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When and Where I Enter

*The Impact of Black Women
on Race and Sex in America*

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~ *The Women's Movement and Black Discontent* ~

As far as many Blacks were concerned, the emergence of the women's movement couldn't have been more untimely or irrelevant. Historians trace its roots to 1961 with the President's Commission on the Status of Women chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. At a time when Black students were languishing in southern jails, when Black full-time working women were earning 57 percent of what their White peers were earning, the commission concentrated its attention on the growing number of middle-class women who were forced to enter the labor market in low-skill, low-paid jobs. In 1963, the year of the March on Washington, the Birmingham bombing, and the assassination of Mississippi civil rights leader Medgar Evers, the report from the commission was published. Although it did not go so far as to challenge the traditional roles of women, its litany of inequities, especially in employment, was telling. President John Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act, the first federal legislation that prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex.

In the same year, the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* added fuel to the fire of a growing feminist discontent. The author spoke to middle-class White women, bored in suburbia (an escape hatch from increasingly Black cities) and seeking sanction to work at a "meaningful" job outside the home. Not only were the problems of the White suburban housewife (who may have had Black domestic help) irrelevant to Black women, they were also alien to them. Friedan's observation that "I never knew a woman, when I was growing up, who used her mind, played her own part in the world, and also loved, and had children" seemed to come from another planet.¹

In 1964, two developments spurred the women's movement to a new level of intensity. The first of them, the Civil Rights Act, won by blood sacrifice, provided the legal foundation for women's rights—much as the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments had a century

earlier. That wasn't what the proponents of the Civil Rights Act had in mind. But when the bill came to the House, Representative Howard Smith of Virginia tacked the word *sex* to Title VII, which prohibited discrimination in employment. Emulating the tactics used after the Civil War, Smith's purpose was to defeat the entire bill. Sex equality in employment would be viewed as so ridiculous, he believed, that even those whose consciences were pricked by the plight of Blacks wouldn't be able to vote for it. There *was* much ribaldry in the Congress; the day Smith made his proposal was called "Ladies Day" in the House. But evidently the good ol' boys were laughing so hard they missed a step. Some of their colleagues, particularly Representative Martha Griffiths of Michigan, were able to marshal forces sufficient to pass the bill—with its sex provision. In fact Griffiths was going to propose the addition of *sex* herself, but when Smith jumped the gun, she withdrew, figuring that his Machiavellian tactics would gain at least one hundred more votes.

Yet it was clear that women had won only a battle, not the war. The Equal Employment Opportunities Commission was the enforcement arm of Title VII and its first director, Herman Edelsberg, made some alarming statements. He characterized the sex provision as a "fluke," one "conceived out of wedlock." Such an attitude would be a direct catalyst for the formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW).

At the same time, the feminist consciousness of White women in the student movement was also reaching a new plateau. This development had a great deal to do with what was happening within SNCC. In the Black organization's formative years, the role of White women activists had not been inconsequential. For example, Jane Stembridge, a White Virginian, was brought to SNCC by Ella Baker and was one of its earliest staff members. She and others who joined the organization were able to perform just about any task in SNCC that they had heart enough to do. With the "group-centered," egalitarian values of SNCC, any activist who worked hard inevitably had some say in policy decisions. Thus many of the White women gained a respect for their own abilities that would not have been possible in other organizations. Additionally, they benefited from seeing Black women as a new kind of role model.

Contrary to Friedan's experience, Black women in SNCC not only performed heroic deeds, but their activism did not preclude many of them from marrying and having children. Most enlightening was the exposure to the rural women who formed the backbone of the

southern movement. "I have been thinking about this," wrote Stembridge in her notes. "Mrs. Hamer is more educated than I am. That is—she knows more." What Fannie Lou Hamer knew had little to do with formal education, Stembridge wrote: "... She knows something else. ... She knows that she is good." Stembridge felt she had no such knowledge about herself. "I went into society. I was there. And that is where I learned that I was bad. ... Not racially inferior, not socially shameful, not guilty as a White southerner ... not unequal as women ... but Bad."

Perhaps Hamer's isolation from mainstream society had saved her from learning she was bad rather than good, Stembridge speculated. "If she didn't know that, she couldn't get up and sing the way she sings. She wouldn't stand there, with her head back and sing! She couldn't speak the *way* that she speaks and the way she speaks is this: she announces. I do not announce. I apologize." The difference, Stembridge concluded, was that Hamer had not been taught to be ashamed of "herself, her body, her strong voice."²

However, the SNCC of 1964-65 was in no position to incubate the development of Whites. In those years SNCC was going through an identity crisis which had left the organization in confusion. Some of that confusion could be traced to the inevitable tensions of interracial liaisons between White women and Black men which reached a pitch during the Freedom Summer. A White activist of the period, Sara Evans, put it this way:

For Black men, sexual access to White women challenged the culture's ultimate symbol of their denied manhood. And some of the middle-class women whose attentions they sought had experienced a denial of their womanhood in failing to achieve the cheerleader standards of high school beauty and popularity so prevalent in the fifties and early sixties.³

Some relationships were constructive, noted Evans, but others had a "chaotic" and "depersonalizing" nature. The more "enthusiastic" White women posed dangers when their activities extended beyond SNCC circles into local southern communities. The sexual tension of White women in SNCC, said Evans, "was key to their incipient feminism" but also "became a divisive and explosive force within the civil rights movement itself."⁴

Many Black activists agreed that Whites were creating more problems in SNCC than solutions. By 1964, the handwriting was on the wall for a separatist movement, and many of the Whites were

being "demoted" accordingly. For White women, who were by now budding feminists, this was a painful blow. They had their chance to respond to the developments within SNCC at its Waveland Conference held in 1964. The purpose of the conference was to sort out the problems through discussions and position papers on various issues confronting the organization. Among the papers presented for discussion was one, unsigned, criticizing SNCC for its treatment of women. The paper cited the relegation of women to clerical work and their exclusion from the decision-making process. It complained of the "assumption of male superiority" in SNCC, one "as widespread and deep rooted and every much as crippling to the woman as the assumptions of white supremacy are to the Negro."⁵ Amid all of SNCC's other concerns, the position paper on women was either ignored or ridiculed. Of the latter attitude, Stokely Carmichael's rebuttal, "The only position for women in SNCC is prone," was the most infamous.

That Black women in SNCC did not rise en masse against such flagrant sexism reflected a number of factors: First of all, most of them saw the race issue as so pressing that they had little attention to spare for questions of sex. "I'm certain that our single-minded focus on the issues of racial discrimination and the Black struggle for equality blinded us to other issues," remarked Cynthia Washington, a Black project director.⁶ Second, Black women such as Muriel Tillinghast, though angered by Carmichael's statement, were not aware of sex discrimination in SNCC at the time. Men usually held the top spots, but the charge that women were shut out from decision-making or leadership positions didn't really hold up. Women like Ruby Doris Smith (who would soon become executive secretary), Diane Nash, and Donna Richards Moses were in SNCC's inner circles. Others, like Tillinghast and Washington, had been assigned the non-sex-stereotyped roles of project directors in the South—by Carmichael himself. In fact, the influence of Black women was actually increasing at the time; it was White women who were being relegated to minor responsibilities, in part because of indiscriminate sexual behavior. If Black women had complaints of their treatment in SNCC, those complaints often centered around the "brothers' "role in their White "sisters' " sexual liberation. All this was not to say that there was no sexual discrimination in SNCC—James Foreman himself admitted there was—but it was not perceived to be as "crippling" as other problems. In any case, by 1964–65 such White women as Casey Hayden and Mary King, the authors of the unsigned position paper, began to look

toward the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which was predominantly White. So, echoing the scenario of the nineteenth century, White women developed their feminism in a Black organization and then turned the thrust of their activist energies elsewhere. And as had happened a century earlier, the development occurred at a time when both the Black and women's movements were being radicalized.

In 1965, the year that Malcolm X was assassinated and Watts set off a chain reaction of major urban uprisings, the concept of "Women's Liberation"—a step beyond "rights"—was first presented at an SDS conference. It was laughed off the floor.⁷ By 1967, the year that Black Power called for Whites to be purged from the movement, radical feminists did succeed in passing a resolution calling for their full participation in SDS. It was nevertheless clear that men had not lost their derisive attitude toward the woman question. The SDS publication, *New Left Notes*, bore on the cover of the issue that contained the resolution a free-hand illustration of a girl in a baby-doll dress holding a sign that said, "We want our rights and we want them now!"⁸ When an SDS woman spoke at a demonstration at Richard Nixon's inauguration two years later, she was jeered. "Take her off the stage and fuck her," an SDS man cried out. White women may have had their complaints about SNCC, but the comparison to SDS was revealing. Betty Carmen, a member of both organizations, observed: "As a woman I was allowed to develop and had and was given more responsibility in SNCC than I ever was in SDS. It would have been tougher for me to develop at all in SDS."⁹ Despite, or perhaps because of, the ridicule of male radicals, White women's liberation groups began to proliferate throughout the country. In 1966, these relatively radical leftist groups would be joined by another type of women's group: the National Organization for Women.

NOW was composed primarily of "mainstream" women: members of the state commissions on women, employees of various levels of government, trade union representatives, business and professional women. Like the old American Equal Rights Association organized after the Civil War, it sought to develop a coalition with prominent Black women. Among NOW's early Black participants and/or founding members were: Aileen Hernandez, former ILGWU union organizer and an EEOC commissioner; Pauli Murray, an Episcopalian priest and lawyer who helped write the brief for the *White v. Cook* case which struck down state laws denying women the right to serve on

juries; Fannie Lou Hamer; Representative Shirley Chisholm (D, N.Y.); Addie L. Wyatt, international vice-president of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters Union; and Anna Arnold Hedgeman, former executive director of the National Council for a Permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee and assistant to the administrator of the Federal Security Agency. In fact, the stated purpose of NOW was to act like an "NAACP for women" to ensure the enforcement of the Civil Rights Act. In later years the organization would go through its own identity crisis. There were regional and ideological conflicts, resulting in the more radical contingent pulling out of NOW because of its hierarchical structure, and the more conservative elements withdrawing because of the organization's endorsement of a woman's right to have an abortion. The leadership of NOW also quarreled with the non-mainstream elements within its own ranks. For instance, Betty Friedan, NOW's first president, initiated a campaign to undermine the influence of lesbian advocates.

Although NOW had made some important breakthroughs by the late sixties—notably the prohibition of sex discrimination by holders of federal contracts—its significance was still largely ignored by Blacks. One reason was that the achievements of the women's movement in general were obscured by derisive media on the one hand and by urgent racial events on the other. In 1968 for example—the year of Martin Luther King's assassination and the explosion of urban ghettos, the year of a planned "Poor People's March," which had been conceived by the grass-roots-oriented National Welfare Rights Organization—media attention to the women's movement was concentrated on a bra-burning protest at the Miss America pageant. And throughout the late sixties and into the seventies—a time when Blacks were trying to forge a consensus around Black Power, and Black students were gunned down at Southern, South Carolina, and Jackson State universities—the image of the women's movement ranged from that of middle-class women with little history of racial sensitivity, to a radical fringe that advocated the view that male supremacy rather than White supremacy was the root of oppression.

On August 26, 1970, the women's movement reached a peak. On that day a Liberation Day March commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment. Even beyond the women's most optimistic expectations, the march drew thousands of feminists from around the country, and for a change, the media covered the mammoth event as a straight news story. The result was that for "the first time the potential power of the feminist movement became pub-

licly apparent," wrote Jo Freeman in *The Politics of Women's Liberation*, "and with this the movement came of age."¹⁰ But it came of age in a way that alienated Black women, as an incident in the march clearly illustrated.

Taking part in the demonstration was the Third World Women's Alliance, a Black feminist group that was the only SNCC project still functioning successfully. Led by Frances Beal, the Alliance brandished placards about Angela Davis, who had been expelled from her teaching position at the University of California earlier that year, and in August had been charged with first-degree murder, first-degree kidnapping, and conspiracy to commit both.* Fearful that if caught she would be killed in California—where state authorities led by Governor Ronald Reagan had been harassing her—she fled, and became the first Black woman to make the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list. Naturally there was great concern about Davis at a time of increasing violence against Black radicals, but that concern was evidently not shared by some leaders of the feminist movement. "We had signs reading 'Hands Off Angela Davis,'" Frances Beal recalled, "and one of the leaders of NOW ran up to us and said angrily, 'Angela Davis has nothing to do with the women's liberation.'"

"It has nothing to do with the kind of liberation you're talking about," retorted Beal, "but it has everything to do with the kind of liberation we're talking about."¹¹

Woman to Woman: Reactions to the Women's Liberation Movement

The movement's coming of age also fixed its image. After 1970 the women's movement was virtually synonymous with NOW—which itself was undergoing a transformation that would further alienate it from the majority of Black women.

The Liberation Day March attracted a new constituency into the National Organization for Women. They were, well, the *daughters* of the women Friedan had written about: younger women who shared many of the values and circumstances of the *Mystique* generation. They were not career-oriented; many of them had attended college but had

*The charges arose when Jonathan Jackson and several others attempted to kidnap a judge, several jurors, and the district attorney during the trial of a Black prisoner, James McClain. In the ensuing melee Jackson and the judge were killed, and several were wounded. Although Davis was not at the scene of the shooting, Jackson's guns were allegedly registered in her name.

not graduated. They were white-collar and clerical workers or suburban housewives who were determined not to leave the same empty legacy to their daughters. These women were less concerned with the larger political or economic issues, Jo Freeman observed, than with the "meaning of feminism to their personal lives and personal relationships."¹² Their *modus operandi* tended more to "rap groups" than to head-to-head confrontations with Washington policy makers.

After 1970 they yearned for a women's organization they could identify with. And by that time NOW, largely because of its national orientation, was the most accessible. It was also the most "respectable." To some of the more ideologically and politically minded members of NOW, the new constituency was not a wholly welcome development. Nevertheless, the priorities of this new group had to be catered to—as in the case of southern women and NAWSA in the earlier part of the century. For the neo-*Mystique* generation caused NOW's membership to swell dramatically in the early seventies. Many chapters expanded 50 to 70 percent.¹³ And the children of the *Feminine Mystique* fortified NOW's power in several ways: The organization became more homogeneous, thus easing many of the inherent tensions between the older factions, according to Freeman. Consequently, more than ever before, NOW could speak as one, and its constituency promised to be a factor in the 1972 presidential campaign. This potential was exploited by the founding of the National Women's Political Caucus in 1971.

NOW's coffers also grew. In 1967 it had a budget of \$6,888.38; in 1972 the budget was \$99,505.93, and \$293,499 in 1973. By 1974 some \$430,000 was budgeted for general expenses, with an additional \$140,750 for the ratification of the ERA and \$34,900 for reproductive issues.¹⁴ In the same years the number of chapters multiplied from fourteen to seven hundred; its members from one thousand to forty thousand. NOW's tremendous growth also helped oil its legal machinery. The EEOC began receiving more sex-discrimination than race-discrimination complaints.

In the early seventies, sex-discrimination suits became more consequential to both Blacks and women. Most important of these was the successful suit against AT&T, the largest employer of women in the world, which doled out \$15 million in back pay to persons who had been denied promotion because of discrimination, and \$23 million in immediate pay increases to women and minority males who were underpaid in their job classifications. Some commentators were quick

to point out that the AT&T action showed how the women's movement could positively affect the lives of working-class and minority men and women as well as middle-class women. Nevertheless, the ascendancy of the women's movement was viewed with a mixture of disdain, distrust, and fear by Blacks in general and Black women in particular. True, actions such as that against AT&T had benefited the working class and minorities. True, minority and working-class concerns were part of NOW's agenda. In fact, in 1970, Aileen Hernandez, a Black woman who was well known as a civil rights activist, replaced Betty Friedan as NOW president. Still, several factors about NOW, and therefore the perception of the women's movement in general, disturbed Black women.

One was the particular group of women who were emerging at the front of the movement. Black commentator Linda La Rue predicted in 1970: "The few radical women in the 'struggle' will be outnumbered by the more traditional middle-class women. This means that the traditional women will be in a position to take advantage of new opportunities that radical Women's Liberation has struggled to win."¹⁵ Of course this holds true for all movements, including the Black movement, but the specter of *traditional* White women, who had historically been the bane of Black women's existence, wielding power over their lives was particularly distressing. Black women "look at White women and see the enemy," wrote Toni Morrison in an article about the liberation movement, "for they know that racism is not confined to white men and that there are more white women than men in this country." That majority, she continued, "sustained an eloquent silence during the times of greatest stress"—or worse: "The faces of those white women hovering behind that black girl at the Little Rock school in 1957 do not soon leave the retina of the mind."¹⁶

Criticism by Black women during this period was mixed with an undeniable tone of disdain. There was "no abiding admiration of white women as competent, complete people," Morrison declared. Black women regarded them "as willful children, pretty children, mean children, ugly children, but never as real adults."¹⁷ That they were seen as children was because of their social station in life—described by activist Eleanor Holmes Norton as one "sinking in a sea of close-quartered affluence where one's world is one's house, one's peers, one's children, and one's employer, one's husband."¹⁸ That this kind of woman was gaining power was what bothered many Black

women—more than the goals of the women's movement or even NOW.

The second disturbing aspect of the women's movement was that its rise coincided with the deterioration of the Black movement. By the early seventies, assassinations, subversion by domestic intelligence, and internal squabbles had left virtually every Black group in disarray. Now it appeared that the predominantly White women's movement was going to reap the benefits that the Black movement had sown. Comparing the status of women to that of Blacks was particularly upsetting. That White women would characterize themselves as "niggers," and even as a minority deserving special favor, enraged many Black women. Morrison saw this as "an effort to become Black without the responsibilities of being Black."¹⁹ Many women felt as La Rue did: "It is time that definitions be made clear," she suggested. "Blacks are oppressed . . . White women are suppressed . . . and there is a difference."²⁰ Dorothy Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women, pointed up the difference this way: "Fifty years ago women got suffrage . . . but it took lynching, bombing, the civil rights movement and the Voting Rights Act . . . to get it for Black women and Black people."²¹

Indeed, history had offered little comfort to Black women. In the past, White activists had exploited the parallels between White women's and Blacks' oppression, only to betray Black women in the end. "What do Black women feel about Women's Lib?" asked Morrison. "Distrust . . . Too many movements and organizations have made deliberate overtures to enroll Blacks and have ended up by rolling them. They don't want to be used again to help somebody gain power—a power that is carefully kept out of their hands."²² La Rue agreed: "One can argue that Women's liberation has not only attached itself to the Black movement but has done so with only marginal concern for Black women and Black liberation and functional concern for the rights of White women."²³

The concerns of Black women also applied to potential economic conflict between Blacks and women. "When white women demand from men an equal part of the pie, we say, 'Equal to what?'" asked Frances Beal. "What makes us think that white women, given the positions of white men in the system, wouldn't turn around and use their white skin for the same white privileges? This is an economy which favors whites."²⁴ Ida Lewis, publisher of *Encore American and Worldwide News*, though supporting such goals of the movement as equal pay and child-care centers, nevertheless warned:

The Women's Liberation Movement is basically a family quarrel between White women and White men. And on general principles, it's not good to get involved in family disputes. Outsiders always get shafted when the dust settles. . . . Suppose the Lib movement succeeds. It will follow since white power is the order of the day, that white women will be the first hired, which will still leave black men and women outside.²⁵

All professed the suspicion, shared by La Rue, that the women's movement "will probably end up having used the black movement as a stepping-stone to opportunities in a highly competitive economy."²⁶

A third disquieting aspect of the women's movement was the shrill tone it adopted against men. Inherent in this, of course, was the prevailing attitude among White women that sexism was the enemy. Black women, far more concerned about the impress of racism on their lives, believed that racial oppression was the root of their problems. "Some groups," Frances Beal observed, "come to the incorrect conclusion that their oppression is due simply to male chauvinism." The enemy wasn't Black men, said Joyce Ladner, "but oppressive forces in the larger society."²⁷

In many ways the race-versus-sex argument mirrored that of a century before. Although a number of Black feminists, such as the lawyer Flo Kennedy, adopted Sojourner Truth's argument that women needed power to protect themselves from men, most Black women who spoke out reflected Frances Ellen Harper's view that the race must rise in order for Black women to do so. Betty Friedan reported that when she visited the SNCC office to recruit Black women, they told her they were not interested in joining the feminist movement, but rather in helping Black men get the "rights they had been denied so long."²⁸ As in the past, the thinking was that before they could gain rights as Black women, the rights of Black men had to be assured. In direct contradiction of the attitudes of White feminists, Frances Beal said, "It must be pointed out that at this time Black women are not resentful of the rise of the power of Black men. We welcome it."²⁹

With the Black movement now under siege, Black women were also very sensitive about the issue of Black unity. Ida Lewis, then editor-in-chief of *Essence* magazine, said in an interview with Eleanor Holmes Norton: "If we speak of a liberation movement, as a Black woman I view my role from a Black perspective—the role of Black women is to continue the struggle in concert with Black men for the liberation and determination of Blacks."³⁰

As it had been a century earlier, unity was important, as a bulwark not just against the society at large but also against the implicit and explicit racism of the White feminists. The implicit racism was evident in the low priority granted to race by the movement. And explicitly, some familiar charges carried echoes of the past. In a scholarly book about rape, *Against Our Will*, Susan Brownmiller came to some of the same conclusions that Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had a century before. As Angela Davis noted in *Women, Race & Class*: "In pretending to defend the cause of women, [Brownmiller] sometimes boxes herself into the position of defending the particular cause of *white* women, regardless of its implications."³¹ The implications, of course, have deep historical roots, and Brownmiller's evocation of the crude intentions of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was revealing. But it must also be pointed out that the sensationalist writings of such Black intellectuals as Calvin Hernton, Imamu Amiri Baraka, and Eldridge Cleaver, advocating the rape of White women as a justifiable political act—and the slowness of Black women to condemn the idea—provided hemp for a lyncher's rope.

Where White women saw Black sexism as essentially a cruder version of that of White males, Black women saw something else. Toni Morrison contended:

For years in this country there was no one for black men to vent their rage on except black women. And for years black women accepted that rage, even regarded that acceptance as their unpleasant duty. But in so doing they frequently kicked back, and they seem never to have become the true slaves that white women see in their own history. True, the black woman did the housework, the drudgery; true, she reared the children, often alone, but she did all that while occupying a place on the job market, a place her mate could not get or which *his* pride would not accept. . . . So she combined being a responsible person with being a female.³²

And combining responsibility with being a female was what those in the women's liberation movement were working toward. Black women felt themselves already "superior in terms of their ability to function healthily in the world," Morrison noted. Why join White women when "Black womanhood," in the words of Joyce Ladner, had "always been the very essence of what American womanhood is trying to become."³³

Before 1973, virtually the only Black women who acknowledged

the value of feminism were those ensconced in the women's movement itself. A notable exception to this was Kathleen Cleaver, a Black Panther and the wife of Eldridge Cleaver. She saw women's liberation in the context of the universal plight of women in a male-dominated society: "In order for women to obtain liberation, the struggles are going to have to be united on the basis of being women, not on the basis of being Black women or White women," she wrote.³⁴ Still, she did not believe that Black and White women could work toward liberation within the same organization. "The relationship," she said, ". . . will have to be on a coalition basis and not on an integrated basis." The reason, Cleaver felt, was the great difference between the relationship of Black women to Black men (who were "colonized") and that of White women to White men (the colonizers).³⁵ Consequently, she concluded, "Because the problems of Black women and the problems of White women are so completely diverse, they cannot possibly be solved in the same type of organization nor met by the same type of activity."³⁶

Dealing with Male Chauvinism

Despite all the sound reasoning about the women's movement and women's liberation in the early seventies, some Black women felt themselves in a dilemma. Although they were clear about their assessment of Whites, their own situation was more complicated.

During the first heady years of the civil rights movement, Black men and women shared a unity of purpose and camaraderie—particularly in the student movement. As is historically true, in periods of racial assertion Black women's feminist reactions tend to be muted. Nevertheless, there was male chauvinism within the movement, and when the movement began to deteriorate after 1964, the intensity of that chauvinism increased. At the same time, with the movement in decline, Black women were less willing to tolerate such attitudes and became more openly critical of men, as they had done a century before. This was particularly true of women who had played prominent roles in organizations like SCLC and SNCC. For example, the highest-ranking female member of SCLC's staff, Dorothy Cotton, had her problems:

I'm conscious of the fact that I did have a decision-making role, but I'm also very conscious of the male chauvinism which existed within the movement. . . . Historically, where there was a female

sitting, she was always asked to go get the coffee and to take notes. And interestingly enough, it was a male member of our staff who finally protested that, because I was the educational director, I needed to be part of the deliberations.³⁷

One would think that Ella Baker, by virtue of her role in the creation of SCLC, would have had a decision-making role. Although she says she did not seek such a position, her observations of the organization are revealing:

There would never be any role for me in a leadership capacity with SCLC. Why? First, I'm a woman. Also, I'm not a minister. And second . . . I knew that my penchant for speaking honestly . . . would not be well tolerated. The combination of the basic attitude of men, and especially ministers, as to what the role of women in their church setups is—that of taking orders, not providing leadership—and the . . . ego problems involved in having to feel that here is someone who . . . had more information about a lot of things than they possessed at that time . . . This would never have lent itself to my being a leader in the movement there.³⁸

According to at least one account, Martin Luther King, Jr., himself was somewhat uncomfortable around assertive women. This was evident when he met with members of the National Welfare Rights Organization. The NWRO was composed of some very forthright women: Beulah Saunders, Johnnie Tillmon, Etta Horn, and others who had had personal experience with welfare and who organized other welfare women. The organization quickly scored a number of impressive victories in gaining better welfare laws and, as importantly, effectively broached the issues of the urban poor and the government's responsibility to them. In one Senate hearing, the presentation of their case was so effective—and so combative—that Senator Russell Long angrily called them "brood mares." (To the surprise of George Wiley, founder of the organization, no civil rights leader responded to the name-calling.)

The NWRO had actually come up with the idea of a poor people's campaign before King did. And the women in that organization were peeved when King started to beat that drum without even acknowledging their efforts—or their knowledge of the issue. Yet King needed the NWRO, which by 1968 was ten thousand strong and

had chapters throughout the country. They demanded a meeting with King which took place in Chicago.

After the women introduced themselves, King explained *his* ideas about the Poor People's Campaign and asked for their support. Etta Horn, NWRO's first vice-chairman, then proceeded to ask him his views on P.L. 90-248. He stared at them blankly. Then Mrs. Tillmon, the chairman, explained to King: "She means the Anti-Welfare Bill, H.R. 12080," passed by the Congress on December fifteenth, and signed into law by Lyndon Baines Johnson on January second. "Where were you . . . when we were down in Washington trying to get support for Senator Kennedy's amendments?" she inquired.³⁹ It was obvious that King didn't know what they were talking about, and he and his staff were getting defensive. Finally Tillmon said, "You know, Dr. King, if you don't know about these questions, you should say you don't know, and then we could go on with the meeting."⁴⁰ King was forced to respond that she was right, that he didn't know much about welfare and had come there to learn.

Andrew Young, one of King's assistants at the time, noted King's uneasiness with strong-willed women in general:

We had a hard time with domineering women in SCLC, because Martin's mother, quiet as she was, was really a strong, domineering force in the family. She was never publicly saying anything but she ran Daddy King, and she ran the church and she ran Martin, and Martin's problem in the early days of the movement was directly related to his need to be free of that strong matriarchal influence. This is a generality, but a system of oppression tends to produce strong women and weak men.⁴¹

Obviously, King was not alone in that dilemma. Even the March on Washington, in which almost every conceivable faction was represented, only belatedly included Black women. "A week before the March the final program was presented for review and there was no woman listed as speaker," said Anna Arnold Hedgeman, who was on the March committee. "It is significant," she noted, "that not even the rebellious [SNCC] leader thought of the role which women had played" in the movement.⁴² Hedgeman wrote a letter to A. Philip Randolph, protesting that it was "incredible" that no woman was listed as a speaker. Some hasty arrangements were made. And on the day of the March, Gloria Richardson, Diane Nash Bevel, and Mrs. Herbert Lee, wife of a slain civil rights worker, were asked to take part.

On the dais were the wives of the "big six" civil rights leaders, and other women. "Mrs. Daisy Bates was asked to say a few words," Hedgeman recalled. "Mrs. Parks . . . was presented, but almost casually. . . . Some of us recognized anew that Negro women are second-class citizens in the same way that white women are, in our culture."⁴³

The Masculine Decade

A male-conscious motif ran throughout the society in the sixties. Commentators attribute this to the "male revolt" against the societal expectations of the postwar years. By the late forties and fifties, the ethos of "rugged individualism" had been replaced by that of the corporate man, who was expected to conform and be obsequious to the power above. Postwar manhood demanded a docile breadwinner whose primary role was to support the consumers who were his wife and children. Henpecked, trapped by family responsibilities, pushed around by his boss, he was ripe for rebellion. Preceding the sexist outbursts of the sixties were the "Gray Flannel Dissidents," the "Beats," and *Playboy* magazine—whose message, as Barbara Ehrenreich indicated in her book *The Hearts of Men*, was not so much eroticism as escape. The most subversive implication of the Hugh Hefner philosophy was that one "didn't have to be a husband to be a man." Ehrenreich concluded that this "male revolt," manifested in part by misogyny and the abandonment of family responsibility, was a cause, not a result, of the feminist movement of the sixties.

One need only recall E. Franklin Frazier's pitiable image of the Black Bourgeoisie male, and his "why men leave home" rationale, to understand that Black men shared this ethos too. In addition, Black masculinity was challenged by racial caste and wives who were already competently engaged in the work force. In the beginning, the civil rights movement had served to confirm masculine as well as racial assertiveness, but when it began to break down, that old nightmare of impotence no doubt resurfaced. The evidence of this was found even in SNCC. In 1966, Ruby Doris Smith was elected executive secretary of the organization. The election of Smith, touted for her leadership skills and toughness, at a time when SNCC was on the verge of dissolution, was believed by many to be the last hope for the organization to pull itself together. Even so, she was plagued by chauvinistic attitudes. As James Foreman asserted, "She endured vicious attacks from the SNCC leadership. They also embodied male

chauvinism in fighting her attempts as executive secretary to impose a sense of organizational responsibility and self-discipline, trying to justify themselves by the fact that their critic was a woman."

A year later, Smith succumbed to a rare blood disease—though there were those in SNCC who believed she was deliberately killed. Kathleen Cleaver saw her death in other terms:

Ruby Doris died at the age of twenty-six and she died of exhaustion. . . . I don't think it was necessary to assassinate her. What killed Ruby Doris was the constant outpouring of work, work, work, work with being married, having a child, the constant conflicts, the constant struggles that she was subjected to because she was a woman. . . . She was destroyed by the movement.⁴⁴

By 1966, the movement had taken a decided turn—to the North. There, manhood was measured by wages, oppression had no face, and powerlessness no refuge. And in the North, the exhibitionism of manhood was not mitigated by the strength of Black institutions whose most vital resource was women. Both Black men and radical-chic White men—women, too—applauded the *machismo* of leather-jacketed young men, armed to the teeth, rising out of the urban ghetto. The theme of the late sixties was "Black Power" punctuated by a knotted fist. It sought a common ethos between northern and southern Blacks. Although it may not have been consciously conceived out of the need to affirm manhood, it became a metaphor for the male consciousness of the era. As Floyd McKissick, who replaced James Farmer as head of CORE, explained: "The year 1966 shall be remembered as the year we left our imposed status as Negroes and became Black men."⁴⁵

Two years later, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., renewed the conviction that a violent struggle was inevitable, and Black men proclaimed their willingness to die for it. Black Panther Huey P. Newton wrote a book entitled *Revolutionary Suicide*; Stokely Carmichael announced that in the coming racial war Black people would "stand on our feet and die like men. If that's our only act of manhood," he said, echoing the lines of the Claude McKay poem written a half-century before: "then Goddamnit we're going to die."⁴⁶ H. Rap Brown, who headed SNCC at one time and became associated with the phrase *burn, baby, burn*, believed that any lesser action was tantamount to impotence: "One loses a bit of manhood with every stale compromise," he warned.⁴⁷

This desperate need for male affirmation affected the relationship of men and women in Black militant organizations. Angela Davis discovered this when she cut short her studies in Europe to throw her considerable energies into the movement here. While organizing for a rally in San Diego in 1967, she said:

I ran headlong into a situation which was to become a constant problem in my political life. I was criticized very heavily, especially by male members of [Ron] Karenga's [US] organization, for doing a "man's job." Women should not play leadership roles, they insisted. A woman was to "inspire" her man and educate his children. The irony of their complaint was that much of what I was doing had fallen to me by default.⁴⁸

A year later she confronted similar problems in the newly organized Los Angeles chapter of SNCC. On the original central staff were six men and three women, one of whom was Davis. However, she said, two of the men and all of the women were doing a disproportionate share of the work. Davis wrote:

Some of the brothers came around only for staff meetings (sometimes), and whenever we women were involved in something important, they began to talk about "women taking over the organization"—calling it a matriarchal coup d'état. All the myths about Black women surfaced. (We) were too domineering; we were trying to control everything, including the men—which meant by extension that we wanted to rob them of their manhood. By playing such a leading role in the organization, some of them insisted, we were aiding and abetting the enemy, who wanted to see Black men weak and unable to hold their own.⁴⁹

Davis went on to say that these attitudes were particularly unfortunate because the chapter was one of the few organizations in the country where Black women had any kind of significant role at all. Her experiences there seemed to have contributed to her ultimately joining the Communist party. "I was tired of ephemeral ad-hoc groups that fell apart with the slightest difficulty," she wrote, "tired of men who measured their sexual height by women's intellectual genuflection."⁵⁰

Kathleen Cleaver, who was an officer in the Black Panther Party, noted similar problems. She had to "genuflect" when it came to offering her views about how something could be done within the organization.

... if I suggested them, the suggestion might be rejected; if they were suggested by a man the suggestion would be implemented. It seemed throughout the history of my working with the Party, I always had to struggle with this. . . . The suggestion itself was never viewed objectively. The fact that the suggestion came from a woman gave it some lesser value. And it seemed that it had something to do with the egos of the men involved. I know that the first demonstration that we had at the courthouse for Huey Newton which I was very instrumental in organizing, the first time we met out on the soundtrucks, I was on the soundtrucks, the first leaflet we put out, I wrote, the first demonstration, I made up the pamphlets. And the members of that demonstration for the most part were women. I've noticed that throughout my dealings in the Black movement in the United States, that the most anxious, the most quick to understand the problem and quick to move are women.⁵¹

No better example existed of Cleaver's statement than Gloria Richardson, who had led the Cambridge Movement. But at a rally in her hometown in the late sixties, she was shouted down by members of CORE, who called her a "castrator."⁵² As Davis concluded, the late sixties and early seventies were "a period in which one of the unfortunate hallmarks of some nationalist groups was their determination to push women into the background. The brothers opposing us leaned heavily on the male supremacist trends which were winding their way through the movement."⁵³ Ironically, the most "nationalist" groups were also the most sexist, often to the point of downright absurdity.

The Black Muslim organization, led by Elijah Muhammad and thrust into the national spotlight by Malcolm X, had some appealing aspects. It was a highly disciplined group. They had an independent economic base, with Black Muslim-run restaurants, food stores, schools, and a newspaper that they both published and distributed themselves. At least as appealing to some was that the relationship between men and women in the organization was taken care of by fiat. Through their own Muslim ethic, men were the unquestioned leaders and decision makers; women had a decidedly secondary place in the scheme of things. This appeared, at least, to be as true within their families as in the running of the organization.

Black writer Barbara Sizemore declared that in his *Message to the Black Man*, "Elijah Muhammad openly states that women are prop-

erty." Sizemore went on to quote such passages as: "The woman is man's field to produce his nation." The *Message* also exhorted men to "keep women from the streets," because they are "given to evil and sin while men are noble and given to righteousness." "To become good Muslims," concluded Sizemore, "black women must become chattel once again, with good and loving masters, to be sure, but chattel nevertheless."⁵⁴

Well, that was one way to solve the difficult problem of male-female relationships and assure "Black manhood": revert to nineteenth-century White society's handling of it. However, the irony was lost on many Blacks at the time. C. Eric Lincoln's study *Black Muslims in America* concluded that the organization's most significant achievement was its promotion of men as the dominant force in the family and the mosque.

Black activist and writer Imamu Amiri Baraka infused into most of the activities he was associated with in the period the idea that "Nature had made women submissive, she must submit to man's creation in order for it to exist." His Spirit House in Newark was run along those lines, and at least at one conference he organized the only women allowed to attend were widows of "Black martyrs" and Queen Mother Moore, a Garveyite who shared this philosophy. He was the main thrust behind the Congress of African Peoples, which was billed as the first modern Pan-African Congress. Documents emanating from the CAP meeting of 1970 included position papers on the Black family and the role of women. Amina Baraka, an activist and wife of Amiri, reiterated the teachings of Ron Karenga which proclaimed: "What makes a woman appealing is femininity and she can't be feminine without being submissive."⁵⁵ Another position paper disclosed: "We understand that it is and has been traditional that the man is the head of the house. He is the leader of the house/nation because his knowledge of the world is broader, his awareness is greater, his understanding is fuller and his application of this information is wiser."⁵⁶

It was but a short step from this sort of thinking to advocate that women remain politically barefoot and literally pregnant. Another Baraka orchestration, the Black Power Conference held in Newark in 1967, passed an anti-birth-control resolution along with other serious-minded intentions. The idea had a surprisingly wide distribution. A May 1969 issue of *The Liberator* warned, "For us to speak in favor of birth control for Afro-Americans would be comparable to speaking in favor of genocide." A year earlier, an *Ebony* article had published the

views of a physician who saw a revolutionary baby boom as a tactical advantage. He believed if Black women kept producing babies, Whites would have to either kill Blacks or grant them full citizenship.

There were protests, though usually belated, from Black women in the face of this anachronistic thinking. Linda La Rue remarked on the irony of "the rebirth of liberation struggles in the sixties with a whole platform of 'women's place' advocates who immediately relegated Black women to home and babies."⁵⁷ It was a reflection of "Puritan-Americanism and/or the lack of simplest imagination," she concluded. Frances Beal called the demand to make Black women submissive "counterrevolutionary" and said, "Women who feel that the most important thing that they can contribute to the Black nation is children are doing themselves a great disservice."⁵⁸ Beal also reminded the movement that the object of the "revolution was the freeing of all members of the society from oppression." The sexist emphasis of this period was also criticized by Sonia Pressman, writing in *The Crisis*: "When most people talk about civil rights, they mean the rights of Black people. And when they talk about the rights of Black people, they generally mean the rights of Black males."⁵⁹

Some Black intellectuals of the time were not content merely to relegate Black women to the political—or biological—back seat of the movement. Sociologists, psychiatrists, and the male literati accused Black women of castrating not only their men but their sons; of having low self-esteem; of faring badly when compared to the virtues of White women. Black women were unfeminine, they said; how could they expect the unflagging loyalty and protection of Black men?

The castration theme was most vividly postulated by sociologist Calvin Hernton in *Sex and Racism in America*. Poor Hernton was emasculated by the tender age of seven—not by the racist forces in the South where he grew up—but by his grandmother. By his own account, at this young age he fell in love with a little White girl. When his grandmother discovered his hand-holding affection for the girl, she beat him, evidently with much vigor. Her disciplinary action retarded his sexual development, Hernton wrote. For from then on he acted "like a eunuch" around White women because of his "undefined sense of dread and self-mutilation."⁶⁰ That an old Black woman, apparently alone, was forced to take on the full responsibility of protecting a young Black boy in the South to ensure that his "dread" remained undefined never seemed to occur to him.

In another litany of complaint, the Black psychiatrists William

Grier and Price Cobbs accused Black mothers of inflicting "senseless pain" on their sons. Not only did they inflict severe corporal punishment, they also exhibited unpredictable shifts of mood from permissive to punitive. The Black mother's behavior, the psychiatrists asserted, was motivated by a desire to prepare "their sons for manhood by blunting their assertiveness and aggression." The result was that Black men "develop considerable hostility toward Black women as inhibiting instruments of an oppressive system."⁶¹ One wonders what Black women would have been charged with had they permitted their sons to be lynched extralegally in the South, or legally in the North.

Nevertheless, the charge was supported by Hernton. He recognized his hostility toward his grandmother after he witnessed her deferring to some young, lower-class White girls who pushed in front of her while she was standing in a line. Insensitive to the possible reasons his grandmother had for enduring the humiliation (which probably included the fact that she was the sole charge of this little Black boy), Hernton wrote: "I knew grandmother was a proud, self-willed woman and I could not understand why she belittled herself before those nasty, lying white girls." Although Hernton felt himself a eunuch, he concluded that "it was the Negro female who bowed her head and tucked her tail between her legs like a little Black puppy."⁶² "There arose in me," he continued, "an incipient resentment towards my grandmother, indeed, towards all Black women—because I could not help but compare them with White women." This is a strange comparison after describing "nasty, lying white girls," but of course we know what he meant. Hernton was comparing his grandmother—and all Black women—with mythically beautiful White women, the stuff of male dreams. So not only were Black women kowtowing, destructive mothers, they were no roses either. The "reputed virtues of white women smother whatever worth black women may have," explained Hernton: "The Negro male is put to judging his women by what he sees and imagines the white woman is."⁶³

The problem here of course is that Black men "imagined" white women to be diametrically different from Black women. In perhaps the most devastating chapter of Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, "The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs," a Black man says, "The myth of the strong Black woman is the other side of the coin of the myth of the beautiful dumb blonde. The white man turned the white woman into a weak-minded, weak-bodied, delicate freak, a sex pot,

and placed her on a pedestal; he turned the Black woman into a strong self-reliant Amazon and deposited her in his kitchen."⁶⁴

It is interesting to note that these Black men seemed to understand that their attitudes were at least as affected by the indoctrination of White values as by anything else. Yet they, and others, continued to rationalize their compulsions by projecting inadequacies on Black women. The lack of Black "femininity" was an often-used rationale. "Femininity is only imperfectly grasped by most black women," submitted Grier and Cobbs.⁶⁵ In *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver used the term *subfeminine*.

This lack of femininity, according to the two psychiatrists, had less to do with the texture of Black women's lives than with the texture of their hair. Their negroid features resulted in their self-rejection and in their rejection by the general society and the family as well. Consequently, Black women not only suffered from the Freudian malaise that all women shared, but had an additional burden to bear. Black women, said the psychiatrists, did not experience the "compensatory blossoming of narcissism" found in women of other races. So they stopped competing for male attention, allowed themselves to become overweight, and their "sexual lives became perverted." Even attractive (i.e., more "White-looking") Black women had their problems. Because they were often the sex objects of White men, they recoiled within themselves. Grier and Cobbs summed up: "Black women have a nearly bottomless well of self-depreciation into which they can drop when depressed."⁶⁶ (Little wonder.) Hernton believed this self-depreciation principally motivated the alleged physical abuse of children. Corporal punishment, in his view, did not arise from a mother's concern for her children as much as from "simple personal frustration and self-hatred."

With the notable exception of Eldridge Cleaver, Black men failed to draw logical conclusions from their own expositions. Though they accused Black women of a variety of failings, it was Black men who, by their own admission, felt the self-hatred, lacked the qualities generally attributed to their gender, needed to be accepted in White society. These compulsions, not the shortcomings of Black women, made Black men seek the arms of White women. As Hernton put it: "Having the white woman, who is the prize of our culture, is a way of triumphing over a society that denies the Negro his basic humanity."⁶⁷ And another political patron saint of the period, Frantz Fanon, poignantly revealed in *Black Skins, White Masks*:

By loving me she [the white woman] proves I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realization. . . . I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.⁶⁸

When in the same book Fanon describes a Black woman who says she will marry only a White man, that she loves his blue eyes and blond hair and submits to him in everything because she really wants to be White, it is difficult not to look at that in the context of his own previous statements. When Grier and Cobbs talk about the Black woman's despair because White society does not recognize her womanhood, they seem to use a criterion more appropriate to men. For if anyone was a "Black puppy," it was men confronting the power of the White woman's hold over them. "The Ogre [the White woman] possessed a tremendous and dreadful power over me. . . . I was at its mercy. . . . If I conquered the Ogre and broke its power over me I would be free," Cleaver wrote.⁶⁹ Hernton noted that for the Black man, "the White woman symbolized at once his freedom and his bondage."⁷⁰ He further illustrated this thesis by quoting a line in Richard Wright's *The Outsider*, where the protagonist, Cross Damon, on his knees, begs of his White woman: "Have mercy on me. . . . Pity me; be my judge; tell me if I am to live or die."⁷¹

In James Baldwin's *Another Country*, this power, and the love-hate ambivalence toward it, finally drives the character Rufus, whose girlfriend is White, to suicide. These attitudes were even seen as a justification for the rape of women. Hernton indicated that Black men harbored a desire to rape White women; Fanon characterized rape as a political act; and Imamu Amiri Baraka wrote about "raping White girls" in *The Dead Lecturer* and other works. Eldridge Cleaver freely admitted to *actually* doing it—after "practicing" on Black women. Odd behavior for eunuchs.

There is a tragic irony in these views from prominent Black male thinkers. Their chauvinism invested Black women with the same negative qualities that had been perpetrated upon them—and which they had fought against—for centuries. In the age of the cultural Black aesthetic one was hard put to find any positive female character not wrapped in vice and degradation.

Black women had a complicated and sometimes contradictory reaction to this hail of bullets. They criticized the excesses of the male

viewpoint, while attempting to accede to Black men's needs, and to maintain a racial rather than a feminist perspective. For example, although Kathleen Cleaver admitted to being "hostile" toward Black men who had "anything to do with any white woman," she rationalized her husband's penchant for White women, including an affair he had with his lawyer. "When Eldridge was an unknown convict," she said, "the only [attorney] who responded to him was a white woman. . . . No Black women came to his assistance. . . . I had to do a lot of thinking myself in order to accept that."⁷² And although she talked about the universality of sexism and described the "assertion of Black manhood" as no different from the sexism of White men, although she noted the "violence . . . the brutality, the hostility, the bitterness" that Black men directed toward women, she postulated that colonialism, not men, was to blame.⁷³

Toni Morrison wrote of the "bad" relationships that resulted from men's inability "to deal with a competent and complete personality and the Black woman's refusal to be anything less than that," but she also said an important reason for Black women's not joining "women's lib" was that "black men are formidably opposed to their involvement in it—and for the most part the women understand their fears."⁷⁴ Joyce Ladner suggested that Grier's and Cobbs's betrayal of the Black man's victimization overemphasized the degree "to which the Black man had been damaged," but still felt that "the scars of emasculation probably penetrated the Black man more deeply than the injustices inflicted upon the woman." She also criticized their assessment of Black women, saying that the sociological study of women in inner-city St. Louis revealed a great deal of feminine pride and positive sense of self, some of which was due to the "Black Is Beautiful" climate of the period. Ladner also described the self-sufficiency of many women, mothers as well as daughters, in female-headed households. Still, she concluded:

The bold assertion of Black masculinity has required that Black women redefine their roles, especially as they relate to Black men. . . . An alteration of roles between Black males and females must occur. The "traditional strong" Black woman has probably outlived her usefulness because this role has been challenged by the Black man.⁷⁵

Of course, as in Frances Ellen Harper's day, the question of race had to be paramount in the concerns of Black women. This, combined with a lack of respect and trust for the White women who were

leading the feminist movement, explains many of the reactions of Black women. But threading through these attitudes there was also a sense of guilt. Many felt that Black women had somehow gotten a better shake from this racist society, that their men suffered more, and that Black women's duty, as Morrison noted, was to absorb their justifiable rage. Black women were proud that they were strong, that they were responsible, but wondered if they were too strong, both for the good of their men and the good of the race. The other side of the coin of the "bad" relationships Morrison described were those *saved* by the Black woman's "unwillingness to feel free when her man was not free."⁷⁶ The notion of aiding men's freedom so that women could be free themselves was a historic one. Not putting a "straw" in Black men's way, as Harper had said almost exactly a century before, was valid. But the question was, were Black men on the path to freedom in the misogynous late sixties and seventies? Would Black women's stepping aside, with no strong, organized sense of their sociopolitical role—as they had at the turn of the century—aid that freedom? Were Black women clear about the distinction between general male sexist impulse and that which had its roots in the specific Black experience?

Hovering over these questions like an obfuscating cloud was a Labor Department document entitled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," published in 1965. The document, better known as "The Moynihan Report" (after its author, Daniel Patrick Moynihan), perpetuated the misconception that the success of Black women, not racism, was responsible for the problems of Blacks.

XVIII

~ Strong Women and Strutting Men: The Moynihan Report ~

President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty," the key to his Great Society program, was unprecedented in its conception. Not only did the federal government support the equality of Blacks as a right and in theory, but it acted to make equality a result and a fact.¹ The War on Poverty was waged at a time when the percentage of Americans living in poverty had reached an all-time high (17.8 percent) and poor urban Blacks were setting cities on fire. It became clear that Black poverty had to be alleviated if legal rights were to mean anything. So an expert set about the study of how to make economic equality a fact.

The first step was to pinpoint the problem. And the conclusion, detailed in the subsequent Moynihan Report, was: "At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of the Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental cause of weakness in the Negro community. Unless the damage is repaired all the effort to end discrimination, poverty and injustice will come to little."²

So the "case for national action" was no longer to concentrate on the external machinery of racism and discrimination, but on the internal problems of the Black family—as if the two were unrelated. Moynihan arrived at this conclusion through the slavery-specific thesis. The problems of the Black family began under slavery, he postulated, and were worsened by continued discrimination and the migration to cities. In the urban environment, Black men had experienced "disastrous" levels of unemployment since World War II. This fact, combined with the already slave-damaged family structure, resulted in abnormal prominence of women. "A fundamental fact of Negro American family life is the often reversed roles of husband and wife," Moynihan noted,³ citing studies showing that the wife was "dominant" in the majority of Black families while the reverse was true of Whites. This matriarchal pattern "reinforced" itself over the

generations through the continued higher educational attainment of Black women and their greater representation in professional and semiprofessional jobs. All of this made Black men very dispirited, said the report. Consequently they were not good prospective marriage partners, and this translated into high rates of desertion, divorce, and female-headed families, then making up one fourth of the Black family population. This in turn added to the high rate of out-of-wedlock births (about a quarter of all Black urban births) which led to a "startling" increase in welfare dependency. Such circumstances, Moynihan observed, borrowing a phrase from Black sociologist Kenneth Clark, led to a "tangle of pathology," inextricably knotted by a matriarchal head of the household.

A question that might arise from these observations was why men, rather than women, seemed less able to fulfill family obligations under the pressure of racism and discrimination. The answer, Moynihan speculated, was that although all Blacks suffered, men suffered more: "It was the Negro male who was the most humiliated. . . . Segregation and the submissiveness it exacts, is surely more destructive to the male than the female personality."⁴ The reason for this evidently had to do with the inherent nature of the species: "The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut," was his scientific conclusion.⁵

The report drew a storm of protest. Leaders such as George Wiley, founder of the National Welfare Rights Organization, criticized the emphasis on internal problems of the Black family at a time when racism was particularly virulent. William Ryan, a psychologist who offered one of the most detailed responses to the report, suggested that the race factor may have induced Moynihan to exaggerate the increase in female single-headed households (which was 5 percent from 1940 to 1960) and its causes. Furthermore, he challenged Moynihan's conclusion that Blacks were more entangled in pathology than Whites, especially as reflected in the number of out-of-wedlock births. Whites had a greater tendency to use birth control and to abort unwanted pregnancies, Ryan said. And, especially taking discrimination into account, Black families were not deteriorating at an any more alarming rate than White families were.

The most controversial aspect of the report concerned the Black matriarchy. In response, a number of Black sociologists, including Joyce Ladner and Andrew Billingsly, wrote books stressing the strengths of the nontraditional family. The idea had even greater

currency at a time when the middle-class family was under general attack in the society. "One must question the validity of the white middle-class life-style from its very foundation because it has already proven itself to be decadent and unworthy of emulation," said Ladner.⁶ In any case, Blacks challenged the accuracy of the term *matriarchy*, which implied female dominance and male subordination within the family. What appeared as matriarchy, many argued, was in reality something else. Despite male economic instability, Ladner wrote, "It could indeed be argued that much of the 'strength' of the Black woman comes as a result of the sustained support she receives through her male partner."⁷ Even in slavery, Angela Davis asserted, the Black woman was "in no sense an authoritarian figure. . . . On the contrary, she herself had just been forced to leave behind the shadowy realm of female passivity in order to assume her rightful place beside the insurgent male."⁸

Black sociologist Robert Staples called Black matriarchy a myth, suggesting that the Black woman actually had little power over the family or the society. She did make many decisions affecting the family, but that was because men often deferred to her greater knowledge about certain things, especially the bureaucratic structure with which many families had to deal. The tenacity of Black women was something to be proud of, Staples affirmed. "While White women have entered the history books for making flags and engaging in social work, black women have participated in the total black liberation struggle."⁹ Furthermore their assertiveness was part and parcel of a history that had deprived Black men of their ability to protect and provide for the family since slavery. But if that assertiveness had been translated into power and dominance, Staples asked, why did Black women earn an annual wage of \$2,372 in 1960 compared to \$3,410 for white women and \$3,789 for Black men?¹⁰ Writer Albert Murray also criticized the report's thesis: "Moynihan's figures provide for more evidence of male exploitation of females, than of females henpecking males. . . . Negro family instability might more accurately be defined as a cycle of illegitimacy, matriarchy, and female victimization by gallivanting males who refuse to or cannot assume the conventional domestic responsibilities of husbands and fathers."¹¹

It is likely that no one was more shocked by the reaction to his report than Daniel Patrick Moynihan. He had taken pains to be racially sensitive. For example, he explicitly stated that the report concerned only a certain segment of the Black community and not the

race as a whole. In fact, Moynihan cited evidence in the report that middle-class Black families put "a higher premium on family stability and the conserving of family resources than their White counterparts."¹² Moynihan also praised the strength of Blacks as a race. Many other groups would not have survived the centuries-long ordeal they had undergone, he declared. As far as patriarchy was concerned, Moynihan's report stated that there was nothing inherently wrong or pathological about a woman-headed household, only that it was not the norm in the society and thus subject to disadvantage. No doubt Moynihan was put out by the knowledge that strategy for the War on Poverty in general, and aspects of his report in particular, had been "approved" by the civil rights establishment, including King, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young, head of the National Urban League. Moynihan had borrowed heavily from established Black sociologists. In fact, Moynihan was less harsh in his evaluation of the nontraditional family structure than E. Franklin Frazier had been in *The Negro Family in the United States*.

Like Frazier's, Moynihan's thesis suffered from myopia. Moynihan's was also particularly untimely, leaving Blacks with no option but to challenge it. Though many took issue with Moynihan's view of the problem, however, few criticized his suggestion for resolving it—which was even more malevolent. Moynihan concluded, as Frazier had done, that Black family stability could be achieved only if Black men could "strut," even, if need be, at the expense of women. This was epitomized in his program for eradicating Black poverty. He believed, as an analysis of the report points out, "that jobs had primacy and the government should not rest until every able-bodied Negro man was working *even if this meant that some women's jobs had to be redesigned to enable men to fulfill them.*"¹³ (Emphasis added.) Not *White men's* jobs, mind you—women's jobs. This, despite the growing number of female-headed families, the fact that the average two-income Black family still earned less than one-income White families, that college-educated Black males earned less than high-school-educated Whites, that Black women earned less than Black men, and that because of historical circumstances more urban Black women were prepared to fill positions in an era of increasing credentialism. The thinking seemed to be: Just make Black men the lords of their own castles and everything will be all right. To reach this utopia, of course, Black women would somehow have to slow down, become less achievement-oriented, give up much of their independence. By re-

maining assertive, they were ruining the family and so ruining the race.

It was a shortsighted thesis, but what could one expect in an era of male revolt, when Black and White men alike targeted the destructiveness of mothers and wives? The Moynihan Report was not so much racist as it was sexist. Although it can't be held responsible for the intense Black male chauvinism of the period, it certainly didn't discourage it, and the report helped shape Black attitudes. In its wake, an *Ebony* article unequivocally stated, "The immediate goal of Negro women today should be the establishment of a strong family unit in which the father is the dominant person."¹⁴ Dorothy Height, head of the NCNW, said, "The major concern of the Negro woman is the status of the Negro man and his need for feeling himself an important person."¹⁵ All well and good, but the question was: At what cost? At what point did making men feel good provide only diminishing returns?

Finding the answer required a change of focus, away from "why men leave home" and toward why Black women, who were fulfilling their responsibilities, were yet the most vulnerable and exploited group in the society. One should have asked why, despite their status, a larger percentage of Black women stayed in school longer, were disproportionately represented in the professions, and (if full-time workers) were experiencing the greatest percentage increase in median income of all race/sex groups. Finding the answers could have alleviated Black women's guilt and ambivalence.

The traditional value of education among Black women was one key to their success. That parents had historically encouraged their daughters to go to school was not just a racial phenomenon but a class one. In an economy where blue-collar men earned as much as or more than white-collar women, sons dropped out of school to support themselves and their families, while daughters *went* to school to do so. They went to school, in most instances, to prepare for traditionally female occupations. This was true among Blacks and Whites alike. The 1960 percentage of the Black female labor force in professional occupations was 7.2, as compared to 3.1 percent of Black men. However, as one analyst noted, if teaching, social work, and other typically feminine occupations were to be subtracted from the total of female professionals, the total number of Black professional men would "appear in a more favorable light."¹⁶ The same holds true for the White population. In the same year, 13.8 percent of White women were in the

professions compared to 10.9 percent of men. But the latter figure was conveniently overlooked in the Moynihan Report. Perhaps because to include it would have begged the question of why the difference in professional representation had a greater effect on Black families?

The reason for the disparity was that Black men had been largely excluded from both the most desirable professional occupations and the lucrative blue-collar positions by big business and discriminatory labor unions. It has always been easier for Black women, often more educated and work-experienced than White women, to enter the lower-paying women's professions than it was for Black men to enter the male professions. Historically, when Black women were allowed—or needed—in occupations like nursing, teaching, and government work they moved into them in disproportionate numbers. In 1965, for example, in the Department of Labor, 70 percent of Black employees, compared to 40 percent of Whites, were women. And in positions open to civil servants with modest credentials, Black women outnumbered men four to one.¹⁷

In the sixties, as in the past, Black women were able to draw strength and advantage from a situation that oppressed them because of their race and their sex. Through collective effort, they struggled to make substantial gains—in a way Black men were unable to do—in those occupational areas relegated to them. An outstanding example of this was the organization of the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees in 1969.

The first focal point of the union effort was New York City's voluntary hospitals. Because voluntary hospitals are nonprofit institutions and thus exempt from minimum wage laws, their nonprofessional workers were woefully underpaid and exploited. They had no unemployment insurance or disability insurance. Consequently only the most marginal class of workers sought jobs in the voluntary hospitals: By the late fifties the overwhelming majority of them were Black and Hispanic women. The hospital and nursing home industry is the third largest employer in the country, and in no field are more Black women employed. Its 2.5 million workers, mostly Black women, constitute a group four times larger than the steelworkers.

In the fifties, the first foray came from New York City's Local 1199, which demanded better pay and working conditions, as well as recognition of the union as the workers' bargaining agent. For a decade the struggle continued. The obstinance of voluntary hospital administrators precipitated walkouts, and the increasingly bitter battle

drew the attention of such civil rights leaders as Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The confluence of civil rights organizations, other unions, and the determination of the workers resulted in major concessions and pay raises for New York City voluntary hospital workers in 1968. But that was only the first chapter. Their success inspired the formation of a national organizing committee and other hospital workers throughout the country—most notably in Charleston, South Carolina.

When management discovered that women workers in Charleston were attempting to organize, the leaders of the group were immediately fired. The firings prompted a walkout of four hundred workers, leading to the most spectacular of the labor actions of the sixties. SCLC and other civil rights organizations, along with labor unions and the Charleston Black community, were pitted against the southern establishment. The latter included all the anti-union effort that J. P. Stevens—fearful of the implications of a successful strike—could muster. (His instincts were correct. Six years later a J. P. Stevens plant in Virginia voted to unionize, capping decades of struggle to do so. As with the hospital workers, increasing numbers of Blacks—and especially Black women—in the textile industry provided the crucial margin of victory for the pro-union vote.)

Resulting from the hospital workers' strike were massive rallies and massive arrests, the bringing in of the National Guard, "jail, no bail," and predictable violence. The leader of the Charleston workers was a twenty-seven-year-old Black woman named Mary Moultrie. And one of the most visible civil rights leaders participating was Coretta Scott King, who continued to be active on the workers' behalf even after the assassination of her husband. What had impressed her about the strike was not only the determination of the Black workers and the support of the Black community, but "the emergence of black women as a new breed of union leaders." Such women as Moultrie, Emma Hardin, and Rosetta Simmons were "following in the steps of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, Daisy Bates, and Fannie Lou Hamer," she noted.¹⁸

A turbulent 113 days and 1,000 arrests later, the Charleston hospital strike was settled, with many gains to the workers. By 1969 the national union was established, and in subsequent years 2.5 million workers throughout the country were organized. As a result, Local 1199—now headed by Doris Turner—and the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Workers are counted

among the most important unions for Black and Hispanic women in the country.

The relative success of Black women in the desirable "higher" professions, though more visible, was not as great. Although more Black women than Black men were listed under the general category of "professional" when Moynihan published his report, many more Black men than women were physicians, dentists, engineers, and so on. And that trend was continuing. In 1968, three years after the report was published, Black institutions conferred 91 percent of their professional doctoral degrees on men and only 9 percent on women.¹⁹ A 1969 Ford Foundation survey revealed that 94.5 percent of 1,096 Blacks who had attained doctorates (excluding medical degrees) were men and 5.5 percent were women. Furthermore, a good portion of the Black women who received doctorates got them in education (and their percentage was lower than the percentage of women in the total doctoral population).²⁰ Nevertheless, the relative achievement of Black women seemed startling. The 1960 census showed, for example, that 7 percent of White physicians as opposed to 9.6 percent of Black physicians were women; 8 percent of Black lawyers, compared to 3 percent of White lawyers, were women. The same trend was apparent in a whole range of occupations. As extraordinary as these statistics were, one must keep in mind that they reflected not only the achievements of Black women but the *lack* of achievement of Black men and White women in these occupations.

Still, the disproportionate number of Black women in the professions deserves further study, for it has fueled the charges of Black women's advantage over Black men. In 1972 sociologist Cynthia Fuchs Epstein studied thirty-one Black women professionals, including lawyers, physicians, university professors, journalists, and public relations executives. What prompted her inquiry was the seeming inconsistency of Black women's success in a society that was both racist and sexist. Epstein discovered that achievement had little to do with advantage but a great deal to do with the attitudes of each woman's family, her sense of self-worth, the role of her mother, and her superiors' perception of her.

In virtually every instance, Black women professionals (unlike most of their White counterparts) grew up in homes where their mothers were doers. Of those interviewed, only four had mothers who had never worked (one of these mothers had thirteen children).

Many of the women's mothers were in professional or semiprofessional occupations themselves; they were teachers, professors, nurses, and one was a physician. Fewer (five out of the thirty) fathers of the women were professionals, and many others held stable jobs, such as postal employee or bricklayer. A description of the mother of one of the women was typical: "My mother was not the stronger of my parents but she was the most aggressive, always planning and suggesting ideas to improve the family's situation."²¹ The mother, a dressmaker, would often "slip out" and do domestic work if she had to make ends meet, without telling the father, a carpenter who was excluded from the union and laid off periodically.

Not surprisingly, Epstein found that the daughters of such Black women had a tremendous sense of confidence in themselves and their abilities. She cited a 1964 study of Black women college graduates which confirmed that Black women tended to be more confident of their own abilities than did their White peers. When asked if they had personalities suitable to careers as business executives, 74 percent of Black women thought that they did as compared to 49 percent of the Whites.²² Another study, conducted by the American Council of Education in 1971, noted that 62.1 percent of Black women college freshmen rated themselves "above average to achieve." This was higher than Black male freshmen (59.2 percent), White female freshmen (53.4 percent), and White male freshmen (50.6 percent).²³ Mothers of the Black women in Epstein's study encouraged achievement almost without exception. One physician recalled that her goal was to be a nurse but her mother encouraged her to be a doctor. This was in contrast to White families, who had more ambivalence about their daughters' becoming overeducated and thus having difficulty finding husbands.

One can speculate that although some Black women shared these anxieties, their life expectations generally were different from those of most White women. Black women expected to have to work, whether they were married or not. They didn't often think of their careers as "supplemental" to those of their husbands.

Another interesting characteristic of Black women professionals, Epstein found, was that they seemed to have a higher regard for each other than White women professionals had for *their* peers.²⁴ In a previous study she had found self-hatred among White women lawyers, including negative stereotypes about "aggressive, masculine" women, but Black women professionals had better attitudes toward

each other. Whereas few White women favored other women professionals, Black women "never indicated doubts about the competence of other women, and some said that they favored women as colleagues because they were more reliable and more willing to work than the men they knew."²⁵

The attitudes of Black women professionals also affected how they were perceived by White male employers. Often they were regarded as more "serious" than White women, because of their strong career motivation. Black women were also less apt to become involved in the sexual politics of the office. Nevertheless it is often heard that Black women's success is due to the fact that they are perceived as less of a threat to White males. This is true, but that perception also has its disadvantages, for it indicates that whatever their abilities, Black women often progress so far and no farther. They are less apt than their male or White female peers to displace someone from the executive suite, because they are women and because they are Black. And the assumption that the most lucrative and favored positions will fall to men is borne out by statistics.

As we see, for Black women, double discrimination can cut two ways. On the one hand their status makes them the most apt to be unemployed and underemployed. As a result, Black women have had the lowest median income of all groups. On the other hand, the tremendous effort required to transcend the barriers of race and sex has catapulted full-time Black women workers into significant gains in the ever-widening women's sphere of economic activity. The rate of progress of this group has been startling to some, not because they threatened to overtake Black men but because of their proximity to them despite sex *and* race discrimination. Sociologists like Moynihan believed that the proximity made Black men too dispirited to be responsible heads of household.

His male-directed solution ignored the fact that Black women's income and occupational status compared more favorably to Black men because of the latter's inability to penetrate the more lucrative job market reserved for White men. The suggestion that Black women brake their progress, rather than eliminating the discrimination that kept Black men down, ignored the plight of disproportionate numbers of Black poor women, female heads of families, and the necessity for two decent incomes if Blacks were to have a quality of life comparable even to that of single-income White families.

By failing to isolate the true reasons for some Black women's relative success in the face of double discrimination, both the women's movement and the Black movement failed to benefit from the valuable lessons inherent in that achievement. Consequently, the failure effectively to challenge Moynihan's solution, with all its implications, retarded both movements. This was made abundantly clear by 1972.