

Double Jeopardy: TO BE BLACK AND FEMALE

By Frances M. Beal

MUCH HAS been written recently about the white women's liberation movement in the United States and the question arises whether there are any parallels between this struggle and the movement on the part of black women for total emancipation. While certain comparisons can be made, simply because we both live under the same exploitative system, there are certain differences, some of which are quite basic.

The white women's movement is far from being monolithic. Any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the black women's struggle. In fact, some groups come to the incorrect conclusion that their oppression is due simply to male chauvinism, and therefore there is an extremely anti-male tone to their dissertations. Black people are engaged in a life-and-death struggle and the main emphasis of black women must be to combat the exploitation of all black people. While it is true that male chauvinism has become institutionalized in American society, one must always look for the main enemy, the fundamental cause of the female condition.

Another major differentiation is that the white women's liberation movement is basically middle class. Very few of these women suffer the extreme economic exploitation that most black women are subjected to day by day. This is the factor that is most crucial for us. It is not intellectual persecution alone, and it is not an emotional release for us; it is quite real. We as black women must deal with the problems that the black masses deal with, for our problems are the same.

BUT IN ATTEMPTING to analyze the situation of the black woman in America one crashes abruptly into a solid wall of grave misconceptions, outright distortions of fact and defensive attitudes on the part of many. The system of capitalism (and its afterbirth, racism) under which we all live has at-

tempted by many devious ways and means to destroy the humanity of black people.

To accomplish this, a situation was created in which the black man was unable to find meaningful or productive employment, if indeed he was able to find work of any kind. And the black woman was also manipulated, economically exploited and physically assaulted by the system. Although she was allowed to work in the white man's kitchen, the fact that she was sometimes the sole breadwinner in her family led to many psychological problems affecting both men and women and has contributed to the turmoil that we now find in the black family structure.

For a long time neither the black man nor the black woman understood the true nature of the forces working upon them. Many black women, for example, accepted the prevailing evaluation of manhood and womanhood that characterized black men as shiftless and lazy if they didn't get a job and support their families as they "ought" to. Personal relationships between black men and women were thus torn asunder, and one result has been the separation of husband from wife, parent from child, man from woman.

America has defined manhood in terms of a good job, a good salary and plenty of expensive material possessions. Anyone who doesn't meet these "standards" is considered less than a man. The advertising media continuously inform the American male of his need for indispensable signs of his virility — the brand of cigarettes that cowboys prefer, the whiskey that has a masculine tang, the jockstrap that athletes wear. America has also defined womanhood. The ideal for a woman is to be surrounded by hypocritical homage, to be estranged from all real work, to spend idle hours primping and preening, to be obsessed with conspicuous consumption and to limit her functions to a sex role.

The Black Women's Liberation Committee unconditionally rejects these re-



spective models. A woman who stays at home caring for her children and house has an extremely limited life. She exists only as a satellite to her mate. He goes out into society and brings back a little piece of the world to her, and his interests and his understanding of the world become her own. She is unable to develop as an individual because she has been reduced to fulfilling only a biological function.

Furthermore, it is idle dreaming to think of black women simply caring for their homes and children like the middle-class white model. Most black women *have* to work to help feed, house and clothe their families. Black

women make up a substantial percentage of the black working force, and this is true for the poorest black family as well as the so-called middle-class family.

Black women have never been able to afford phony middle-class luxuries. Though we have been browbeaten with the white middle-class image of womanhood, the reality of the degrading and dehumanizing jobs we were forced to take quickly dissipated any dreams of achieving this mirage.

UNFORTUNATELY, there seems to be some confusion in the movement today as to who has been oppressing whom. Since the advent of black power, the black male has exerted a more prominent leadership role in our struggle for justice in this country. He sees the system for what it really is for the most part and rejects many of its values and mores, but when it comes to women, he seems to take his guidelines from the pages of the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Certain black men maintain that they have been castrated by a white society but that black women somehow not only escaped persecution but even contributed to their emasculation.

The black woman in America can justly be described as a "slave of a slave." When the black man in America was subjected to such abject oppression, the black woman was left with no protector and was used—and is still being used, in some cases—as the scapegoat for the evils that this horrendous system has perpetrated on black men.

It is true that our husbands, fathers, brothers and sons have been emasculated, lynched and brutalized. They have suffered from the cruelest assault on mankind that the world has ever known. However, it is a gross distortion of fact to state that black women have oppressed black men. The system found it expedient to enslave and oppress them and did so without consulting or signing any agreements with black women.

At the same time, black women were not only reduced to a state of enslavement, but they often served as a scapegoat for the evils of this system in much the same way that the poor white cracker in the South, who is equally victimized, looks down upon blacks and contributes to their oppression. Through giving men a false feeling of masculine superiority, the op-

pression of women is used as an escape valve for capitalism. Men may be cruelly exploited and subjected to all sorts of dehumanizing tactics but they still have someone who is below them—women.

WOMEN ALSO present a surplus labor supply, the control of which is absolutely necessary to the profitable functioning of capitalism. They are systematically exploited by being paid less for doing the same work that men do or by being relegated to low-paying jobs where there is no possibility of advancement.

Industries employing mainly black women are the most exploitative in the country. Domestic and hospital workers are prime objects of this oppression, as are the garment workers in New York City. The leadership of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, whose predominantly female membership is overwhelmingly black and Puerto Rican, is nearly all white and male, and it has completely sold its soul to the corporate structure. To add insult to injury, not only does this bought-off leadership contribute to our continued exploitation in this country by not truly representing the best interests of its membership, but it has invested heavily in business enterprises in racist, apartheid South Africa—with union funds.

The entire labor movement in the United States has suffered as a result of the superexploitation of black workers and women. The unions have historically been racist and chauvinistic. They have upheld racism in this country, have not fought the white-skin privileges of white workers, and have not even made an issue of the inequities in the hiring and pay of women workers.

I have briefly discussed the economic and psychological manipulation of black women, but perhaps the most outlandish act of oppression in modern times is the current campaign to promote sterilization of nonwhite women in an attempt to maintain the population and power imbalance between the white haves and the nonwhite have-nots.

It has recently come to our attention that a massive campaign for so-called birth control is presently being promoted not only in the underdeveloped nonwhite areas of the world, but also in black communities here in the United States. However, what the au-

thorities in charge of these programs refer to as birth control is in fact nothing but a method of outright genocide.

The United States has been supporting sterilization clinics sponsored by the governments of various nonwhite countries, especially in India, where already some three million young men and boys in and around New Delhi have received vasectomies, an operation that takes only six or seven minutes and is relatively simple. The sterilization of a woman involves a major operation, a salpingectomy,* and must be performed in a hospital under general anesthesia. This method of "birth control" is commonly practiced in Puerto Rico, which has long been used by the United States as an experimental laboratory for medical research before allowing certain practices to be used here. When the birth-control pill was first being perfected, it was tried out on Puerto Rican women and selected poor black women to evaluate its effect and efficiency. The salpingectomy has now become the most common operation in Puerto Rico, and is so widely performed that it is referred to simply as "la operacion." On the island, 20 per cent of the women between the ages of 15 and 45 have already been sterilized.

AND NOW this method is being used in the United States. Sterilization clinics are cropping up more and more around the country in black and Puerto Rican communities in the guise of "maternity clinics." A number of organizations have been formed to popularize the idea of sterilization, including the Association for Voluntary Sterilization and the Human Betterment Association for Voluntary Sterilization, Inc., which has its headquarters in New York City. Front Royal, Virginia, has such a maternity clinic in Warren Memorial Hospital and the tactics used to pressure poor, helpless black mothers and young girls into undergoing sterilization are certainly not confined to that clinic alone.

* The surgeon makes an abdominal incision, cuts both Fallopian tubes and ties off the separated ends, thus preventing the egg from passing from the ovaries to the womb.



is the poor black and Puerto Rican women who are at the mercy of local butchers. Statistics show us that the nonwhite death rate at the hands of unqualified abortionists is substantially higher than for white women. Nearly half of the child-bearing deaths in New York City are attributed to abortion alone, and out of these 79 per cent are among nonwhite and Puerto Rican women.

We are not saying that black women should not practice birth control. Black women have the right and responsibility to determine when it is in their best personal interest and in the interest of the struggle to have children or not to have them, and this right must not be relinquished to anyone.

THE NEW WORLD we are attempting to create must destroy every kind of oppression. The value of this new system will be determined by the status of the person who was low man on the totem pole. If the black woman has to retreat to the position she occupied before the struggle, the whole movement and the whole struggle will have retreated in terms of truly freeing the colonized population.

Black liberation means changing the traditional routines that we have established as a result of living in a totally corrupting society. It means changing how we relate to our wives, husbands, parents, children and co-workers. If we are going to liberate ourselves as a people, we must recognize that black women have very specific problems that have to be spoken to. Black women must be liberated along with the rest of the population. We cannot wait to start working on these problems until that great day in the future when the revolution somehow, miraculously, is accomplished.

Black women are not resentful of the black man's rise to power. We welcome it. We see in it the eventual liberation of all black people. Nevertheless, we do not believe that in order for the black man to be strong the black woman has to be weak. Those who are asserting their "manhood" by telling black women to step back into a domestic, submissive role are assuming a counterrevolutionary position. Black women have also been abused by the system, and we must all be concerned about eliminating all kinds of oppression. If we want to build a strong nation and remove the bonds of oppres-



sion, then we must have the total involvement of every man, woman and child.

We live in a highly industrialized society and every member of the black nation must be as academically and technologically developed as possible. To wage a revolution, we need competent teachers, doctors, nurses, electronics experts, chemists, biologists, physicists, political scientists. Black women who limit themselves to sitting at home reading bedtime stories to their children are just not going to make it. We need our whole army out there dealing with the enemy, not half an army.

All the resources that the black community can muster up must be channeled into the struggle. Black women must take an active part in bringing about the kind of society where our children, our loved ones and each citizen can grow up and live as decent human beings, free from the pressures of racism and exploitation. ☉

DISTRIBUTED BY:

REDSTOCKINGS
P.O. Box 744
Stuyvesant Station
New York City
10009

+
Gainesville Women's
Liberation

PO Box 2625
Gainesville, FL 32600