

WOMEN IN THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY: AN INTERNAL STRUGGLE FOR POWER, EQUALITY, AND SURVIVAL

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the complex gender relations in the Black Panther Party (BPP). At the outset, hyper-masculine ideals drove the party forward as an organization of powerful men. This intrigued many African American males struggling to find an identity. Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, gender roles significantly changed within the party as male leaders were arrested or killed by police and opposing federal groups, and women began to move up the ranks in numbers and leadership. The gains made by women during their continued push for this equal footing made significant improvements for the Black community and kept the party afloat at its weakest times. Though women were eventually able to hold executive roles, true gender equality could never be achieved in the BPP given the party leaders' sexist views and the party's strict gender hierarchy. The continued struggle became a divisive issue that played a large part in the Party's eventual demise.

INTRODUCTION

In the mid- to late 1960s, many African Americans became tired of the slow and sometimes superficial gains that the nonviolent advocate leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. were making. Drawing on many of the teachings of Malcolm X, and earlier Black nationalists, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale formed the BPP in Oakland, California in 1966 with the purpose of empowering the Black male and providing armed self-defense against police brutality. Throughout the years of slavery and the rise of the Jim Crow south, black men were emasculated in multiple ways. Under the system of slavery, Black men were often forced to witness acts of brutality directed at their loved ones with no means for legal recourse. As lynching became widespread and carried out for even small offenses or unproved allegations, fear of lynching at hands of Jim Crow kept men 'in their place'. Men were often unable to act out without the fear of being attacked and killed themselves. It must have been a debilitating feeling to watch the rape of a loved one or wife and not being able to defend them without worse repercussions.

The Black Panthers also had to deal with the brutal police violence rampant in African American neighborhoods. A publicly visible goal of the party was to take a stand against police. In the eyes of the Panther founders, the legislation gained by nonviolent organizations only went so far towards noticeable improvements. This was especially true if the laws were not enforced or if those tasked with enforcing them were the ones exhibiting the violence. It became clear to Newton and Seale that police would attack even when unprovoked. Peaceful protests often led to police dog attacks and brutal beatings. As Newton asked, "What good is nonviolence when police are determined to rule by force?"¹ Black Power activist Stokely Carmichael echoed these sentiments, noting that even a bus boycott, "the most passive political act possible," was met with aggression. The Black Panthers thus declared their stance to organize and gather weapons for their own armed self-defense. In summary, along with active defense from police, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale began their party with an explicit goal of reaffirming the masculinity of African American males, who "had been metaphorically castrated" by racist mistreatment, as they cowered from lynching threats and often watched their wives bring in more money than they could manage themselves.² Thus, from the very birth of the BPP, women were left out of its mission and goals.

¹ Samuel Josephs. "Whose Revolution Is This? Gender's Divisive Role in the Black Panther Party." *Georgetown Journal of Gender & the Law* 9.2 (2008): 404.

² Josephs, 405.

R. SEITHER: WOMEN IN THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

With a hyper-masculine image and an emphasis on recruiting males party leaders made it clear that women's was not the focus of their platform. Kathleen Cleaver, who would later emerge as a key Party leader, suggests that the greatest difficulty was in the idea that black men and women's objectives directly conflicted with one another.³ In a struggle between self-improvement and improvement of the race as a whole, many Party leaders believed that if men were trying to regain their manhood and power, women's empowerment and expanded leadership opportunities ultimately defeated the purpose.

Despite this conflict of interest, the number of women in the party began to increase steadily during the latter half of the 1960s. Women gained interest in the party for several reasons. Though some were turned off by the hyper-masculinity and gun-wielding image, many others were especially drawn to the Party's emphasis on armed self-defense. During a period in which the police occupied African American neighborhoods like wartime, the "protector of the home" identity was very attractive to women. Erika Huggins, who joined the Party during the 1960s, described the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) as a spinoff of the Ku Klux Klan because of the repeated acts of police brutality, unwarranted harassment and seemingly random arrests on a frequent basis.⁴ Additionally, it was the logical next step for women already involved in the Black Power movement. Many female members of the civil rights organization the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) began to have radical ideas about change. Many of these women were excited and impassioned about taking action against racism and discrimination, and regaining control of their own fate.⁵ Katherine Campbell and Madalynn Rucker, who were both active in the BPP between 1969 and 1975 expressed that the Party gave female members a reason to get up in the morning and provided a platform for them to engage in the struggle for equal rights.⁶ Contrary to the original ideological statements of the Black Panther leaders, women did not view the party as an opportunity for only Black men to move forward. These women viewed the BPP as a space where they could also participate in the Black Power movement in very profound ways. As interest continued to grow among Black women, more opportunities began to become available and women were able to gain more influence as men were forced to vacate their positions. At one point, the female majority reached sixty percent of membership.⁷ Though these gains were very positive for the female Panthers, upon closer inspection it can be seen that much of their improved status was primarily due to the sudden dismantling of the male leadership infrastructure. By this time in the life of the Black Panther Party, a large portion of the male governing members had fallen victim to the rampant violence and legal problems from the police and Federal Bureau of Investigation. By 1967, both Seale and Newton were behind bars. Countless males were killed and arrested by the police. Special joint task forces were even established to attack the Black Panther members; males were accosted by members of the LAPD, FBI, CIA and a special organization by the name of COINTELPRO. This was the Counter Intelligence Program put into action but the FBI that carried out covert operations.

All of this aside, opportunities did open up for women to ascend in the party and they took on these chances as much as they could. Initially, women in the Party maintained supportive roles. Many worked as secretaries, assistants and as members of committees. In fact, many women expressed their view that their purpose was to aid men in any way possible and to take on a secondary role. According to Linda Lumsden, "female writers [...] extolled women to train their energy on men as part of the party mission to salvage black manhood".⁸ Other women in the Party said they should help to improve the men's mindsets and that they needed to fulfill the needs of Black men in any way that to further the aims of the Black Power movement.⁹ As male membership and leadership dissolved before them, women

³ Josephs, 407.

⁴ *41st & Central: The Untold Story of the L.A. Black Panthers*. DVD. Directed by Gregory Everett. (Ultra Wave Vision, n.d.)

⁵ Josephs, 412.

⁶ *Still Revolutionaries*. DVD. Produced by Sienna McLean. Perf. Katherine Campbell and Madalynn Rucker. (Berkeley, 2000.)

⁷ Josephs, 413.

⁸ Linda Lumsden. "Good Mothers With Guns: Framing Black Womanhood In The Black Panther, 1968-1980." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 86.4 (2009): 904.

⁹ Lumsden, 904.

began to fill in and take hold of some powerful positions in the party. In the words of Kathleen Cleaver, who was the first woman to serve in a truly influential position in the BPP, when she arrived on the scene, the party was "in the midst of a total crisis" without any sort of organizational structure remaining.¹⁰ The party no longer had meetings, was no longer publishing a newspaper and did not have any active officers.¹¹ At this juncture, the women virtually revived the organization. Cleaver immediately took on the first task of raising funds for the Party.

Slowly at first, but eventually with increasing pace, women made significant strides for gender equality. Initially, women worked to move forward with the standing agenda of the party while integrating their own goals of overall betterment. While they wanted to make personal gains, the women were tactful in avoiding the image that they saw themselves as more important than the male leaders they replaced. This political approach did not last very long, however. Articles began to flood the Black Panther periodical magazine of women claiming that they were the strength behind the revolution and that men could do nothing without their assistance. Scholar Samuel Josephs states that the women had the change of mind that both sexes were complementary yet still vital.¹² Following the trend of increasing intensity and drive, the next group of women to speak out called for full equality. Women like June Culberson passionately proclaimed that women needed "equal footing and equal rank" to men of equivalent skill and that they should shed the "Pantherette" moniker for the simple title of "Panther".¹³ Other women expressed that they should be called "comrades" as the male members in the Party.

As women rose through the party, they became just as involved mentally and spiritually as men. They performed their roles with passion and were at the forefront of programs to help the community. Most notable were the women's social activism especially involving Black youth. The party women moved to the streets to promote the ideas of "revolutionary intercommunalism," which was the application of Marxist ideals of providing for the members of a community in need. Women led the way towards Black Panther survival programs. These programs worked to provide a stable education and support system to the African American children around them. Women organized food drives provided school children with daily nutritious meals. Other breakfast drives fed children before they went to class. The Black Panther women collected and gave away shoes, clothing and coats, as well.¹⁴ On top of these programs, the Panthers founded a daycare called the Child Development Center (CDC) and other centers where hundreds of children, many of them the children of Panther members, received daily educational instruction.¹⁵ Other women did not shy away from serving on the front lines of defense for the party. For example, women like Ericka Huggins joined their male comrades at the forefront of the armed revolution. Huggins was arrested and jailed alongside Bobby Seale and several other men on charges of torturing and murdering a fellow Panther suspected of informing the FBI. Her actions sparked praise from some male leaders formerly at the helm, including Eldridge Cleaver, who called to his fellow men to throw off the chauvinistic attitude plaguing them and to realize that a woman can be as strong a revolutionary force as any man.¹⁶

While there is no denying that the women of the Party performed extremely important and helpful tasks, the female presence began to have a disruptive effect on the inner workings of the group. For instance, the survival program gains were controversial, and for understandable reasons. Supporting African American children and providing a better future for them was a resounding positive impact on the community but it simply was not one of the central goals of the Black Panther Party, which had been established to combat police violence. This was one of the first examples of how female influence shifted the views of the party. In addition, as commendable as the passionate self-sacrifice of women like Erika

¹⁰ Josephs, 413.

¹¹ Robyn Ceanne Spencer. "Engendering the Black Freedom Struggle: Revolutionary Black Womanhood and the Black Panther Party in the Bay Area, California." *Journal of Women's History* 20.1 (2008): 97.

¹² Josephs, 419.

¹³ Josephs, 420.

¹⁴ Spencer, 105.

¹⁵ Spencer, 106.

¹⁶ Charles E. Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party: Reconsidered*, (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 284.

R. SEITHER: WOMEN IN THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

Huggins were, it again went against a fundamental founding priority of the BPP, which had been established as a means of empowering Black men and restoring their power..

As time progressed, women occupied a number of visible leadership roles, accomplished much for the community, and were able to gain some support from male members of the Party. Despite these efforts of women and statements from BPP men who seemed to be changing their views, women still faced resistance to their leadership. In several ways, what the men of the party said directly conflicted with how they acted with regards to women. It is impossible to deny that there was still inequality at the deepest roots of the Party. Though the initial call of recruitment was focused solely on men, Newton and Seale later expanded their efforts to include some women as well, calling them “‘strong Black [...] women on the scene who are willing to step out front and do what is necessary’”.¹⁷ Though it is likely that these leaders’ comments were guided by their desire to gain a larger following, it was also a small step forward for women to gain recognition and respect in the party. In the summer of 1969, one male BPP member even expressed his thoughts that women are “‘our other half, they’re not our weaker half, they’re not our stronger half, but they are our other half and that we sell ourselves out, we sell our children out, and we sell our women out when we treat them in any other manner’”.¹⁸ Thus, on numerous occasions, men verbally supported women’s equality in the BPP. Still, this is not to suggest that all men in the party maintained this view. One anonymous male author published his ideas that overall, Black women were selfish and had an attitude of superiority over Black men.¹⁹ Still more elucidating were the actions of Black Panther men towards the women working alongside of them. For example, although Tarika Lewis, the first woman to have official membership in the BPP, obtained a position of leadership, her orders were often ignored. In order to garner respect for her leadership role, Lewis had to act the part of the “‘macho’” male. For example, in some instances, Lewis challenged the men in the party to target shooting competitions. Assata Shakur, another Party member, reinforced this idea, using shocking, aggressive and foul language as a necessary means of garnering respect and attention from male comrades who would otherwise overlook her as a leader.²⁰ The sexism of the party was clear. According to Elaine Brown, who would later become chairman of the party in 1974, “[a] woman in the [...] movement was considered, at best, irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah. A woman attempting the role of leadership was, to my proud black Brothers, making an alliance with the ‘counter-revolutionary, man-hating, lesbian, feminist white bitches’”.²¹ To be respected at all, women had to present themselves in a ‘manly’ way. This further reinforced women’s subordination in the Party because they were not being respected for who they were as women, but rather for the masculine façade they were often forced to wear. It was also clear that, especially during the Party’s early years, founders had no clear plan for integrating women into the Party’s leadership.

In addition to struggles with male leaders and members, BPP women also endured acts of physical violence. In the early to mid 1970s when the Party began to face mounting federal suppression and internal challenges, Huey Newton and other BPP leaders began to deviate from the original goals of the Party, and in many instances, turned to drugs and alcohol to cope with the dire situation. Newton, in particular, became increasingly violent towards women in the Party. He, and other men in the Party, also treated women as sexual objects. Even after declaring that women were the “‘other half’” of men and should thus be treated equally, the men of the party still expected the women to satisfy their sexual advances.²² If the men continued to think of and treat the women as objects of pleasure, clearly in their minds they were not on equal ground, no matter how much they attempted to express this in writing. Bobby Seale attempted to defend the Party’s image, arguing that the Party had created rules such as “‘Do not take liberties with women’” and had punished members for acts of violence against women.²³ This appeared to be a feeble attempt to save face, however. As historian Robyn Spencer points out, male

¹⁷ Spencer, 93.

¹⁸ Philip Sheldon Foner. *The Black Panthers Speak*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970: 99.

¹⁹ Josephs, 417.

²⁰ Josephs, 413-22.

²¹ Elaine Brown. *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*. New York: Pantheon, 1992: 357.

²² Josephs, 425.

²³ Spencer, 103.

leaders were not expected to follow these rules in their intimate relationships, and ultimately, were not held acceptable by Party leaders.²⁴ Women without Panther affiliation had even less say when it came to challenging assault they experienced behind closed doors. Before his apparent change of heart, Eldridge Cleaver even spoke of his overtly vulgar titled theory of using a woman and her body as a reward for political success.²⁵ Thus, the Party leaders' attempt to advocate gender equality and respect for women, appeared to be a half-hearted attempt to sweep the issue under the rug.

In the early 1970s, the Black Panther Party was a shadow of what it was at the outset. By the mid-1970s, it ceased to exist.²⁶ From a broader scope, it can be argued that the relentless onslaught of trouble and violence from law enforcement and the federal government agencies doomed the Black Panthers from the beginning. However, one can also argue that the presence of women in the Party was unintentionally disruptive and ultimately catastrophic to the survival of the organization. This fact showed itself from the advent of female interest in the group. As soon as women joined the BPP, they began to push for better positions. This in turn led to more influential women who, looking out for their best interests, began to bend the Party goals towards betterment and equality for all. Just like the community service efforts strayed from the original, basic goals of the Party, the rise of women directly conflicted with the party's masculinist ideology in an unalterable way. The very fundamental basis of the BPP was the betterment of males and the reaffirmation of the masculinity and power of the Black man. Women having an equal role or even a superior position with control over men in the rank-and-file positions undermined the Party's philosophy. Many of the men realized this immediately and spoke out. According to Elaine Brown, "It was a violation of some Black Power principle that was left undefined. 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. She was an enemy of the black people".²⁷ The debate over gender equality was constantly published in the Black Panther newspaper, putting the internal struggles of the group in the public eye each week.²⁸ The organization was toppling from within. It was clear that the gender issues were distracting the party from any concrete objective. A significant portion of energy was spent simply fighting with each other, making it even easier for the federal government and law enforcement agencies to make successful attacks on the party. The CIA and FBI even inserted secret informants into the party to undermine them further. These spies would start rumors among the leaders that led to internal distrust and acts of violence. In this atmosphere of internal conflict, it was impossible for women to be fully effective.

Ultimately, women appeared to make steady gains within the hierarchy of the BPP and certainly made significant contributions to the black community through food and clothing drives and educational programs for Black youth. However, even as women took the places at the forefront of the party, which were left vacant by male members who were dead or incarcerated, women in the BPP were never able to gain full equality with their male counterparts. Though women spoke widely of their increased status and some male leaders made statements of level ground, this verbal evidence was outweighed by the undeniably chauvinist actions of men. While support from women kept the party above water for a short time, in the end issues of gender added to the turmoil and discord within the party. The issue was a disruption and a distraction from the party's goals that eventually led to the collapse of the Black Panthers.

²⁴ Spencer, 104.

²⁵ Spencer, 104.

²⁶ Scholars Charles E. Jones and Akinyele Omowale Umoja argue that the Oakland branch of the Black Panther Party continued to exist until 1982 and that certain radical branches of the party actually reformed and continued to function through the Black Liberation Army for the same duration.

²⁷ Brown, 357.

²⁸ Lumsden, 901.

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