

OUR LIVES

Volume 1 No. 1

\$1.00 March 1986

Statement To The International Women's Day Coalition February 5 '86

What We Believe

The Black Women's Collective is a group of Black women who came together because we saw a need for Black women to unite and organize politically and autonomously around Black women's issues. This is the first issue of "Our Lives" and it is one way that we can speak to each other about ourselves from our own perspective. It is a way to link with other Black sisters.

The backgrounds of the women in the Collective are diverse. Some of us were born and raised in Canada; some in isolation in white communities and some from Black Canadian communities whose history in Canada goes back hundreds of years. Some of us are from different parts of the Caribbean who arrived in Canada anywhere from early childhood to recent years ago. Some of us are from England and South Africa. We are working class and middle class. Some of us are not employed. We are writers, artists, domestic workers, musicians, teachers, social workers, and health care workers. We are lesbian and heterosexual. Some of us are mothers.

We have all been involved in political work in the Black and women's communities and are tired of the way in which our voices and our issues as Black women are ignored or treated in a cursory manner.

Those of us who worked in the white feminist community were fed up with white women's racism and their expectation that we should devote our labour to issues of priority to them for their benefit. The white feminist movement defines all women as white by ignoring the fact that Black women's lives are very different from their own and that these differences are significant and shape our politics and priorities.

Those of us who worked in various Black community organizations are tired of male sexism and the unwillingness of both men and women to
cont'd pg. 2



Statement of the Black Women's Collective To
The International Women's Day Coalition -
February 5th. 1986.

We want to make clear our position as part of the International Women's Day's Coalition and to comment on events which have taken place and their political significance. In the beginning some of us came to the first meeting of this years coalition to investigate the legitimacy of the coalition in addressing the theme 'Women say No to Racism from Toronto to South Africa'. We knew the coalition in past years to be largely white therefore largely unfamiliar with the analysis which we as Black feminists would bring to discussions. That analysis is deeply rooted in our history in these Americas as slaves, captured and dragged across the middle passage and sold into bondage for three hundred years. Our Historical memory does not allow us to forget our political, economic and social relationship with white people particularly since it is a relationship which extends to this day - the relationship of oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited, privileged and underclass.

We in this room Black and white are the sum total of that history.

To come to a decision to work in the Coalition then, we had to consider that history carefully. The betrayals of working with whites in general are well documented. As women we only have to look to the suffrage movement nurtured on the abolitionist movement and the women's movement nurtured on the civil rights movement. In both those instances the expediency of white women to

the deliberate exclusion of racism is legendary.

Nevertheless we joined this year's coalition because the issue of racism is pivotal to our lives and we felt that our political analysis was crucial to the expression and practice of this year's theme. In the early meetings we recognised the pitfall of working in a group which appears to be homogeneous but that homogeneity veils our specific historical and political stance and therefore only expresses white women's opinions regarding the issues, the organising, the logistics, the practice of the coalition. Hence we pressed for 'white women only' workshops on racism as early as the second coalition meeting and in networking outside of the meeting with white women and with the education committee, we continued to stress the need for these, also suggesting that informed white women in the coalition should put a call out to their sisters explaining the nature of racism and why it was an issue to be taken up by white women. We recognize that understanding and fighting racism was a complex undertaking for white women and require education and consciousness-raising which would lead to political commitment. We could not commit ourselves to doing this work with white women as we need all the strength to devote to our day to day struggles as Black women.

But more importantly it is only white women who can free themselves of racism or commit themselves to anti-racist feminist struggle.

Naturally we did not feel that in joining the coalition we simply had to melt into the woodwork. For us that would be political suicide and totally useless to our struggle. Our vision of
cont'd pg. 2

CONTENTS

What We Believe

Statement To The International
Women's Day Coalition
February 5 '86

Sisterhood Must Be Struggled
For

To Our Native Sisters

AWOM
PKR
FC

106
.B6
A82

Statement cont from page 1

women working together is not the vision of reducing us to our similarities but to addressing our contradictions, respecting our political positions and coming to a politics which is mindful of those things. In England and the U.S. feminists are looking at these issues of race and class which any coalition including Black women necessitates. We must recognise and not be afraid of this moment in the history of the women's movement in Toronto.

We work in this coalition on the principle that it is only we, Black women, who can decide upon issues which concern us because it is only we who have lived our lives. In simple practical terms, we are saying, where the route for example has to be chosen, we as victims of certain institutions and their racist regulations, know these places and their relevance. The freedom with which discussions will flow is directly dependant on and related to acceptance of the qualification of the caucus and its status. If we are all agreed that we are working on this theme then, ensuing discussions on technicalities or logistics logically follow. Where this qualification is not honestly accepted the status will be in question and white women will not know how to raise queries without feeling guilty. But guilty of what? Of not understanding why Native women must lead the march and why a particular building is relevant to our struggle" or guilty because of our separate histories and their relevance to our relations now?

Women Organise**FIGHTING RACISM****IS POLITICAL****ACTION****Women Unite****Fighting Racism**

is

Feminism

What We Believe cont from page 1
address Black women's issues or challenge sexism. Homophobia too is often unaddressed & justified as a correct position by the Black community. Black lesbians must often hide on lesbianism to be "accepted" or face being ostracize from our community.

We in the Black Women's Collective have come to the realization that communities and organization that do not fight all of these issues; racism, classism, sexism and homophobia can only oppress Black women. If we continue to give our labour and support to these organizations and neglect the valuable work we need to do with each other we will perpetuate the injustices against us and further the interests of those who oppress us.

The Black Women's Collective supports all Black liberation and Third world struggles against capitalism and imperialism as these struggles are materially linked to ours.

"Our Lives" is meant to be a forum for Black women to give voice to our experiences. We invite Black women to contribute stories, articles and ideas to "Our Lives".

**BLACK****WOMEN'S****COLLECTIVE (TORONTO)**

It is not our intention to stifle genuine discussion. We cannot however subject ourselves to procedures that negate both the theme of the march and our status in it nor can we agree to "accepted normal procedures" overriding the relevance of a change in those procedures, overriding our history. Normality has a definite social and political horizon i.e. what is normal, will be so for a particular group as accepted to be beneficial to that group. So, voting and democratic voting procedures have never, historically, whether we be in the majority or the minority, served in our interest.

We are not asking to be 'understood', we are asking that the coalition understand racism, its ramifications and the consequences therefrom. This understanding is crucial for our working together

For white women, individual awareness of the problem is the beginning of the process. Verbalising this problem is the next step, followed thereafter by collective awareness of the group. Hence our suggestions for closed workshops for white women. Knowledge of the material reality of racism, its covert and overt forms, helps in strategies

for self liberation. The cohesion of the Coalition is directly related to the unity born of victimisation. Awareness of the components of the group and addressing the ills visited on each component is fundamental. The Coalition will then have a stand as a group "in" itself versus its adversaries - the

exploitative male world.

The debate on inclusion of the prostitution issue in the leaflet is a point in case. As Black women, our historical association with prostitution obliged us to take the political position of leaving it out lest we are interpreted as validating the stereotype. We offered to hold a workshop on the issue at the fair, all to no avail. White people forget our history, if they know it at all. We cannot forget it. It directs us and motivates us as your history of being part of the ruling class, in our history, does you.

Where does all this put the Coalition and our working together on this theme?

This Coalition in our point of view has organised white women over the last ten years. In selecting this theme perhaps it was not fully aware of the step that it was taking. Simply, it was seeking to organise Black women! Did the Coalition consider how it would have to change in order to do so? what matters it would of necessity discuss and how that would change the very face of the women's movement? That is what we all in this room are faced with. Obviously there is much work to be done. The step of choosing this theme shows interest, shows concern but it is just a first step. Deeds count, cause words come easy.

The Black Women's Collective wants to know what deeds will you do as white women?! Are you with us?!

Black Women's Collective (Toronto)

Thato Bereng, Patricia Hayes, Marie Dent
Donna Barker, Faith Nolan, Debbie Dougl
Grace Channer, Beatrice Bailey, Erica Merc
Dionne Brand.

Send Stories, Letters,
Articles, Information to

Our Lives

P.O. Box 44

Station P

Toronto, Ontario.

M5S 2S6

Sisterhood Must Be Struggled For

March 1986

In September 1985, some of us were approached by a white sister from the International Women's Day Coalition around organizing for March 8, 1986. The plan that she had in mind was to bring Audre Lorde, the noted Black writer and Casselberry and Dupree from the States for this year's celebrations. A group of us met with this sister - some of us from the Black Feminist Collective and some from the Coalition of Visible Minority Women. Our position at the time was that we were not interested in parachuting anyone from anywhere else to tell us what our oppression here in this country was. We could name this ourselves. As well, the money to bring them could be put to much better use. If we were interested in anything, we were interested in organising within our own community of Black women. In fact, ever since our involvement in the Angela Davis rally for March 8, '85 we had redoubled our networking and brainstorming. Our work with white women of the Committee for March 8 had confirmed for us (if any of us was not convinced by history) that Black women working autonomously was necessary. Our immediate and correct response to the IWDC sister was no. After all our experiences as Black women in America had taught us to recognise calls for our token appearances in token situations. We are sure that this white sister had contacted us out of well meaning concern and perhaps on her part, a genuine desire to reach out to Black women. But we knew that political analysis should precede political action otherwise that action would be meaningless and therefore fall short of our goals of liberation. That analysis being missing, we declined to participate. We declined to fling ourselves into organising for the superficial "big event" which we knew would leave our energies spent and Black women in the same situation.

In November, 1985, some of us heard about the proposal by the ad hoc committee that the theme for March 8 1986, should be 'Women say No to Racism from Toronto to South Africa'. We attended the first meeting of the International Women's Day Coalition to inspect the terrain and to see if this was a genuine enough effort to come to terms with racism. Remember, we as Blacks have been called cut before only to find the commitment wanting. Two of our sisters had been involved in writing the proposal and that was great encouragement to come to that meeting. The proposal was passed, not without an obscure debate as to whether poverty and peace should not be dealt with also. (As if Black people are not poor and beleaguered by imperialist war: as if poverty was not the result of racism and classism and as if we were not justifiably engaged in armed liberation struggles all over the world).

We joined the Coalition for a number of reasons. First, because we felt that only those who struggle against racism would give leadership and direction to the struggle against racism. That is something that we learned in the 50's and 60's.

Second, we Black women had a history particular to us, Black and woman, which the white women's movement was neither privy to nor expert in expressing. Only we, could speak on our behalf.

Third, there were white women in the Coalition who were progressive, had done work on racism and would be accountable on the question of racism. In the case of some we were proved wrong and in others, right.

Fourth, we saw this year's theme as another rallying point for Black women where we could meet and share our experiences as we have been doing over the years. But this would be an opportunity to publically highlight our struggle and strength.

Fifth, we saw the theme as a genuine and welcome effort on the part of our white sisters to come to terms with racism in the women's movement and to put their labour and their feet where their mouth was on sisterhood. For this we commend them on their courage, because it is not easy to fight against racism. Dealing with racism, because of the deep personal and political examination needed, made it extremely difficult even for the most together white feminists. Many had never sat in a room with Black women before and had stereotyped images of Black people, ie, Blacks are violent. Therefore, they were threatened by our presence and afraid to speak. Not used to being with Black women or dealing with racism with Black women present, most kept silent. For us, racism is common knowledge and we looked on the white women's ignorance with mistrust. How could they have access to so much information and the evidence in their own lives and yet overlook what is for us a daily and imperative struggle. If a Black woman does not see racism, her very existence is threatened. She has to know the look in a potential employer's eyes that says he hates Black people or she will blame herself for the racism which keeps us unemployed. A Black woman must know that these looks are the system otherwise she would go insane.

Given that we were the one's whose lives would be threatened by racism at our workplaces and on the streets, it was therefore fitting that we should be the ones to give political direction around the activities of March 8th. This task certainly posed no problems for Black women wanting to work around the day.

From the beginning we recognized the potential for conflict given the racial makeup of the Coalition and the fact that we live in a racist society. In the past, a few Black women and women of colour have been tokenized within the International Women's Day Coalition. These women were often the entertainment for the day, while the white women did the political work. This was the extent of the solidarity white women showed their Black sisters.

This year our involvement with the IWDC ensured that Black women and other women of colour would play a significant role. This meant a shift in political direction from the 'cultural as political' lessons on Black women to serious political analysis and action. March 8th could not be an isolated event for us. It had to be seen as a political act within our ongoing struggle. This change in focus also made it necessary for the white women to recognize the struggle of Black women in Canadian society. It was also hoped that white Coalition members would recognize their ruling class status vis a vis Black women and come to some understanding of the privileges they enjoy. With this recognition, it was hoped that white women would realize that proper direction could only come from Black women who experience racism on a daily basis.

Due to defensiveness and lack of accountability, it was impossible to achieve some of these stated goals.

As early as December we spoke with the white leadership of the coalition suggesting to them that they, as the most advanced white feminists should set an example by putting a call out to their white sister explaining what racism was in their lives:

TO OUR NATIVE SISTERS

Working with you this year on International Women's Day was one of the most profound experiences for us. Our shared oppression of racism/sexism led to our mutual empathy and solidarity. We gained new insight to ourselves through you. The connections we made cannot be broken because of our shared struggle. We respect your historical resistance and acknowledge that the land on which we stand, is yours. Like the Black townships in Nova Scotia, the stolen land of South Africa, your land must be redeemed, returned to the people. To this end we all struggle.

Love and Sisterhood
Black Women's Collective

Send Stories, Letters, Ideas, Articles, Information to

Our Lives
P.O. Box 44
Station P
Toronto, Ontario.
M5S 2S6

how it also helped to oppress white women and why it was a feminist issue. We also warned that without this analysis the ranks of the white women in the Coalition would dwindle as would the early courage shown by participating white women. We knew that it would not be an easy way to deal with racism and we felt that the white leadership should shoulder that responsibility. We were willing to help if those women would take that radical step of being accountable, even compassionate to their white sisters who had less experience. Our suggestions went unheeded.

We repeatedly suggested internal workshops for White women on racism. There was much balking and hemming and hawing but no movement. We pressed and pushed saying that this had to be a condition of organizing together not just for this day but for the future. After several discussion, the white women agreed (some reluctantly) to accept direction from us. In spite of this, we met with obstacles on issues ranging from voting to the selection of workshops.

The Black Women's Collective delivered a position paper on the role of Black women within IWDC this year (see Statement to the IWD Coalition - February 5, 1986, this paper). One of the issues addressed was white women wanting to vote on what were positions of principle for us. And, positions where only we (Black women and Native women) had the qualification to determine the relevancies: to speak to the issues or to make decisions. The IWDC then, and in an

earlier meeting with a summary of the historical process of IWD meetings. It was said that in the past ten years IWD members have voted on every issue and went on to imply that to change this would be tampering with the democratic process and throwing tradition away. The fact that Black women were the ones making suggestions as to how the issue of racism should be dealt with did not come into play. In an area where Black women are clearly the experts, the white feminists still felt that they should have the last word; the vote. Even though that vote would disenfranchise the Black and Native women in the room.

Notably the same white sister who had approached us in September '85 was among the few white women who acknowledged that the process was political and that the presence of Black and Native women indeed meant a changing of the process. Regrettably, others in the leadership of the white women of the Coalition only provided excuses for not dealing with the issues honestly and in our opinion stunted the growth and limited the possibilities of white sisters who may have been willing to learn. (We only hope that these sisters are not lost.) Instead of bridging the gap they used divisive tactics to create 'camps' within the Coalition, at times using other Women of Colour as a buffer. But our history made us wise to these tactics. The propaganda of menace and unreasonableness was disseminated widely. We refused to respond. We Black women are uppity and strong and accustomed to racist propaganda.

When people from different cultures, races or classes the expectation would be that they will all learn from each other - the naive that ignores class and race attitudes, values and way of life was made clear in our intersection with white members of the Coalition. Time-old attitudes of directing and programming what they have never gone through, i.e. racism, made it difficult for most of them to accept fully the directorship of Native, Black or women of colour. The irony of this fact is that white women have perceived this domination quality in white men, be it in an organization, corporation or a home but they did not draw parallels. Where we referred to ourselves as the Black Women's Collective they saw and thought of us as a group of Black women with no political rationale behind the 'grouping'. It was unavoidable therefore that they vacillated between the sublime to the ridiculous in doing chores and preparations that facilitate any rally march without countless pleas of 'ignorance' as to how the mechanical things should be done. Having declined their imposed leadership they sought to

subtly hinting, from time to time, on aspects that they had imagined we had not focused on, eg. the length of the leaflet; by remaining silent about their awkwardness instead of voicing it. We had been expected to fit into a program in a typical "cultural domination" method - hence their bewilderment when we structured the program to fit our understanding of racism.

Because we had been thought of as tokens and not full participants, white women wanted us to participate in their workshop on racism so they could release their guilt. The assumption here was that we would be content with the tokenism of guilt instead of a full grasp of what racist attitudes mean in real terms, even in the Coalition itself. Another assumption was that the theme on racism was a March 8th 'event' rather than a mode of life for us, so we would willingly participate in giving entertainment to lighten the Day's gloom.

We also encountered a type of behaviour that was meant to be divisive when different Black of Native women would be called up with 'mistaken' information quoted from one of us or surprise positions taken by one of us in contradiction to a collective position. Confusion and decreased faith in each other were supposed to result - we resisted and stuck together even more. Jumping over such racist confusionist hurdles consumed a lot of energy and time, which is what they were calculated to do so that when things go wrong it would be because we just cannot organize without white women's tutelage. Multiracial organizations that pay lip service to racial equality show all these tendencies precisely because Blacks and Natives are seen, from a lifelong of teaching, as being incapable. These truths we knew even before we lent our participation. We hope our white counterparts know that now. We cannot surrender our identity and become invisible to perpetuate the idea that "to be" is to be white. It is also not a pastime that we point out these things. We intend them to be educational to those of us who do not realize that we are taken as Black per colour, not as per political, social or economic experience. This scenario has been enacted in Toronto - the South

African situation portrayed similar outrage and sulky acknowledgement when Black people started organizing in Black communities, telling whites to do the same in theirs. Why are white people so reluctant to organize in their communities? Is because they cannot race-bully anyone there? Are they perhaps being robbed of their benefactor status there? To those white sisters who saw an appreciated our right to politically direct their activities this year, we extend strength in our fight against racism. Black people need us - Black women, white people need them - white women and the human race need all our combined effort to eradicate racism.

The Black Women's Collective and the Native Women's Resource Centre gave leadership to a aspects on this year's International Women's day from the writing and editing of the leaflet to the management of the route of the March to the organising of the workshops. We could not do less if we are to keep faith with our sisters, Black and white, and our fight against racism at the same time. Our leadership marked a milestone in the history of International Women's Day (Toronto) the significance of which we in the feminist/womanist movement and the Black Liberation movement will have to examine over the next several months/years. This leadership and militancy of Black women is not uncommon in the tradition stretching from Nanny of the Maroon; Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Rosa Parks and Ella Baker. We only have more work to do to meet the standards they set. We know the importance of organising autonomously as Black women and we also know the importance of uniting with other women, creating a base of sisterhood with other who are disempowered by sexism. That base of sisterhood must be a principled one, however. One of moving from strength to strength. To our white sister-

We feel that the contradictions raised at this year's coalition were/are necessary steps in building the base of sisterhood. There was no going around it no shilly-shallying about it. It had to be lived in order to be analyzed and understood. In other words, sisterhood must be struggled for.



Send Stories, Letters, Ideas,
Articles, Information to

Our Lives
P.O. Box 44
Station P
Toronto, Ontario.
M5S 2S6