

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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