is tempting to push on for our individual advancement without regard for those we are leaving behind.

Black women must more critically analyze this system to which we have demanded access. We must reject those components which suggest exploitation. Too many individuals have been lost to an image of being free. The struggle against racial op-

pression must continue to be of utmost importance in our lives. The younger we are, the higher the risk is of forgetting how far we have come and of limiting our vision of how far we will be able to go.

In conclusion, I have a sense that the lonely, isolating experiences of a black feminist in the battered women's movement can be over. I can soon recover from the exhaustion I feel at having to constantly make a place for myself in a society which negates my existence. It is clumsy and burdensome to live in constant defense against simultaneous racial and sexual oppression. I find it empowering to be sharing my journey with you.



-WARN Report 1/Matrix

The ideas I have discussed represent only a part of the agenda for our future. We must begin in our homes, our heads, and mostly our hearts to identify "traps" of loyalty. We must demand equality in our communities and in our relationships with black men. Homophobic behavior must become unacceptable in our lives. As black women we must re-dedicate ourselves to the struggle for racial equality and ending violence in the justice system. Finally, we must study together and plan our future in the battered women's and feminist movements in ways which are meaningful to our lives.

Clearly, we have a great task before us. Let's join together and use our spirit to move us towards our dream of peace.

It is important that while I accept responsibility for my ideas, I acknowledge those who assisted in their formation. First, the Committee to End Violence in the Lives of Women, a group of white wom-

en who taught me a great deal about black feminism, I thank you for being so willing to stretch. I am grateful to the Women of Color Caucus of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence for giving me a safe space to share and for sharing with me. I am most indebted to the third world women of the communities I know who taught me the meaning of survival and support.

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