

RACISM and SEXISM

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A COLLECTIVE STRUGGLE: A MINORITY WOMAN'S POINT OF VIEW

By Valerie Russell

There is a battle now raging about whether or not sexism and racism have any real elements in common, and whether or not the collective struggle of one has any real implications for the other. It is my position that the struggle for liberation is a struggle toward a new humanness, and that one dare not happen apart from any other struggle. The seeds which spawn the racist mentality also spawn the sexist mentality, though the results differ in both their historical manifestations and degree of oppression. It is critical to any group of women, working through a Christian perspective toward liberation, that we take a careful look at sexism and racism in order to build an understanding of their similarities and differences. If we are to effect institutional change we need to capitalize upon the similarities but to realistically acknowledge and be sensitive to the differences. This will enable us to build a community of trust with each other and also affirm the nature of pluralism within a context of unity.

WHAT IS RACISM? Any attitude, action or institutional structure which systematically subordinated a person or group because of their color.

WHAT IS SEXISM? Any attitude, action or institutional structure which systematically subordinated a person or group because of their sex.

As we work through these definitions let us begin to look at some of the fundamental similarities in the two problems. One way of doing this is to reflect upon the general nature of oppression and the context which it sets for human liberation.

Jurgen Moltmann has pointed out that a succession of freedom movements have expressed the human striving for liberation in Western society. Each new movement has continued the gains of previous ones. "Each one has opened a new front in the struggle for freedom" A staff colleague of mine, Dr. Letty Russell, states in a paper entitled, "Human Liberation in a Feminine Perspective," that "Women belong to one of the groups who find that liberties gained in past revolutions of freedom have not been adequate. As an oppressed majority they point to a basic and persistent form of domination which is expressed in the various social customs regarding the man-woman relationship. As they strive to break the peculiar chains of sexism, they become aware of their solidarity with all those who aspire for full human liberation. Learning from others--they also contribute their own perspective to what is happening in the rapidly changing institutions of society..."

"Secondly, HUMAN LIBERATION MEANS NEW CONSCIOUSNESS OF OPPRESSION AND RISING EXPECTATIONS CONCERNING THE FUTURE. Oppressed people begin the process of liberation by negating the negative of the present situation. And it is this discovery that frees them to discover their humanity..."

"This is a phenomenon which points to the growing awareness that humanization involves freedom to participate in shaping one's own destiny."

It is precisely at this critical juncture of what Paulo Freire calls "conscientization" that the broad perspective of sexism and racism must converge. It is critical that the perception of the nature of oppression, and the vision of the new freedom not be one-sided. For when analyzing the nature of past oppression we quickly realize that part of the disease has been the inherent one-sidedness of the definitions of social reality. Namely, the norms of America, and indeed in most Western thought and historical Christianity, have been set by white, Western, male thinking. The historical struggle which both women and racial minorities have suffered in America is predominately the history of those hang-ups. We have been living out a reality not authentically our own. Yet, through inheritance, assimilation, socialization, seduction, whatever name you call it, the majority of Americans--particularly females--have bought those

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hang-ups as their own, "lock, stock and barrel." This was particularly true of white women since their physical, social, cultural and economic characteristics most closely resembled the oppressor. Racial groups have always been aware that they have never been a part of "the American dream." To Black, Chicana, Asian American, Indian and Puerto Rican women, there is little reason now to believe that suddenly white women, newly aware of their oppression will rise up with a new vision of the future which somehow encompasses more than their historical experience. I am not saying that white women do not have a new vision which is nonoppressive, but it must be defined and demonstrated to be believed. Trust must be earned. How such trust is earned should be a major focus for any women's group seeking to deal with questions of liberation. Minority sisters have too bitter a taste in their mouths from the years spent doing white women's housework and child-raising from being constantly demeaned because of white standards of beauty and "gracefulness." Sojourner Truth's now famous poem, "And Ain't I a Woman?" stands as a cry of minority women from the depths of their struggle for acceptance. In their historical eye, the white woman has been their enemy. It is now necessary for white women to prove that just as they will no longer play the pampered soft sex-object role, they will no longer play the role of being the enemy of their minority sisters. The demonstration of this fact, however, will take a determined and intentional effort on the part of all sisters. It is not something which will just "happen." White sisters have to understand this and accept it as reality. One of the reasons that black sisters have been so hostile toward whites in women's liberation is that they have perceived great hostility from white sisters because they have looked upon the good intentions of these sisters with doubt.

I do believe that as white sisters get past the period of exorcism (or expression of rage) to a time when they clearly define their goals, methodologies and value framework, the relationship will, hopefully, become more possible. When people are broken open, something new emerges. But what that new will look like is up for grabs in the women's movement. All the input possible must be sought by those from other groupings. None of us can move forward alone. We must seek out new ways of communication and communion so that we can provide some mutual support in the struggle for change.

Finally, white women must realize that minority women are intrinsically bound to the total struggle of a race. The enemy as stated earlier, is "the white establishment"--not her man. The minority male in America has suffered equally from oppression. In a society which equates manhood with "success" the minority man suffered grave historical injustice. The struggle of minority people is to free themselves mentally and morally from the "oughtness" and oppressive value systems of the mainstream of American life. For many minorities, indeed, the struggle is for actual physical and spiritual survival. These battles cannot be waged by women alone but are intrinsically bound together. Many white sisters have not understood this phenomenon and perceive that minority women are merely perpetuating chauvinism because they have not been so quick to denounce their interdependence with their men. Minority men and women do need to work out new supportive and freeing roles with each other, but that will have to happen within the context of the struggle for justice in America. White women must learn to trust their minority sisters that this is happening and will continue. The process, however, will not often take on the rhetoric, form or methodology of the predominately white "women's lib" movement.

All of us as sisters must become more politically involved in shaping America's new priorities and in reshaping its vision. We must somehow look at our own histories in the collective as well as personal stories which have shaped our consciousness toward liberation. We must believe in the right and necessity for those collective and personal stories to differ. We must believe that the goals will bring us together out of our diversity. We must believe in the power of healing--that the gaps will be diminished and that our liberation will result in the freeing of the whole human society, because our new consciousness and action toward liberation will empower and bestow dignity, not oppress and deny it. We are not asking for a bigger piece of the American pie, rather we are seeking to formulate a new world.