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Recommended Citation

Sudbury, Julia, "Hidden struggles: Black women's activism and black masculinity" (1998). *University Administration Faculty Publications*. 4.
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Hidden struggles

Black women's activism and black masculinity

Julia Sudbury

Julia Sudbury looks at the complexity and the differences between the lives of black women and those of black men.

As we celebrate the long hard struggle represented by the fiftieth anniversary of the landing of the *Empire Windrush*, another less feted anniversary is about to pass by unnoticed. Twenty years ago, black women from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia launched OWAAD, the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent. OWAAD was conceived of as an umbrella organisation which would bring together black women as individuals and community activists from all over the United Kingdom, to campaign against injustices facing the black community at large, as well as issues facing black women in particular. Black women who participated in OWAAD, as well as in the black women's organisations which sprung up in every location with a substantial black population, from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s, began to develop understandings of the ways in which black women's experiences of racism were distinct from those of black men. When they looked at racist immigration legislation and practice, they also highlighted the ways in which those practices discriminated in specific ways against women - as in the 'virginity tests' which many women from the Indian subcontinent were subjected to at Heathrow airport. When they looked at racism in the National Health Service, they also identified the widespread practice of prescribing Depo Provera, a long-term contraceptive with damaging side effects, to black women, and pointed to the racist construction of black women's sexuality as a key component in their

oppression. In other words, black women activists began to identify the ways in which 'race' is also, always, gendered.

Black women's attempts to understand these complex intersections of race, class and gender sometimes resulted in overly simplified cumulative approaches which viewed black women as triply oppressed and therefore 'worse off than both black men and white women. Adding sexism to racism and class exploitation seemed to offer an explanation for black women's location at the bottom of the socio-economic pile. However, it also led to a rigid political perspective in which black men and women, straight and lesbian, were ranked in a hierarchy of oppressions which left little room for an analysis of situations which did not fit this theoretical framework. For example, it failed to look at the ways in which black young people, both men and women, were stigmatised and excluded. At its best, however, black women engaged in grassroots theorising produced more nuanced understandings, which looked at the ways in which race, class and gender were articulated to form complex and fluid outcomes. Without losing sight of the brutal forms which racialised sexism could take in black women's lives, from sterilisation to violent attacks in the home, black women theorised the intersection of systems of dominance in ways which left open the possibility that black women would not always, everywhere, be found at the bottom. Rather than the winner/loser perspective of the hierarchy of oppression approach, this new approach challenged us to ask more complex questions and to seek more nuanced answers.

The need for more complex questions is perhaps exemplified by recent newspaper headlines which proclaimed that even as we celebrate the bitter-sweet memory of those men lining the decks of the *Windrush*, 'Black women have overtaken ... black men in the pay stakes'. Based on recent research by the Employment Policy Institute, which found that African Caribbean women earned more per hour on average than both black men and white women, these headlines simply brought to mainstream attention folk-knowledge which has circulated within the African Caribbean communities for over five years. African Caribbean women, the argument goes, are leaving their men behind. Concentrating on individual educational and professional advancement rather than the 'manly' pursuits of rebellion, resistance and community defence, black women are embraced by a society scared of those 'angry' black men, yet fearful also of appearing racist.

Soundings

I think we're in danger of leaving everybody behind that is not compromising. Which is why I think so many black women are leaving their men behind. I never thought as a dyke I'd be worried about this. But I am seriously, genuinely worried about what is happening to black men in this country ... I think what's happening is that straight black women are ... making it, you can see them, they're the first ones as Assistant Director in the voluntary sector.

Perusal of the black press reveals numerous allusions to the assumption that African Caribbean women are doing better than 'our men' (*The Voice* 23.4.96, 5.3.96, 26.3.96). This supposed differential is attributed to the idea that while black men are a threat to white men and women, black women are more acceptable.

Black women's advancement is never seen as beneficial to the black community as a whole. Conservative councillor Lola Ayonride states:

EOPs have helped black or African women to get highly paid jobs... But in the process, our men have lost out'... 'There has been enough talk about the African woman, now let us deal with the African man. They are threatened with extinction. A successful black woman without a successful black man has nothing to be proud of.¹

The argument that black men are under attack is given further support by evidence of police brutality, imprisonment, massive unemployment and the proliferation of guns and drugs, all of which suggest that African Caribbean men in Britain are sliding down the slope of American style 'ghetto' deprivation.²

The argument that black men suffer more in a system of racialised oppression is of course not a new one. It was a feature of black nationalist ideologies of the 1960s, and led to the alienation of many black women from organisations such as RAAS, and Black Power groups in Britain, as well as the Black Panthers and SNCC in the US. Black women who formed the first autonomous organisations in the late 1970s and early 1980s faced hostility from many black men, who

1. Cited in Z. Yeebo, 'Now is the time to save the African Man from extinction', in *The African* 1, African Development Communications Network, London 1995, p29.

2. See Z. Yeebo, as in note 1.

believed that by calling attention to sexism and violence within black communities they were colluding with the racist stigmatisation of black men, and distracting attention from the 'real' issues such as police brutality, economic exclusion and political marginalisation.

Images of black female betrayal and black male emasculation draw on a long history of racialised relations in the Black Atlantic. They build on collective memories of slavery and the belief that women's position was ameliorated by their ability to manipulate the master enslaver's sexual attention in order to win better treatment. They also draw on popular representations of the female 'house slave' who was able to wear fancy 'hand-me-downs' and eat left-over food from the master's table, while the enslaved men worked in the fields and plotted revenge and flight-

There is a strongly held opinion that... black women have always been sexually liberated. This argument has its foundations in slavery and is based on the so-called 'easy' life of those black women who were forced to 'service' their white masters sexually. Their condition has historically been projected as being closer to that of white women than black men³

Such depictions were steeped in sexism and have since been countered by more accurate representations of the sexual coercion and rape to which enslaved women were subject, the involvement of the vast majority in gruelling work in the fields and the role of maroon and enslaved women in resistance to the enslavers in America and the Caribbean.⁴

The idea that enslaved African women were given favours by the master enslavers finds its parallel in the notion that women of African descent are progressing because white males allow them to. In this sense, African

3. Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Black Feminism', in H. Kanter, S. Lefanu, S. Shah, C. Shedding (eds) in *Sweeping Statements: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement 1981-83*, Women's Press, London 1984, p251.
4. See A. Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, The Women's Press, London 1981; B. Bush, 'Defiance or Submission? The Role of the Slave Woman in Slave resistance in the British Caribbean', in D.C. Hine, W. King and L. Reed (eds) 'We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible': *A Reader in Black Women's History*, Carlton Publishing, New York 1995.

Soundings

Caribbean women are seen as 'selling out' the black community. 'Selling out' does not necessarily involve taking political positions which actively undermine black community interests. Simply by exceeding the economic and educational achievements of their menfolk, African Caribbean women are seen as contributing to the former's emasculation and thus to white domination. While economic power in the hands of men is seen as empowering the community, such power in the hands of African Caribbean women is seen as a threat to African Caribbean masculinity and therefore to community cohesion. To a large extent this rhetoric draws on black nationalist discourse from the United States.⁵

The implications of such beliefs are clear. Black women who attain professional positions or reasonably paid employment are chastised for 'emasculating' their menfolk or being disloyal to 'the community'; while those who remain in low paid exploitative work, or fail to find stable employment, simply become invisible. The implication for political activism by black women is also clear. Black women's autonomous activism begins to lose its legitimacy. Black women are expected to focus their attention not on the problems of racism, brutality and poverty facing black women, but on the exclusion, criminalisation and violence enacted against black boys and men.

In this context data such as that published by the Employment Policy Institute, and the headlines it produces, enter a discursive sphere overlain with ideas of betrayal and collusion, privilege and 'emasculating'. Folk beliefs about gender relations in African Caribbean communities prevent an adequate interrogation of the new findings. Thus suggestions that the survey overlooked other factors affecting the statistics on black women's wage rates were given little attention, in either black or mainstream presses. But there have been interrogations of the findings: for instance the survey overlooked geographical disparities such as the predominance of black women in urban areas like London, where wages are higher; it also ignored the higher rates of female activity in informal sectors such as homeworking, which fail to show up in surveys.

African Caribbean women enter a labour market which is gendered as

5. See, for example, N. Hare and J. Hare *The Endangered Black Family: Coping with the Unisexualization and Coming Extinction of the Black Race*, Black Think Tank, San Francisco 1984.

well as racialised. They are concentrated in 'women's jobs' - low and intermediary level jobs within the service and public sectors' such as clerical work, nursing, cleaning and childcare.⁶ When unemployment data from the 1991 census on African and Caribbean communities are disaggregated, other patterns begin to appear. Not only do African men and women experience higher unemployment rates than Caribbean men and women (27.0 to 18.9 per cent), but African women actually experience slightly higher unemployment rates than Caribbean men (24.7 to 23.8 per cent). Even the relatively superior employment prospects of Caribbean women must be put in context of an unemployment rate of over double that of white women (13.5 to 6.3 per cent).⁷ And in the light of the increased burdens of childcare and household costs which fall on those African Caribbean women who have no financial contribution from a male partner, it is also likely that the relative advantage for Caribbean women in escaping unemployment will be undermined by problems of stress, overwork and exhaustion. Furthermore, their concentration in low status professions such as nursing, and in 'race' specific jobs, such as Section 11 posts in the welfare and education sectors, further undermines this apparent mobility, and increases black women's vulnerability to government cuts, and changes in policy such as moves away from 'race specific' funding initiatives.

While the Employment Policy Institute findings do little to elucidate the continuing problems facing black women, they have served to bring to the surface a simmering debate about black male-female parity. While black women have long struggled for racial equality between blacks and whites, as well as gender equality between black men and women, anti-racist activists have frequently succumbed to gender-blind race thinking in which demands are made for racial parity even as gender inequality is normalised. Data which suggests that black women may begin to exceed black male progress in some areas shakes expectations that removing racism will enable black men to take their 'rightful' place at the head of the household. As more black women progress into professional and managerial positions, black men will need to

6. See R. Bhavnani, *Black women and the Labour Market: A Research Review*, Equal Opportunities Commission, Manchester 1994.

7. D. Owen, *Ethnic Minority Women and the Labour Market: Analysis of the 1991 Census*, Equal Opportunities Commission, Manchester 1994.

Soundings

interrogate their visions for an anti-racist future, and question whether that future is necessarily one in which equality for black males is achieved through the reinscription of unequal gender relations.

Rethinking anti-racist activism

What hope then is there for meaningful coalitions between black women and black men around a holistic agenda for social change? My own work suggests that there are four areas where the potential for coalition building is present, or where such coalitions are beginning to emerge, often in embryonic form.⁸

The first area is the emergence of a number of progressive initiatives focusing on black men in London, Birmingham and Manchester. There are organisations which aim to re-think black masculinity, to question 'macho' behaviour, and to counter violence against black women and children. In London the Black Male Forum hosts debates on gender relations within the African Caribbean community. The Black Fathers Project explores the ways in which parenting by African, Asian and Caribbean men is affected by racism, sexism and the pressure to conform to traditional family roles. In Manchester, Kemetic Educational Guidance organises study sessions for African Caribbean men in prison, with an emphasis on analysing the roots of abusive behaviour, and embracing African centred' values such as respect for women. In Birmingham, the Rites of Passage programme creates a learning environment for male teenagers to prevent destructive behaviour and challenge sexist notions of African Caribbean women as 'baby mothers'.

While the male leadership of these organisations is nothing new, these initiatives are unique in their overt focus on black masculinity, their acknowledgement of the specificity of black male experience and their willingness to acknowledge destructive patterns of behaviour by black men. This indicates two significant changes in the approach to community activism by black men. Firstly, there is an acknowledgement for the first time that black men's experience is not 'The Black Experience', and that autonomous and focused organisation by both black men and women is valid. Rather than viewing black women's autonomy as 'splitting the community', these organisations embrace the notion

8. J. Sudbury *'Other Kinds of Dreams': Black Women Organising*, Routledge, London 1998.

of organising on the basis of gendered experiences of racism and community. Secondly, these approaches differ dramatically from the insistence by many black male leaders on not 'airing dirty linen':

I have been told many times by elders who should know better, that there are certain things about the Black communities which we must conceal, that must not be talked about, because to reveal them would be to fuel the fires of racism and state oppression. We must close ranks at whatever cost.⁹

This closure has meant keeping a veil of silence over sexism and abuse within black communities. For the first time, it is black men who are exploring problems within black communities, and the impact of racism in reinforcing these problems. In overturning two stalwarts of opposition to black women's autonomy, these organisations appear to pave the way for effective partnership with black women activists.

A second arena of successful coalitions between black men and women has been the development of black voluntary sector umbrella organisations. At the local level, umbrella groups such as the Black Community Forum in Sheffield, the Ethnic Community Forum in Cambridge, Bath Network of Black Organisations and Bristol Black Voluntary Sector Development Unit have been established throughout the 1980s and 1990s. These forums have active involvement from black women's organisations. Several women whom I interviewed stated that their political concerns at the local level were channelled through these bodies, as they were less easily singled out for punitive action by local authorities. Support was also received when funding was cut or threatened.

The introduction of 'partnership' funding, involving group bids from statutory, voluntary and private sectors, is gradually changing the face of voluntary sector funding. It is clear that if black women's organisations are to receive any funds from such initiatives, they will be forced to form coalitions with other black organisations. Attempting to negotiate as an individual organisation, when large corporations are sitting at the table with

9. H. Bains, 'Southall Youth: an Old Fashioned story', in R Cohen and H. Bains (eds) *Multi-racist Britain*, Macmillan Press, Basingstoke and London 1988, p226.

Soundings

their eye on million pound 'flagship' schemes, will clearly be inadequate. Thus building effective coalitions at the local level can have financial as well as political benefits.

Thirdly, black women's organisations which work on issues of violence against women may find potential allies in burgeoning projects concerned with racist violence. There are numerous connections between violence against women, state repression and racist hostility. The fear of racist attack is an additional burden on women considering escape from abusive households; and the high visibility of a house full of black women also lays refuges in primarily white areas open to further violence. Police collusion in cases of domestic violence is mirrored by their frequent failure to acknowledge racist harassment: their unwillingness *to prosecute offenders is common to both events*. In addition, the failure of the courts to bring about justice in many cases of domestic violence is matched by a paucity of successful prosecutions against perpetrators of racist murders.¹⁰

Black men and women working together in a primarily Bengali community in East London have created CAPA, a multi-racial organisation which tackles both sexist violence against women and racist violence against men, women and children. The organisation's philosophy, that violence is indivisible and that no elements of violence against black communities can be left unchallenged, is the foundation for solid work with black women's organisations. CAPA is not the only anti-violence project to have developed a commitment to tackling sexism; the Coventry Anti-racial Harassment and Attacks Network, which ceased to function in 1992 due to lack of funds, nevertheless developed strong links with local Asian and African Caribbean women's organisations. Similar projects in Liverpool, Newcastle, Birmingham and other parts of London should provide an opportunity for black women's organisations in these localities to create joint campaigns against all forms of violence.

A final area of potential solidarity is black gay activism. While the nascent 'black men's movement' has not yet developed a rigorous critique of heterosexism and homophobia, black gay men have long been engaged in critical thinking on gender roles. Black gay and lesbian autonomous struggles have been

10. A. Mama, *The Hidden Struggle*, London Race and Housing Research Unit, London 1989.

characterised by strong alliances between gays and lesbians within mixed organisations as well as between single gender organisations. As such, these organisations are a model for black men and women working in partnership around a progressive agenda, building on commonalities in the face of different gendered experiences. The effective political alliances which black gays and lesbians have forged indicate that there is an opportunity *for* collective action on issues such as re-defining black masculinity, making links between patriarchal and homophobic violence, health and HIV. Ultimately, black women's organisations that wish to forge such links will need to challenge their own attitudes and to make theoretical links between homophobia, gendered racism and economic exploitation.

As we look *to* the past for pointers which will take us into the next century, we need to turn away from romantic visions of a homogeneous black community. Black women's activism, with its refusal to remain silent about awkward 'family secrets', threatens the romanticised picture of the road from Windrush which dominates the BBC version of black British history. It pushes us to ask difficult questions about inequalities and fractures within the black community, and challenges us to look to the margins of the black experience, to those histories which are less vocally celebrated. Viewing the years since Windrush through a womanist lens, we make visible the significant battles which black women have had to wage against silencing, exclusion and sexism within black communities. Even as we acknowledge the impact of this exclusion, we also need to avoid creating a hierarchy of oppression in which black men are always seen as dominant. The complex articulations of racism, class, sexuality and gender prevent us from making such simplistic calculations. The Employment Policy Institute survey is just one reminder of those complexities. Nor can we assume that black male politics will take a monolithic form. Instead, we need to seek out those instances where black men are engaged in building anti-sexist and progressive organisations. Black women have much to gain in seeking coalitions with such organisations; black men in turn have much to learn from the grassroots theorising which informed the resistance struggles of OWAAD, and which continues today in the black women's autonomous organisations which are OWAAD's legacy.