

Women, Power, and Revolution

About two weeks before I joined SNCC, "Black Power" replaced "Freedom Now" as the battle cry. We, young women and young men who flocked to the front lines of the war against segregation, were contesting the remaining legacy of racial slavery. What we sought to eliminate were the legal, social, psychological, economic, and political limitations still being imposed on our human rights, and on our rights as citizens. That was the context in which we fought to remove limitations imposed by gender, clearly aware that it could not be fought as a stand-alone issue.

During that era, we hadn't developed much language to talk about the elimination of gender discrimination. Racism and poverty, imposed by bloody terrorists backed by state power, seemed so overwhelming then, and the ghastly backdrop of the war in Vietnam kept us alert as to what was at stake. It was not that gender discrimination wasn't apparent. It was evident in the most intimate matters—separate bathrooms marked "colored women" or "white ladies"; it was obvious in the facts that so many schools did not allow women to attend, and that so many jobs were not available if you were a woman. But from the early to mid-1960s, the first order of business was not how to advance our cause as women but how to empower the community of which we were a part, and how to protect our lives in the process.

Being in the Movement gave me and everyone who joined it a tremendous education. That experience taught us how to understand the world around us, how to think through the issues of what we could do on our own to advance our peoples cause, how to organize our own people to change the world around us, and how to stand up to terrorism. Everything I learned in SNCC I took with me into the fledgling Black Panther Party. I started working there in November 1967, three or four weeks after Huey Newton was jailed on charges of killing an Oakland policeman in a predawn shoot-out. I organized demonstrations. I wrote leaflets. I held press conferences. I attended court hearings. I designed posters. I appeared on television programs, I spoke at rallies. I even ran for political office in order to organize the community around the program of the Black Panther Party and mobilize support to free Huey Newton.

At times, during the question-and-answer session following a speech I'd given, someone would ask, "What is the woman's role in the Black Panther Party?" I never liked that question. I'd give a short answer: "It's the same as men." We are revolutionaries, I'd explain. Back then, I didn't understand why they wanted to think of what men were doing and what women were doing as separate. It's taken me years, literally about twenty-five years, to understand that what I really didn't like was the underlying assumption motivating the question. The assumption held that being part of a revolutionary movement was in conflict with what the questioner had been socialized to believe was appropriate conduct for a woman. That convoluted concept never entered my head, although I am certain it was far more widely accepted than I ever realized.

Nowadays, the questions are more sophisticated: "What were the gender issues in the Black Panther Party?" "Wasn't the Black Panther Party a. istion of sexism? Etc., etc., etc. But nobody seems to pose the question that I had: Where can I go to get involved in the revolutionary struggle? It seems to me that part of the genesis of the gender question, and this is only an opinion, lies in the way it deflects attention from confronting the revolutionary critique our organization made of the larger society, and turns it inward to look at what type of dynamics and social conflicts characterized the organization. To me, this discussion holds far less appeal than that which engages the means we devised to struggle against the oppressive dynamics and social conflicts the larger society imposed on us. Not many answers to the "gender questions" take into consideration what I've experienced. What I've read or heard as answers generally seem to respond to a particular model of academic inquiry that leaves out what I believe is central: How do you empower an oppressed and impoverished people who are struggling against racism, militarism, terrorism, and sexism too? I mean, how do you do that? That's the real question.

My generation became conscious during a period of profound world turmoil, when the Vietnam War and countless insurgencies in Africa, Asia, and in Latin America challenged the control of the resources of the world by the capitalist powers. They were facing a major assault. Those of us who were drawn to the early Black Panther Party were just one more insurgent band of young men and women who refused to tolerate the systematic violence and abuse being meted out to poor blacks, to middle-class blacks, and to any old ordinary blacks. When we looked at our situation, when we saw violence, bad housing, unemployment, rotten education, unfair treatment in the courts, as well as direct attacks from the police, our response was to defend ourselves. We became part of that assault against the capitalist powers.

In a world of racist polarization, we sought solidarity. We called for Black power for Black people, Red power for Red people, Brown power for Brown people, Yellow power for Yellow people, and, as Eldridge Cleaver used to say, White power for White people, because all they'd known was "Pig power." We organized the Rainbow Coalition, pulled together our allies, including not only the Puerto Rican Young Lords, the youth gang called Black P. Stone Rangers, the Chicano Brown Berets, and the Asian I Wor Keun (Red Guards), but also the predominantly white Peace and Freedom Party and the Appalachian Young Patriots Party. We posed not only a theoretical but a practical challenge to the way our world was organized. And we were men and women working together.

The women who filled the ranks of our organization did not have specifically designated sex roles. Some women worked with the newspaper, like Shelley Bursey, who became a grand jury resister when she was jailed because she refused to respond to one of the investigations into the Black Panther Party newspaper. Some of us, like Ericka Huggins, saw their husbands murdered, then were arrested themselves. In Ericka's case, she was jailed along with Bobby Seale and most of the New Haven chapter on charges of conspiracy to commit murder. She was later acquitted, but imagine what happens to an organization when fourteen people at once get arrested on capital charges. That doesn't leave much time to organize, or to have a family life. Maybe that was the kind of pressure that they hoped would force us to give up.

I created the position of Communications Secretary, based on what I had seen Julian Bond do in SNCC. I sent out press releases, I got photographers and journalists to publish about us, I wrote articles for our newspaper. I ran for political office on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket, against the incumbent Democratic state representative—who, by the way, was Willie Brown (now mayor of San Francisco). We

ran a campaign poster in the *Black Panther* newspaper, which was a drawing of Willie Brown with his mouth sewed up, his body tied up in rope. The caption read: Willie Brown's position on the Vietnam War, political prisoners, and racism, you get the idea. We were imaginative in our approach to political organizing. Matilaba [J. Tarika Lewis], one of the earliest women members of the Black Panther Party, published drawings in the newspaper along with Emory Douglas. Connie Matthews, a young Jamaican who was working for the United Nations in Copenhagen, met Bobby Seale when he came over there on a tour, joined the Black Panther Party, and became our International Coordinator. Assata Shakur, who joined the New York chapter of the Black Panther Party, later became convicted of murdering a state trooper after a shoot-out on the New Jersey Turnpike in which she was wounded and another Panther, Zayd Shakur, was killed. Fearing that she would be killed, she escaped from prison, lived underground for a while, and eventually received asylum in Cuba.

In fact, according to a survey Bobby Seale did in 1969, two-thirds of the members of the Black Panther Party were women. I am sure you are wondering, why isn't this the image that you have of the Black Panther Party? Well, ask yourself, where did the image of the Black Panthers that you have in your head come from? Did you read those articles planted by the FBI in the newspaper? Did you listen to the newscasters who announced what they decided was significant, usually, how many Panthers got arrested or killed? How many photographs of women Panthers have you seen? Think about this: how many newspaper photographers were women? How many newspaper editors were women? How many newscasters were women? How many television producers were women? How many magazine, book, newspaper publishers? Who was making the decisions about what information gets circulated, and when that decision gets made, who do you think they decide to present? Is it possible, and this is just a question, is it possible that the reality of what was actually going on day to day in the Black Panther Party was far less newsworthy, and provided no justification for the campaign of destruction that the intelligence agencies and the police were waging against us? Could it be that the images and stories of the Black Panthers that you've seen and heard were geared to something other than conveying what was actually going on?

What I think is distinctive about gender relations within the Black Panther Party is not how those gender relations duplicated what was going on in the world around us. In fact, that world was extremely misogynist and authoritarian. That's part of what inspired us to fight against it. When women suffered hostility, abuse, neglect, and assault—this was not something arising from the policies or structure of the Black Panther Party, something absent from the world—that's what was going on in the world. The difference that being in the Black Panther Party made was that it put a woman in a position when such treatment occurred to contest it. I'll always remember a particular mini-trial that took place at one of our meetings. A member of the Party was accused of raping a young sister, who was visiting from the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party, and he got voted out of the Party on the spot. Right there in the meeting. In 1970 the Black Panther Party took a formal position on the liberation of women. Did the U.S. Congress make any statement on the liberation of women? Did the Congress enable the Equal Rights Amendment to become part of the Constitution? Did the Oakland police issue a position against gender discrimination? It is in this context that gender relations—a term that we didn't have back then—in the Black Panther Party should be examined.

I think it is important to place the women who fought oppression as Black Panthers within the longer tradition of freedom fighters like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida Wells-Barnett, who took on an entirely oppressive world and insisted that their race, their gender, and their humanity be respected all at the same time. Not singled out, each one separate, but all at the same time. You cannot segregate out one aspect of our reality and expect to get a clear picture of what this struggle is about. In some cases, those who raise issues about gender are responding to what they think is the one-sided portrayal of the Black Panther Party as some all-male, macho revolutionary group. But look at where the picture is coming from before concluding that the appropriate response is to investigate gender dynamics within the Black Panther Party. I am not criticizing the project, but I am criticizing the angle.

The way Black women have sustained our community is phenomenal. Historically, we did not live within the isolation of a patriarchal world, we were thrust into that brutal equality slavery imposed. Our foremothers knew we would have to face the world on our own, and they tried to prepare us for that. What I think need to be examined and explained more fully are the powerful contributions women have made to our resistance against slavery, to our resistance against segregation, to our resistance against racism. Placing the participation of women in the Black Panther Party within that context illuminates a long tradition of fighting women.