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Voices on Black Feminism

By BRENDA EICHELBERGER

graphics by Kay Lindsey

It has been unanimously acknowledged by feminists, blacks, human rights activists, sociologists, psychologists, and the Establishment itself that there are few black women in the feminist movement. This article will attempt to examine why this is so and to explore the feasibility of a black feminist movement.

Since there are few, if any, published works from a collective perspective of black feminist activists explaining this phenomenon, it seems appropriate to go to active black feminists for an interpretation and an analysis of the viability of a black feminist movement. This critique is based on interviews with eight black women, all of whom have a unique commonality of experience. This unique experience is feminism, specifically *black feminism*. Each woman perceives herself as a feminist, and is—at least to some extent—a public feminist based on her active membership in a black feminist organization, the National Alliance of Black Feminists.

Though there are only eight interviewees, I hope their views will shed light on the reasons for the black woman's almost nonexistent

feminist involvement, and serve as a guideline for black women who have thought of establishing a black feminist structure.

I. Why Are Few Black Women in the Women's Movement?

The interviewees cite five reasons why black women have little involvement in the feminist movement. They are based on class differences, negative imagery of the black woman and the movement, naivete of the movement, white racism, and fear of dividing the black community.

Class Differences

Socio-economic status of black and white women is a significant differentiating factor. Black women have little involvement in the movement because of their differing priorities and work needs, their lack of time and power, and their perception that grass roots issues are not addressed by the movement.

The differences in priorities are related to class. The black woman's energy output is more often directed toward *survival*, while the white woman's is more often aimed at *fulfillment*.

"Black women find the manner in which the women's movement handles issues isn't

enough for them. For example, in the case of adequate day care facilities, white women might want them and might need them for jobs, but usually it's more for freeing them for time to go shopping, take classes, or engage in recreational activities and not for basic things. Whereas black women would need adequate day care so that they can get a job and not have to pay a large portion of their salary to a babysitter."

Bonita Kelly

The implication is that day care facilities, for instance, would be more comprehensive and plentiful if potential funding sources were given a more fundamental rationale for their existence. Thus one might assume that if the thrust were to get day care for welfare mothers so they might train for jobs, the mothers would have more moral support from the taxpayers, and the movement would have more sympathizers.

As part of their class differences, many black women perceive their motivation to work as being different from that of white women. They often see white women as being or aspiring to be part of the power structure that oppresses blacks.

"Black women were left out of the women's movement because it was basically a white upper-class women's movement, the goal of which was to get their 'share of the pie.' For example, when white women were out in the labor market, they had to have someone care for their kids. They did not seem to consider that their maids might wish to fulfill themselves. Once on a television program, I saw a C-R session comprised of wives of corporate executives. The women repeatedly commented on feeling that women were just appendages of men. One wo-

man said she could afford to have someone come in and take care of her child. I'm certain that person who took care of her child was a black woman."

Monica Stewart

Also, because black women must concentrate on survival, they have less time to become involved in the movement. Consequently, even black women who have no trouble understanding the feminist philosophy often find that they have no time to attend meetings, march in protest, testify at hearings, or even partake in consciousness-raising sessions.

"Another reason few black women are in the movement is that they don't have time to get involved. They are too busy being head of the household, being mother and father in most instances. Also, a lot of black women are going to school. There are more black women going to college now than ever before."

Marion Fisher

"The reason few black women are involved in the women's movement is because the white women's movement does not address grass roots issues relating to black women. The proportion of black female heads of households is greater than that of white females. This means that more black women have to work to care for their children."

Marta White

The white woman is less likely to be poor than the black woman and does not suffer from racism, as the black woman does. And since the movement is primarily white and middle class, there are few in the movement with whom the poor black woman can effectively and comfortably relate. Black women may have a lot in common with that part of the women's movement

which is radical because the radical wing addresses itself to grass-roots issues. Nevertheless, the black woman's movement involvement is still negligible. The perception is that the movement has so little relationship to them that the equal-pay tenet is insufficient incentive for them to join movement forces.

Negative Imagery

Society's negative image of the black woman and her perceived negative image of the women's movement inhibit involvement in the movement. The differences between the images of the white woman and of the black woman is based on physical and social factors. The physical difference is immutable. The term I have coined for the immutable physical difference is the "institutionalized beauty standard." The standard for beauty is white: fair complexion, straight hair, keen features. The antithesis of the standard is black: dark complexion, kinky hair, broad features. In spite of the bleaching cremes, wigs and rhinoplasties, these beauty deviants will never reach "normalcy."

Intertwined with these physical differences are profound social differences. They relate to the way society has viewed and treated white and black women differently through the centuries.

"Many black women have deep enmity for white women because black women don't fit the white standard of beauty and because white women have always been 'ladies' and black women haven't been eligible for 'ladyhood.'"

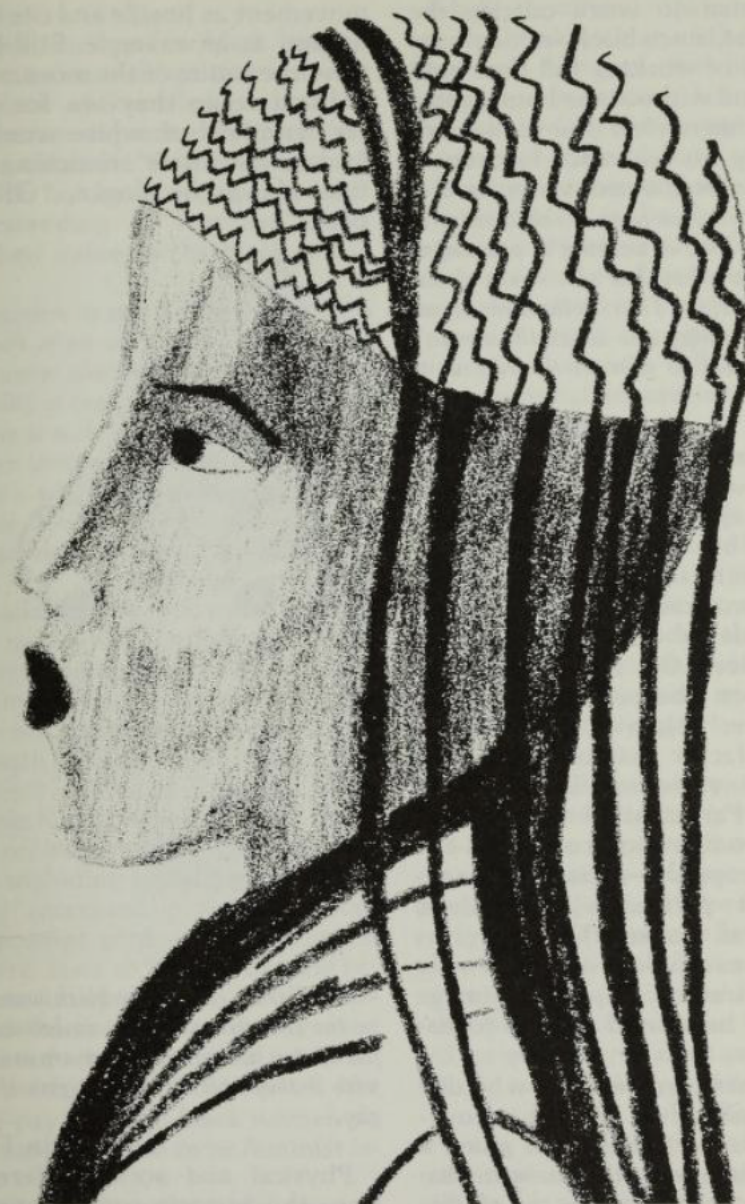
Michele Gautreaux

The physical differences are the distinction from which a dichotomized social system is produced. This social system not only includes a difference in attitude toward the two, but also produces a difference in prescribed roles.

"Black women have always held the lower position in society. White women were placed on a pedestal that black women were never afforded.... Black women were forced to go out and work because they often had the only jobs open to blacks at the time. Rather than the black man saying, 'Thanks for helping me out during this time of need,' he felt that the black woman was pushing him and trying to take over his role.... The white man saw the black woman as lower than the white woman. The black man adopted the white man's belief. He felt that a real woman would not be out working but would be nice and feminine, smelling sweet when he came home. Black women find that they are placed on the lower rungs of the ladder in the black society also, because members of the black community are still accepting white beauty standards. It's a white man's ethic of what women in general should be doing—staying at home, taking care of the kids. Their egos want them to be the sole providers for the family."

Bonita Kelly

This economic model is the work ethic that dictates that the white woman rest on the pedestal and the black woman polish it. It dictates that the white woman stay at home labor-free while her maid does her drudgery. For the black woman has a tradition of spending more time cleaning white women's homes than cleaning her own home. Yet black women have been faulted—by white society at large and, at times, by their own black men—for



a contradiction in roles which they had no part creating. Their dream is pedestal princess, their reality is pedestal polisher. For women to have to as-

sume either posture is an infringement on their personhood.

Many black women perceive the main feminist thrust as encourag-

ing women to work outside the home. Yet, since black women have a history of working full time both within and without the home, some black women view the movement as having no relevance to them.

"As black women, we were part of the labor force ever since we came to this country so we did not look at working as a means of fulfilling ourselves, but as a means of sustaining ourselves. Thus, in the labor arena, there was nothing new which the women's movement had to offer us to draw us to them."

Monica Stewart

Economic and social "independence" was thrust upon them whether they wanted it or not.

Many black women internalize the hostility they feel towards the institutionalized beauty standard and "pedestal privilege" because they believe the stereotypes that have been heaped upon them. Therefore, negative self-image is another factor that contributes to minimal involvement in movement activity. Participation would force black women to confront the double jeopardy—racism and sexism—that permeates their lives, knowing all too well that an aggressive posture would only intensify the "castrating Sapphire" image that they have tried so hard to disprove.

There are black women who disassociate themselves from the movement because it has been given a negative image by the mass media. Many black women view the strategies of the movement as ludicrous and cite bra-burning as an illustration. There are other black women who view the implications of the

movement as hostile and cite "man-hating" as an example. Still others view the tactics of the movement as militant when they see, for example, graphics of white women in "masculine attire" clenching their fists above the slogan, "Off Our Backs."



"A further reason few black women are in the feminist movement is because they feel if it is known that they are associated with it they will have the stigma of being gay."

Marion Fisher

Physical and social differentiation, the historic contradiction of the work ethic plus the negative image of the movement itself, diminish the chances that a black woman will join movement forces.

Naivete

A third reason few black women are in the women's movement is a basic lack of knowledge about it. The themes expressed by the interviewees indicate that black women often do not have a comprehensive understanding of feminist issues and their value to the black struggle.

"Feminism as an organizing principle is too much of an abstraction to work with. They cannot identify conceptual ideas with the reality of their own lives. It is difficult for them to make the connection. Black women can identify with racial oppression because it's self-evident. But I think when it comes to identifying with sexual oppression it is less easy for them...."

Michele Gautreaux

In addition to knowing little about movement philosophy, black women often are not aware of the implementation of that philosophy, or do not connect the implementation with the philosophy. Countless numbers of times, various black women have conversed with feminists on issues about which both agree, including equal pay for equal work; increased protection from and prompt prosecution of sexual abusers; laws to help insure the economic independence of the displaced homemaker and increased rights of the household worker. Yet, with the exception of the equal-pay concept, black women do not consider these to be feminist issues.

Many black women do not see that in order for them to have a better quality of life, the eradication of racist and sexist oppression are interdependent. There are some

—black feminists included—who see the black woman as the connecting link between the black and feminist movements. For whether she acknowledges it or not, she has a personal stake in both struggles. As long as racism and sexism exist, she continues to be the one most exploited. However, until abstractions are broken down sufficiently and the positive correlation between the two struggles is recognized, black women will continue to have minimal involvement in the women's movement.

White Racism

Half of the interviewees perceive racism as being one of the major reasons few black women are involved in the feminist movement. It is interesting to note that many black women, both within and without the feminist movement, perceive white feminists to be racist.

"White women are very standoffish. They don't invite me over to their houses or call me up on the phone. But they do invite me to monthly meetings. Basically, what they're saying is, 'We need your money, but we don't want to be bothered with you otherwise.' Take the National Organization for Women. From what I've seen and read, they're white-oriented....They go in and out of those corporations and try to get jobs for women who are white...."

Rose Diggs

It is the perception of many black women that their white counterparts still do not welcome them to movement ranks with open arms. Therefore some black women may feel alienated when participating in feminist gatherings for the first

time. White feminists, if they are sincere about wanting more black women in the movement, must make social as well as "monetary" overtures to their black sisters. For whether white feminists are cognizant of it or not, their body language, their voice inflection, their overall demeanor, may subtly communicate that black women have only a "qualified" welcome.

Many black women resent whites who employ the tactics of the civil rights movement to increase their social, political, and economic advantage even further.

"...the white feminists have capitalized very much on the civil rights movement, yet they have deliberately rejected any involvement from the minority women except on a very token level."

Cozetta Milton

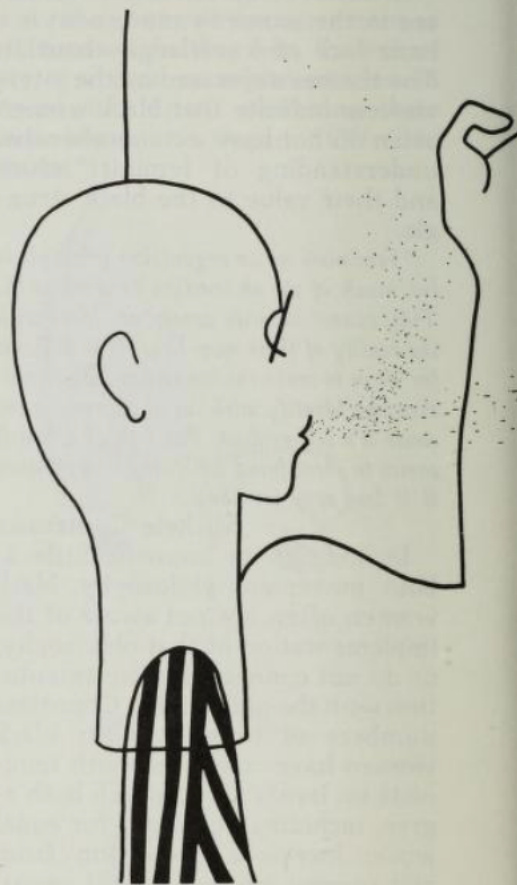
Racism is so pervasive that it would act as a deterrent to the black woman's involvement even if none of the white feminists were racist.

"By and large, black women will define their struggle as part of the black struggle and not as part of the women's struggle because they know that if sex barriers were removed there would still be race barriers. Therefore, most black feminists are involved in the framework of a black organization because black women can visualize superficial sex barriers of the larger society going away before race barriers. When we are viewed by the larger culture, we are not looked on in terms of our class or sex first, but in terms of our black skin."

Monica Stewart

Fear of Dividing the Black Community

Blacks are very much concerned with solidifying the black commu-



nity. In spite of many efforts, there are many blacks who still feel that the black community lacks cohesion. Some blacks view white women as having the luxury to be movement activists without threatening the white community or power structure. They view the black woman as afforded no such luxury. To them, involvement in feminist activity, no matter how

well-intentioned, would alienate black men, weaken the black family, dissipate the energies of the black struggle, and thereby fragment the black community.

For example, there are some black women who believe that forming an alliance with the feminist movement would be economically detrimental to black men.

"A secondary reason black women have little input in the women's movement is because some of them feel that white women are taking jobs away from black men and that the women's movement is helping them do it."

Michele Gautreaux

That which benefits blacks includes both sexes, but that which benefits women excludes half of blacks. To the black female opponents of feminism, it does not matter that white men who have always had power may not directly benefit from the women's struggle. It does matter to them that black men who have never had power receive no direct benefits. Any allegiance on the part of black women to the women's cause will only result in an even smaller slice of the pie for the black struggle.

II. Is There a Need for Black Feminism?

The interviewees see the need for a movement initiated by black women, controlled by black women, for the express purpose of black women. They feel that such a movement is necessary to help the black women self-actualize, to educate the public by articulating her concerns and her status, and to help

effect positive social change for all of humanity.

Effect Social Change

We need a black feminist movement because it necessarily includes other struggles which help bring about social change. Black feminists identify with the black struggle because they are black, the women's struggle because they are women, and the class struggle because they are—most likely—poor. The issues of class, race and sex converge in the experience of non-white women. This is what makes black women unique and the potential of a black feminist movement exciting.

There can't be liberation for half a race. Therefore, it is crucial that black women participate fully in the black movement.

"At this point in time, I feel there is a need for a black feminist movement, but within the confines of the black struggle. I don't think that this time black feminists can afford to isolate their struggle and deal only with feminist issues because we face dual oppression. I see black feminism as a tactic to be used within the black struggle to enhance it, as we can't afford to have 51% of our number unprepared to think and act independently....I think basically black feminist organizations are necessary to speak to the needs of black women in particular; however, they should always reflect the perspective of black people in general."

Monica Stewart

Even among the black women who imply that black feminism should be confined only to the black struggle, there is acknowledgement of the positive influence the women's movement has had on black women within black-movement

ranks who do not even perceive themselves as feminists.

Active participation in the black feminist struggle strengthens the women's movement because both advance the cause of women. Black feminists who set the black movement as the first priority recognize the relationship between the black woman's plight and grass-roots feminist issues. Black women are also keenly aware of the fact that this society is comprised of haves and have-nots. Black women are most likely to lead the have-nots. Thus some black feminists recognize the importance of joining forces with white feminists to enhance the quality and quantity of movement gains.

Self-Actualization

A primary reason for the existence of a black feminist movement is the opportunity for the black woman to self-actualize.

The movement creates an environment within which she may receive economic advancement, moral support, social intercourse, aesthetic fulfillment, outreach for her younger black sisters, and a multitude of other services.

In the economic arena a black feminist movement can encourage unemployed black women to enroll in training programs that will provide them with marketable skills. It can encourage under-employed black women to get on-the-job training that can lead to promotions. It can also provide the incentives for black women to explore various career opportunities.

In addition to career encourage-

ment, there are specific programs, such as day care, that can lead to economic advancement. The National Alliance of Black Feminists, for example, has offered panels, forums, speak-outs, conferences, and workshops on topics such as woman/man relationships, peer counseling, assertion training, drug awareness, political issues and black feminism. In addition we offer retreats, writers' workshops, study groups, a speakers' bureau, and a black women's center. Our referral services include health, education, employment, legal, consumer, etc. We have worked with other feminist groups to establish a women's credit union, to offer rape counseling and anti-rape advocacy, to testify at hearings on race and sex discrimination, and to participate in feminist demonstrations and rallies. We have made numerous public appearances and in addition, have a weekly radio show.

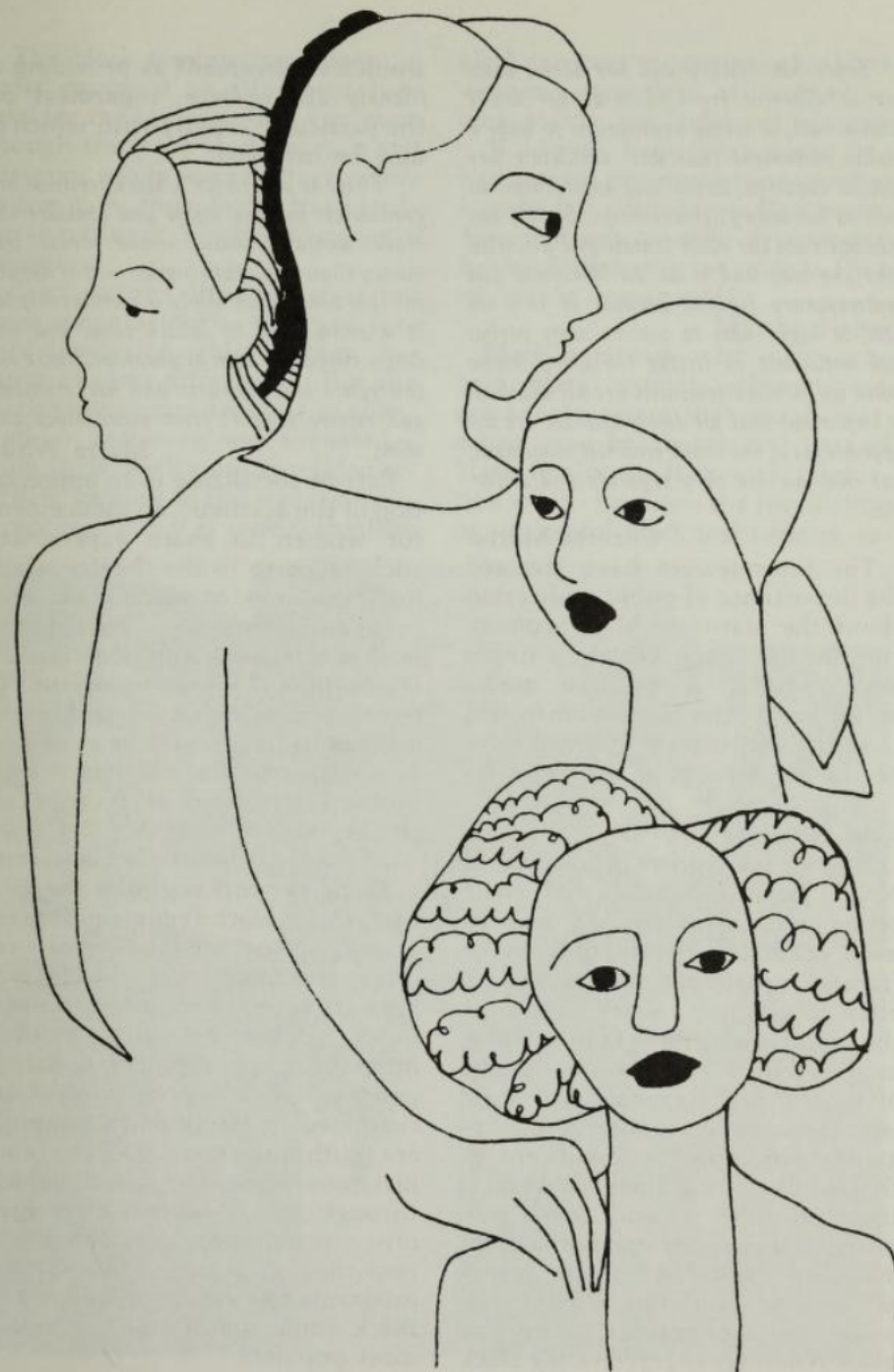
Public Edification

A major concern of the interviewees is to educate the public about black women.

"Black women should reach the white community and let them know that black women are not dirt and that not all black women live just to be on welfare rolls."

Rose Diggs

It is imperative that black women set their own norms by which they are compared. In addition to setting their norms, black women must also speak for themselves. When black women are defined by others, the qualities ascribed to them are in the interests of those who maintain power.



"Since her history and her social caste are so different from those of her white counterpart, it seems appropriate to have a viable movement that will articulate her specific concerns, needs, and aspirations, as well as her many achievements. Society has misconstrued the black female and distorted who she was and is as an historical and contemporary figure. Because of this we need to begin now to become more verbal and articulate in letting the world know what we as black feminists are all about. It is important that we define that we are not appendages of the white feminist movement, but that we are very separate and different."

Cozetta Milton

The interviewees have stressed the importance of public edification about the status of black women. Her media image certainly needs improvement. A positive media projection of the black woman will raise her self-esteem and will raise her in the esteem of others.

Social Interaction

Some black women who come to NABF have indicated that their prime reason for coming was to meet other black women, to make friends, or simply to have some place to go once a week. A few of the women who have families have indicated they "just want to get out of the house." Regardless of their initial reasons for coming to the organization, what is significant is that while getting their needs met, their feminist consciousness was raised and they became feminist activists as a result. NABF is not a "social" organization, nor should any other feminist organization be. But black feminists do perceive the black

women's movement as providing a friendly atmosphere, regardless of the particular activity with which it may be involved.

"There is a need for a black feminist organization because when you consider the black woman's status—she makes less money than any other worker—it is apparent that she cannot afford a membership fee to a social club or health club. But she does need an open atmosphere where she can relate her pressures and her problems and receive support from other black women."

Marta White

Part of socializing is an appreciation of the aesthetic, an inducement for women to share experiences such as going to the theater, visiting a museum, or reading a classic.

"Because the majority of people I know involved in the fine arts are white, I personally feel the need to share my experience in the arts with other black women. I feel this way because it's necessary for us as black women to get together and draw strength from each other. It will help us to get very positive images of ourselves."

Michele Gautreaux

Moral support is one of the vital features of black feminism. It is especially important that women receive encouragement. While women are often accustomed to being moral supporters—wife, mother, hostess, high-level helper, social appendage—they are not always accustomed to having moral supporters. Within the context of the feminist movement, the major vehicle through which women offer each other moral support is consciousness-raising. Among the various programs the National Alliance of Black Feminists offers, C-R is the most popular.

The black feminist movement is most equipped to offer peer support for the black woman. For, even though the poor black woman and the poor white woman have poverty in common, they do not have blackness in common. The black woman is unique.

Black women often feel alienated from those activities that are predominantly for white women, because of class differences. But the black woman may feel just as alienated—in fact even more alienated—from some black woman-related activities because of the same class differences. Thus it is crucial that the

black feminist movement give black women, regardless of socio-economic status, the feeling of belonging.

"I definitely think there's a need for a black feminist movement because something is needed that relates to poor black women. There is already something the upper-middle-class black woman can relate to. She is off into the society world."

Marion Fisher

Black feminists, whose aim is to help black women self-actualize, are keenly aware that social interaction must be an integral part of black feminism. It is such interaction which has been the foundation of successful black institutions, es-



graphic by Cynthia Washington

pecially the church, in which the black woman, far more than her male counterpart, has been the backbone. The black feminist knows that if the energy with which the black woman has so intensely worked in the church is harnessed and channeled along black feminist lines, there is no force that can block the dynamo.

Outreach for Young Black Women

It is important that teenagers have positive adult role models. A young woman at this age is most likely—whether consciously or unconsciously—to seek an older person or persons she admires to pattern her life after. In addition to providing support services for adults, the black feminist movement can also provide supportive services for teenagers.

"I see the black feminist movement as offering an outreach program to our younger black sisters. There is a high number of young black women—14, 15, and 16 years old—who are perpetuating the wel-

fare cycle by becoming pregnant. We need to form a sisterhood with our younger black sisters offering school counseling, job counseling, and other types of services that deal with reality....We, in a black feminist movement, need to show our younger sisters that we care—that their older black sisters can provide a support base for what they will have to deal with in life."

Marta White

It is important that black feminism reach out not only to high school youngsters, but to college students also. In speaking on college campuses across the nation, deans, professors, and students themselves have indicated to me that there is a need for some kind of black feminist organization on campus. They point out that for too long the only outlet for the black woman has been the sorority. They indicate a need for something which goes beyond the superficial.

Strengthen Society

The existence of a black feminist movement aids the black woman in self-actualization, enhances the humanistic struggles, and—because it is a catalyst for social change—strengthens society. *"In the sophisticated society in which we live, we need formal responses to social problems or we will not be effective. In our society, the problems that affect one group usually affect other groups also. Therefore, a black feminist organization tailors itself to the immediate needs of the black female but indirectly helps others too."*

Donna Stutts

Brenda Eichelberger is a founder and Executive Director of the National Alliance of Black Feminists.

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