POWER TO SOME OF THE PEOPLE

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Patriarchy Within Black Activist Movements

Black women have been publicly working for racial justice in the United States for centuries. However, there has always been a focus on black men and their struggles in activist movements, and little focus on the racism and sexism black women face from outside and within the black community.

In this essay, I will examine the patriarchal nature of black activist groups and the sexism black women have faced within these groups and movements. From this, I will look at how it has informed activism, or rather who is seen to matter more in black activism. I will be looking at the Black Panther Party along with the modern Black Lives Matter movement in terms of how these movements have ignored black women.

Women and the Panthers

The patriarchal nature of black activism can previously be exemplified in the structure and attitudes of the Black Panther Party. The Black Panther Party was a radical black rights group, founded in 1966 in Oakland, California, active until 1982. It was founded in response to police and racial harassment by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale[1].

Matthews[2] found that the gendering of the Black Panther Party was heavily influenced by masculine concepts. A focus on strong, arguably toxic, masculinity was an integral part of the Panther's ideology[3]. Stepping up to protect others and the party's form of armed confrontation allowed black male chauvinism to blossom within the party. Moreover, multiple notable men within the party were extremely sexist and even violent towards to black women. Eldridge Cleaver, leader in the Oakland chapter, was a convicted rapist and abusive towards his wife, Kathleen, and Huey Newton had a history of violence against women and dismissed violence against women by male Panthers.

Very few male Panthers outrightly condemned sexism in the party. Fred Hampton, deputy chairman of the Illinois Chapter, conducted a meeting in 1969 condemning sexism in the party, one of the few instances on record. However, it was clear that misogynoir* was not a deal breaker for the party.

Despite all of this, many black women joined the group to protest police brutality, racism and sexism when the group started admitting female members in the 1970s. They were just as combative and effective as their male counterparts in their activism but moving up in the party was difficult. Firstly, male and female panthers were separated as female panthers weren't taken as seriously and even when the group integrated, the focus on reclaiming black manhood fuelled sexism against women in the Party, and the struggles of black women were not a focus for the party.

The sexist attitudes of black power activists were no clearer when Elaine Brown was appointed chair to the Oakland Chapter.

Elaine Brown was the first ever chairwoman appointed to lead the party in 1977, however, even as leader and her successes such as helping appoint the first black mayor in Oakland, she was a woman, and a lot of the men didn't like taking orders from women in the party. Female membership of the party had increased, with women outnumbering the men in some chapters. It can be inferred that many male members were feeling emasculated by the number of women in the party

In her memoir, she wrote about the sexism she faced, writing: "A woman in the Black Power movement was considered, at best, irrelevant.

1   Duncan, Albert G. 2021. "Black Panther Party | History, Ideology, & Facts." Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Black-Panther-Party.

2   Matthews, Tracyee A. 2001. ""No one ever asks what a man's role in the revolution is": Gender politics and leadership in the Black Panther Party, 1966–71." In *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, edited by Vincent P. Franklin and Bettye Collier-Thomas, 230-254. New York: New York University Press.

3   ibid. p. 244

A woman asserting herself was a pariah. If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the black race."[4]. This summarises the struggle women faced within activism. Black men were seen as the focus of the struggle and any attempt to look at other issues, particularly sexism that black women faced would be seen as anti-black. Perhaps because looking at sexism would force men in the party and wider community to be held accountable for their actions against women.

When Huey Newton returned from his exile in 1977, many male members complained to him about the leadership of women in the party and it can be inferred that he agreed with them, as he refused to condemn the beating of Regina Davis, an administrator, who was assaulted by a group of male panthers after scolding a male Panther. Brown left the party after this, as she could no longer stand the patriarchy and sexism of the party.

The argument advanced here is not that this was the uniform attitude across all chapters of the Party, but rather that it reveals the sexist attitude within activism. Black men in this group were not championing true equality, but rather wanting to join and benefit from the white male patriarchy. It seemed they were more concerned with wanting to get away with things white men in America could get away with than fight for equality for all.

Black women were equally, if not more, incensed and yet were treated as if they were traitors when calling out the abusive behaviour of. From this, the struggles of black women when it came to sexism and brutality have been ignored in a focus on "universal" anti-black racism. Black activism that focuses on black men.

Modern Movements

Black women have continued to be heavily involved in the creation of movements to protest injustice. However, like in the 20th century with the Panthers, in the 21st Century, there is still a heavy focus on black men when it comes to the lens of racism and brutality[5].

The Black Lives Matter movement was started by three black women Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi in response to the acquittal of policeman George Zimmerman after he shot a black 17-year-old Trayvon Martin[6]. It has since grown into a global movement, with chapters in the UK and Canada.

Nevertheless, there is still a heavy focus on the suffering of black men, in terms of police brutality and racism. Male victims of police brutality are more likely to be featured in campaigns than their female counterparts. Whilst the toxic attitudes displayed by leading men of the movement are not as present, the patriarchal preference of the struggles of black men remains. The names of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice and George Floyd are widely known but Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland and Rekia Boyd were not shouted as loudly, despite also being victims of police brutality.

In response to this, the #SayHerName social movement was created to raise awareness. The hashtag was created by the African American Policy Forum to add to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Social media has been helpful in highlighting black women who have been victims of police brutality and give black women a platform to speak about their experiences of racism and sexism. Stories of black women who are assaulted or killed by the police do not capture national attention in the same way stories of black men do, continuing the notion that it is mainly black men who suffer at the hands of the police and systemic racism.

However, there is a lack of general support for black women in activism. Mainstream feminism has largely focused on white women, ignoring how race plays a role in the sexism aimed at women of colour. The ignorance or reluctance to look at the sexism within the black community and not being able to relate to sexism which is why black men may struggle to support black female activism.

4   Brown, Elaine. 1994. *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*. N.p.: Anchor Books. p. 357
5   McBean, Shanice. 2014. "'Shoot As Well As Cook': the Black Panther Party, sexism and the struggle today." RS21. URL: https://www.rs21.org.uk/2014/12/31/shoot-as-well-as-cook-the-black-panther-party-sexism-and-the-struggle-today/.
6   Black Lives Matter US, 2020. *Herstory*. https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/.

The needs of black women are distinct from the needs of black men. Black women stand at the intersection of sexism and racism and these experiences are inseparable in terms of the discrimination they face. In the US, Black women are more likely to die in childbirth and pregnancy and are at a disproportionate risk of sexual assault[7]. Whilst some black women are now being investigated more within social policy and academia, there is little being done to remedy the aforementioned problems, mainly due to a lack of overall activism and support across racial and gender lines.

The movement for racial justice in the black community is no doubt patriarchal in nature. Despite the heavy role that black women have played in leading and creating groups and movements, despite. They are expected to show up for everyone else with no one showing up for them. The toxic, sexist atmosphere of the Black Panther Party may be largely gone from activist circles, but the legacy of prioritising men over women when it comes to advocating for black rights has lived on.

Things are improving, however. The use of social media to talk about the problems black women face has resulted in a larger awareness and inclusion of black women when discussing racism and police brutality. Unfortunately, there is little literature on this subject, hence the brief nature of this essay. Most of the data is qualitative which can make it difficult to fully quantify the overall effect on black activism. I would like to do more research into how sexism in the black community has affected activism in both the UK and US. Yet, more unity across gender lines and a recognition of sexism that black women face within the community and by wider society is needed if black activist movements are to be fully inclusive and work towards true equality.

*Misogynoir - dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against black women.

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7   Taylor, Recy. 2020. "Black women, the forgotten survivors of sexual assault." American Psychological Association. https://www.apa.org/pi/about/newsletter/2020/02/black-women-sexual-assault.

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