

On The National Black Feminist Organization

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In the spring of 1973, Doris Wright, a black feminist writer, called a meeting to discuss "Black Women and Their Relationship to the Women's Movement." When I arrived, Margaret Sloan, a *Ms.* Magazine editor then, was chairing the meeting and Doris Wright was sitting quietly over in a corner. As the meeting progressed, it became clear that the majority of the most vocal people there were employees of *Ms.* Magazine, members of Radical Lesbians, the Socialist Workers Party and N.O.W., in that order. We voted to become an organization, The National Black Feminist Organization, and Margaret Sloan was voted chairman which was probably our first mistake because the only thing my grandmother and thousands of other black women knew about Margaret Sloan was that she had sung a love song to her white female lover locally on television, strumming her guitar, her child at her feet. Margaret Sloan as chairman ruled out the possibility of NBFO having a mass appeal though that was the goal of the organization from the beginning. I suppose NBFO wasn't unlike a lot of feminist groups in that we simply could not work out a balance of power between lesbians and non-lesbians; the non-lesbians spent most of their time being intimidated or feeling guilty for fear of some deeply buried anti-lesbian feeling.

The last vote was to have a press conference which sort of stunned me but right from the start NBFO was extraordinarily media conscious. I naively ventured that in order to have a press conference, one had to have something to say. Volunteers were enlisted for a platform committee. Suppressing a groan as the SWP women and the Radical Lesbian women raised their hands, I was one of the fifteen. On a Wednesday night I arrived as instructed with platform proposals in hand. To my surprise no one else even had notes. We spent the next two unusually long hours arguing about why all of my platform proposals were unsuitable. We came to no compromise or agreement on a single issue, not on abortion, birth control, daycare or welfare. But I'm leaving out one thing. There was resounding and unanimous applause for the following proposal: "We recognize the oppression of our black lesbian sisters four times over - first as women, second as blacks, third as gays and fourth as gays who are women, and we advocate the revoking of all laws and practices that constrict their movement and hinder their free existence." The meeting was adjourned and the next week NBFO held a press conference with nothing to say, since cries of "triple oppression" were not likely to attract throngs of new members.

After awhile it became an embarrassment to try to answer the question "what does NBFO do?" so a meeting

was called to plan an action. Someone suggested that we demonstrate in front of a supermarket in Harlem on the day welfare checks are received to protest the common practice of raising food prices on that day (this was around the time of the meat boycott). Most everyone else disliked that idea. One woman argued somewhat illogically that some products (she could name none) were beneficial to black women. The idea of having some kind of demonstration on African Liberation Day was not approved either. It was as though white feminists were peering over our shoulders every time we talked. "That wouldn't be right for our white sisters," was a frequent cry. Each proposal had to withstand the following test: had white women done it and would white women like it?

There was also a contingent of women in NBFO who were plainly not feminists of any kind, but since NBFO had no position on anything, there was nothing to alter their consciousness and nothing to make them indignant enough to leave. One of the worst battles in NBFO's history was waged over whether or not Shirley Chisholm and Florynce Kennedy would be allowed to speak at the national conference scheduled for the spring. At an earlier meeting there was even a lengthy discussion about whether or not to call the organization feminist. An aspiring political candidate was overheard saying at the conference, "I'm gonna get me some votes out of these niggas."

It is very possible that NBFO was not meant to happen when it did. Most of the prime movers in the organization were representing some other organization and whatever commitment they might have had to black women's issues took a backseat to that. Women who had initiative and spirit usually attended one meeting, were turned off by the hopelessness of getting anything accomplished, and never returned again. Each meeting brought almost all new faces. I think NBFO was willed into existence by white feminists who get tired of being asked "where are the black women?" Movements cannot be run from the outside (and NBFO is all that black women have to suggest that they are organized) so NBFO has become an organization of people who actually seem to enjoy long, pointless meetings and endless squabbling. It is conceivable that the level of consciousness feminism would demand of black women wouldn't lead to any sort of a separatist movement anyway. I'm not really sure but I do know that despite a sizable number of black feminists who have contributed much to the leadership of the Women's Movement, there is no Black Women's Movement and it appears there won't be for some time.

— June 1975

RADICAL CRITIQUE – GROUND BREAKING ATTACK

The Second Sex
by Simone de Beauvoir
sourcebook of wlm

The Feminine Mystique
by Betty Friedan
sourcebook of wlm

WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

an idea whose time has come

women suffer from treatment as sex objects

TRIPLE JEOPARDY
(newspaper of Third World Women's
Alliance, founded in 1970)

racism, imperialism, sexism

INVERTING THE RADICAL CRITIQUE & IDEA

The First Sex
by Elizabeth Gould Davis
Naval Intelligence officer

The Masculine Mystique
leading spokesmen:
Gloria Steinem
Warren Farrell

MEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

reaction and backlash
Warren Farrell, leading organizer (above)

men suffer from treatment as success objects

TRIPLE OPPRESSION
(Task Force of National Black Feminist Organization,
founded in 1973)

sexism, racism, anti-homosexuality

