

## *"When people look*

at me, I represent a nation, an entire race. Whatever they think of that race, that's what I become."

"Someone asked me to wear a sari to class to show my heritage. Why? Do I have to be 'traditional' to prove my past?"

Women who are from the Third World (including American and Canadian blacks), 'women of colour' or 'black' women do not identify with the white, middle class attitudes common in feminist thought. They are often frustrated with the direction and approach of the women's movement. Even among this group of women, there is a need for two different approaches: one for women living in the Third World, and another for 'women of colour' living here. Both approaches must be different from mainstream western feminism, for both share an added factor to feminist analysis--oppression on the grounds of race, as well as sex.

"I come out of a tradition where those things are valued; where you talk about a woman with big legs and big hips and black skin. I come out of a black community where it was alright to have hips and to be heavy. You didn't have to feel that people didn't like you. The values that imply that you must be skinny, come from another culture...I refuse to be judged by the values of another culture. I am a black woman, and I will stand as best I can in that imagery."--Bernice Reagon

Many of the frequently cited examples of abuse of black or coloured women come from Britain. Asian women, coming to Britain to meet their husbands, were tested to ensure that consummation of marriage had taken place prior to immigration. Yet, Canadian treatment of black working class women is often little better. It is, however, much more subtle. Makeda Silvera, in her book *Silenced*, writes of the lives of black domestic workers in Toronto. Most of the women work in homes where they are little more than skivvies for professional white families, Silvera says:

"What is never talked about, or made clear to many of these women is the widespread prejudice they will come up against in Canada and the racism imbedded within a system which thrives on the labours of women of colour from Third World countries, women who are brought to Canada to work virtually as legal slaves in the homes of born wealthy and middle-class Canadian families"

Most of the workers were hired and supervised by the woman of the family. Husbands remain the peripheral characters entering the scene often only to sexually harass or rape the employees. One woman talked to Silvera of her experience as a newly arrived domestic:

"One thing I didn't like though, is that I have to wash her nylons and her panties and brassieres by hand. These things I grin and

bear."

'Women of colour' living in the West often experience the same emotional problems in trying to cope with a society that is not quite sure what to do with them:

"The only black kids at school. You got a lot of pressure, a lot of oppression, a lot of exploitation. You take on a lot of pain, a lot of guilt and a lot of humiliation, as black people. It didn't occur to us to question why I was not allowed to go to my best mate's birthday party because she happened to be white. We accepted these things. And we blamed ourselves for being black. Of course, you know we had a lot of teaching- that we were at fault. That we were primitive. That we were the savages. That we were heathens."

This quote is from an Australian "Aborigine" but could just as easily have been made by a black woman in Canada or an Asian in

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Britain. While entire families often suffer from racial discrimination, women often have to bear the burden for both themselves and children. It is they who receive the blame for children who cannot cope in the different academic environment.

Coloured women who become involved in feminist, anti-racist activities often find themselves isolated within the so-called women's movement. Coloured women have created a different feminism based on race. This is necessary because the women's movement as a whole has never incorporated racial discrimination into its platform.

However, the white response was not always positive. White feminists believed the feminism of the coloured woman was separatist rather than constructive. So, many women are forced to see the white perspective on feminism while white women will not even acknowledge that a black perspective exists.

In Britain, many black feminists refuse to go on Take Back the Night marches, as Kum Kum Bhavani, a black socialist feminist describes:

"The unease which resulted from the realisation that my white 'sisters' did not see anti-racist activity as relevant for their brand of feminism became sharper when, some time later, a Reclaim the Night march was organised, whose route went through Chapeltown, a predominantly black area of Leeds (England). I refused to go on the march because of its racism, this refusal being clearer in my mind when issues such as better 'policing' were discussed as a strategy to keep the streets safe for women. But the streets were never safe for any black person, and the presence of the police on the streets only seemed to be a guarantee black people would be more likely to be harassed."

And what about the implications that it was black areas which were unsafe for women?

"We black people are trained to split ourselves, to see things from the white point of view, because it has power over us. You have to see how the white people are going to see it in order to shape your own behaviour."--Wilmette Brown

Women of colour living in North America have radically different perspectives on many basic 'feminist' issues such as birth control, abortion, the involvement of men in the women's movement, and social services.

Contrary to the many women who are currently fighting for the right to choose to have an abortion, many black women are fighting for the right to oppose forced sterilization. In several cases in the southern United States and southern Africa, black women have been sterilised after the birth of a child without their consent or knowledge or even that of their husbands. Yet among the hundreds of different pro-choice buttons seen recently in the Toronto Women's Bookstore, only one button called attention to the problem of sterilisation abuse.

A warning which recently appeared in a hand-printed leaflet in Britain and was distributed among Asian and black women read: "Do you happen to be female, heterosexual, perhaps Black and/or 'unsupported' (i.e. poor)? Have you sought medical advice once - or repeatedly - on pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion or contraception? Might a (probably white, male, middle-class) doctor possibly categorise you along such lines as: 'unmotivated...unreliable...incompetent...stupid...promiscuous... illiterate...'"

For women in the Third World, the problem has become equally evident recently. In India women have undergone sterilisation in order to obtain baby formula for an infant. In Bangladesh women were sterilized in return for three dollars. Desperation is the only thing that could possibly cause these women, who often need more children, to take such measures.

It is also women in the Third World who are the guinea pigs for the testing of birth control devices and innovations. Well-known Toronto

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