

PANTHER SISTERS ON WOMEN'S LIBERATION



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An interview with
six Black Panther Party women

PANTHER SISTERS ON WOMEN'S LIBERATION

Editor's Note: The following is an intensive interview with six Black Panther Party women about some of the issues raised by the women's liberation movement and their own experience with women's lib inside the Black Panther Party. The interview was conducted internally by the Panther Headquarters office and circulated as a four-page press leaflet. The reader should note that a large space between paragraphs below means that a different "sister" is speaking [moose note: I've added a "PW" where a new sister is speaking].

QUESTION: How has the position of women within the Black Panther Party changed? How have the women in the Party dealt with male chauvinism within the Party?

PANTHER WOMEN: I've only been in the Party about ten months and when I got in the Party the thing about Pantherettes was squashed, we sort of grew out of it. Then there's Ericka Huggins. The Brothers had to look on Ericka with a new light because she had been thru a lot of things that some Brothers hadn't even been thru. The sisters looked up to her and we all saw what we had to do. The sisters have to pick up guns just like brothers. There are a lot of things the sisters can do to change society. We realize we have a role to play and we're tired of sitting home and being misused and unless we stand up, male chauvinism will still show itself and be something that's just passed over. Unless we speak against it and teach the brothers what's correct and point out what's wrong, then it'll still be here.

[PW]: There used to be a difference in the roles (of men and women) in the party because sisters were relegated to certain duties. This was due to the backwardness and lack of political perspective on the part of both sisters and brothers. Like sisters would just naturally do the office-type jobs, the clerical-type jobs. They were the ones that handled the mailing list. You know all those things that go into details. They were naturally given to the sisters and because of this, because the sisters accepted it so Willingly, because they had been doing this before, this is the type of responsibilities they've had before, it was very easy for male chauvinism to continue on. The only examples we had of sisters taking responsibility were probably in Kathleen (Clever) or one or two people who exercised responsibility in other areas of Party work.

We've recognized in the past 4 or 5 months that sisters have to take a more responsible role. They have to extend their responsibility and it shouldn't be just to detail work, to things women normally do. This, I think, has been manifested in the fact that a lot of sisters have been writing more articles, they're attending more to the political aspects of the Party, they're speaking out in public more and we've even done outreach work in the community, extensive outreach work in that we've taken the initiative to start our own schools--both brothers and sisters now work in the liberation schools. It's been proven that positions aren't relegated to sex, it depends on your political awareness.

[PW]: Well, I think that's one place where women who are already advanced are going to have to take a strong stand. The fact is because of objective conditions in this society, women are more backwards, because of their positions in their home, or in school, even working women who are more exposed to what's happening in the world, are still relegated at home and to the family jobs, to the children, etc., etc., and their perspective in terms of the world is more limited. So it's very important that women who are more advanced, who already understand revolutionary principles, go to them and explain it to them and struggle with them. We have to recognize that women are backwards politically and we have to struggle with them. And that can be a special role that revolutionary women can play.

The text in this pamphlet can be found online at
<http://www.anarchistpanther.net/>

[PW]: I can remember that when I came into the Party over a year ago, at that time David Hilliard was National Headquarters Captain, and there was another sister in the Party who was the National Captain for women and even though most of the people related to David Hilliard as being National HQ Captain, most of the women related to this other sister for directives because she was the National Captain for women. Under her were sergeants and lieutenants who were all sisters and in their ranks were other sisters. There was almost a separation between the brothers and the sisters.

REORGANIZATION

[PW]: When that was abolished, when there were no longer any separate positions for sisters and brothers, when we all had to relate to the brothers or sisters who were in the specific positions, there wasn't just a reaction on the part of certain brothers cause they didn't like having to relate to certain sisters, who were in leadership positions. There was also a reaction on the part of some sisters, who because they had to relate to some brothers, because they did not have ranks above certain brothers, they wanted to quit the Party. So it wasn't just a matter of brothers being male chauvinistic in not wanting to relate to sisters as leaders over them--but it was also the sisters, because of conditioning wanted to continue to submit to other sisters, rather than to leaders of the party per se, regardless of sex.

And I can see since the time I joined the Party that the Party has undergone radical change in the direction of women leadership and emancipation of women. Even though Ericka Huggins provides us with a very good example, it's not so much Ericka and the realization that Ericka poses a striking example. It's the fact that the political consciousness and the political level of members of the Party have risen very much since I joined the Party and because of the fact that we're moving toward a proletarian revolution and because we have come to realize that male chauvinism and all its manifestations are bourgeois and that's one of the things we're fighting against. We realize that in a proletarian revolution, the emancipation of women is primary. We realize that the success of the revolution depends upon the women. For this reason, we know that it's necessary that the women must be emancipated.

IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION

QUESTION: Could you explain what you mean when you say that the success of the revolution depends on the emancipation of women?

PANTHER WOMEN: It's because of the fact that women are the other half. A revolution cannot be successful simply with the efforts of the men, because a woman plays such an integral role in society even though she is relegated to smaller, seemingly insignificant positions.

[PW]: I think conditions outside the Party have forced us to realize that we have to get rid of male chauvinism. As Panthers, we cannot separate ourselves and divide ourselves and work as Pantherettes, and on the other hand have brothers work as Panthers and expect to present a United Front against Fascism or against the enemy or against outside forces. There has to be unity within the Party. We can't be divided on the basis of sex and we can't be divided on the basis of principles or anything.

Ericka became a good example because the pigs realized she was a revolutionary. Maybe we didn't realize that, in the sense that we thought about it all the time or brought her up as an example of a strong woman. But, I think the pigs realize that and this outside condition has forced us to realize that we can't operate as two halves, separate, apart from each other--we have to be unified.

VIETNAMESE WOMEN LEAD

QUESTION: You once said that the Vietnamese women were your example. Could you explain more concretely what that means in terms of the struggle of women in the United States?

PANTHER WOMEN: We feel that the example given us by the Vietnamese women is a prime example of the role women can play in the revolution. The Vietnamese women are out there fighting with their brothers, fighting against American imperialism, with its advanced technology. They can shoot. They're out there with their babies on their backs, as the case may be, and they're participating in the revolution wholeheartedly just as the Vietnamese men are participating in the revolution, in the national liberation struggle. The success of their national liberation struggle is just as much dependent upon the women continuing the struggle as it is dependent on the Vietnamese men. So there we see in Vietnam where the struggle today is the sharpest in terms of struggling against U.S. imperialism, the women in fact play the role of the other half--not the weaker half, not the stronger half, but the other half of the Vietnamese men. We hold them up as our example and we hope that the revolutionary women in the U. S. can follow that example and live up to the goal that they have set.

Right now the issue of male chauvinism is rather sharp and kind of out of place. We're starting to talk about it and everybody is sensitive about it--but once women find their place in terms of their roles as revolutionaries and use the example of the Vietnamese women, then I don't think it will be such a sharp issue. I think we'll begin to function and make it very natural for a woman to behave as a revolutionary and not as a subordinate or as a submissive half.

SPECIAL ROLE OF BLACK WOMEN

QUESTION: Black women are considered to be the most oppressed group in the U. S., as

You can't be liberated from male chauvinism if you don't even deal with it--if you run away from it. And I think forming any separate organization with that in mind is negating or contradicting what you're setting out to do. I think any type of inside organization that deals with women's liberation should take into consideration that women's liberation is important, but what is primary is the People's liberation. If they want a women's club, those have existed for centuries-- they should form that, instead of calling themselves revolutionaries.

QUESTION: One of the arguments that's been made is that the movement has failed to attract a lot of women because of the intimidation that's found in a lot of political organizations. We fail to attract the other half because men dominate. Women have to get together to talk about their special problems in order to involve more women in the struggle.

PANTHER WOMEN: I think our judgment of caucuses, just like independent groups, is going to have to depend on whether or not they forward the revolutionary movement in the end. I mean if their purpose for caucusing among themselves is to make a more efficient organization and if they, in fact, are able to do that thru their practice, then Right On. But if they fall into a trap of just getting by themselves and just complaining about the situation and are unable to put forth a positive program, then that form is not viable. Again their practice is going to have to tell whether or not they further the revolutionary organization PERIOD.

ROLE FOR ADVANCED WOMEN

[PW]: Also for a person to use the argument that the struggle does not ATTRACT women to the organization, I think, is coming from a subjective point of view. Because if they understand that it's not a women's or a man's struggle, it's not an attraction for a man or a woman, but we're here for the liberation of oppressed people, regardless of whether male chauvinism exists, the women would still come into the Party or movement because they agree or are willing to support the revolutionary principles that exist. If they find male chauvinism, they should be willing to fight it on the basis of principle and unity. And to say, "they're not attracted to it" -- there's no advertisement for getting rid of oppression. It's an attraction based on principles, not based on some subjective wishes or wants. So I say that women who say that they don't want to come into the struggle because they're not ATTRACTED to the struggle aren't really interested in the first place.

QUESTION: No, they say the movement doesn't deal with their special oppression.

PANTHER WOMEN: Well, that may be true, but still, if you're interested in the struggle of oppressed people, you can come into an organization and bring that question in yourself, instead of staying away from it. You can fight on the basis of unity within an organization, not on the basis of "Well, they're not dealing with the women's question and they're not dealing with the special oppression of women, so therefore I'm not going to participate." They're still being subjective.

PANTHER PROGRAMS

QUESTION: Do the Panthers have any specific programs directed at women in the community to get them involved in the struggle?

PANTHER WOMEN: The Black Panther Party does not have any program that is specifically addressed to women, per se. There is, on the National Committees to Combat Fascism, a committee on the national steering committee of women. But the primary function of this committee is to channel those women who are proponents of women's liberation into areas of work integrated into the liberation movement.

[PW]: Even though the Panther Party doesn't have a women's program per se, (I don't know whether we will in the future or not) I think we realize that the best effort is thru practice and that our liberation is gonna come thru the realization on the part of the brothers that they can't practice male chauvinism, but even more important, it comes from a conscious effort on the part of the sisters to educate themselves and not to accept menial positions or relegate themselves to submissive positions. The brothers can be non-chauvinistic as much as they want, but unless the sisters realize that they have to accept an equal position or act as a revolutionary, then this isn't going to do any good. So I think the best criterion for that is practice.

[PW]: In addition to that--simply because of the fact that we are members of the Black Panther Party and are therefore in the vanguard, does not necessarily mean that we can deem ourselves champions of women's liberation. We believe that male chauvinism must be stomped out, because we have come to realize that it is bourgeois. Bourgeois ideas are those which are perpetuated upon us by the bourgeois class and is something we're fighting against. But because we've come to realize all these things just recently, we're very new at it. So that whether or not we will become champions of women's liberation, whether or not we'll be able to provide the example to lead other organizations towards women's liberation will come thru our practice.

WOMEN'S CAUCUSES

QUESTION: What do you think about all women's caucuses inside the organization? Some people say that within movement organizations there's male chauvinism and women must deal with it from a position of power, so they should organize their own caucuses. They also say there's a parallel between women's liberation and black liberation and just like black people had to get themselves together without whites first, so women have to get themselves together without men. Movement organizations have always been dominated by men, the way civil rights organizations used to be dominated by white people.

PANTHER WOMEN: I don't know, that sounds illogical to me because you can't solve the problem apart from the problem.

blacks and as women. That special oppression gives them a special, even vanguard role. Do you want to talk about that a little?

PANTHER WOMEN: I think, historically, even at this time, even for women in the Party, to say we want full share and full responsibility is kind of difficult and kind of touchy because of our society. Our men have been sort of castrated, you know. The responsibilities that they rightfully should have had before, were taken away from them--to take away their manhood. We've had to fight all this before. Our men are constantly thinking or saying that maybe if we assume. A heavier role, a more responsible role, that this, in turn, will sort of take away their responsibility and it's such a touchy thing, that we have to be very sure that the roles are evenly divided.

It shouldn't have to be one certain role for a man and one certain role for a woman--we're all gonna participate in the struggle and whatever we can do best, we do it, whether it's at a higher level or not. This is very touchy and presents some problems in combating a specific thing like male chauvinism, because some brothers still have this fear of women dominating the whole political scene. It may not be voiced that often, but I think it's a very real fear, and we're going to have to be sensitive enough to recognize it. We're going to have to be sensitive enough to say that we're going to take more of a share of the political arena, but, at the same time, we're going to have to keep these things in mind.

[PW]: I think it's important that within the context of that struggle that black men understand that their manhood is not dependent on keeping their black women subordinate to them because this is what bourgeois ideology has been trying to put into the black man and that's part of the special oppression of black women. Black women as generally a part of the poor people of the U. S., the working class, are more oppressed, as being black, they're super-oppressed, and as being women they are sexually oppressed by men in general and by black men also.

So, in this context we see that black women are especially oppressed in this country and it's very important that black man's manhood is not dependent upon the subordination of black women, but rather his manhood is, in fact, dependent on his revolutionary relationship. A relationship is more fruitful when, in fact, the woman is the other half and not the weaker half. They (the men) get more out of the relationship' just as the women.

UNITY IN STRUGGLE

QUESTION: What are your ideas on the strategy for women's liberation in terms of separate women's organization, the priority of women's liberation in relation to other issues like imperialism and racism?

PANTHER WOMEN: I think it's important that the separate women's liberation groups not all be lumped into one category. Their effectiveness and their value is dependent upon to what

extent their work is furthering revolutionary goals in this country. I think that there are all different kinds of organizations in existence now. There are some people who talk about the contradictions among men and women as one of the major contradictions in capitalist society and therefore they take that contradiction (and even if they don't talk about it, some of them put it into practice) and develop it into an antagonistic contradiction, when actually it is a contradiction among the people. It's not a contradiction between enemies.

An example of this is at the UFAF (United Front Against Fascism) Conference where occasions arose from time to time where women would want to have a caucus and a man would come around and they would get very uptight that a man was there and were practically ready to jump on him, just because he happened to be listening around. I think that's an example of how the women's struggle is taken out of perspective--it is separated from class struggle in this country, it's separated from national liberation struggles and it's given its own category of women against men. Sometimes people say, "It's within a revolutionary context," but in practice, if all their rhetoric and all their practice is anti-men, it is not a revolutionary program and, as a matter of fact, it hinders the revolutionary forces.

The contradiction between men and women is a contradiction that has to be worked out within the revolutionary forces. It is not at all comparable to the class contradictions. It's the class struggle that takes priority. To the extent that women's organizations don't address themselves to the class struggle or to national liberation struggles they are not really furthering the women's liberation movement, because in order for women to be truly emancipated in this country there's going to have to be a socialist revolution. And there's going to have to be ideological struggle for decades and probably for centuries before male chauvinism is overcome. If women don't understand this, they're not going to truly be able to overcome their special oppression.

[PW]: Roberta is correct and even those women's organizations who do address themselves to the struggles that are at hand, the strategy of having autonomous women's liberation organizations is incorrect because, as Roberta says, it seems as if those organizations look upon women's liberation as a priority when in actuality the struggle towards socialist revolution is a priority. Women can only become emancipated, not through their own efforts as a particular group, but through their participation on an equal plane in the existing organizations which are comprised of men and women who are struggling for the same cause. It's not a separate struggle and women's liberation does not take priority, but in fact is part and parcel of the overall struggle.

FEMALE CHAUVINISM

Any organization that's being formed for women's liberation, like Rosemary said, has got to take into consideration that they can't operate separately and by themselves. They must also understand the definition of chauvinism. Chauvinism isn't just relegated to the male. Chauvinism is an undying or unreasoning or irrational love for one's sex and if a women's liberation organization gets uptight because a man comes around, that's unreasoning and irrational. It's not being realistic and looking at things as a whole in terms of a man too functioning as a revolutionary and a woman functioning as a revolutionary. If they're not

careful, they will go to an extreme and they will become female chauvinists. They will have an undying love for their sex and totally negate revolutionary struggle.

[PW]: Unfortunately, if we don't be careful, I think that the women's liberation struggle can be co-opted by opportunists. It can become just like a style or a fad and the whole revolutionary struggle will be set back because of this. This is one reason why the revolutionary practitioners, because of the repression we're suffering, can't take time out to go off by ourselves to solve some of our backwardness. This would be just another dividing tactic as far as I can see.

WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN PRACTICE

I think it's important to recognize the dangers that separate women's groups face immediately, just because they're women's groups and there's a good chance that they're going to get off base in terms of what the primary struggle is. However, I think we have to be very careful in terms of condemning forms that are used in the movement. I think that there is room for special organizing of women. There are positive things that these kinds of groups can do: for example, canneries, special plants where there's primarily women, electronics and this sort of thing in terms of working class organizing, in terms of organizing cooperative nurseries to liberate the energies of women.

But, they are always facing certain dangers in terms of turning in on themselves. In terms of becoming a very petit bourgeois little clique where they just talk about how they have to take care of the kids all the time or become a gripe session. So, I think, while we as Panthers, while we integrate the struggle of the brothers and sisters Within the Party, we still will see how these separate women's liberation groups do thru their practice. And that's where our judgment of them will come in.

[PW]: We have a phrase that says that the only culture worth keeping is a revolutionary culture. Now, our culture dictates that we become revolutionaries. Irregardless of what the brothers say, like Rosemary says, we should function in a position that furthers revolution and revolutionary culture. The women's liberation groups that are separating away from the men (I think Roberta said there is some room for them, - and we can't vacillate on whether there is or not, we have to judge them on their practice) should take into consideration that we're here to liberate the people and like we said, it's a socialist liberation struggle and we can't operate as halves.

If women's liberation is going to exist, it should exist with the goal in mind to channel the energies they liberate into a united liberation of the men and women together-- not as a bourgeois cult, because this has happened many times. They've become extremist organizations of female superiority and have totally forgotten about the people's struggles and oppressed people and have themselves become oppressors.