

The Post-WWII
U.S. Womens Liberation Movement
In Black & White

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“All Matter Moves...”

"Irrespective of race, color, or sex" all beings were created and deserving of equality. (Emma Goldman)

The United States of the 1950's was repressive for women of every racial complexion and ethnic variety. The domination by men up to and during the period demanded the contemporary women's liberation movement of the 1960's and 70's. Women from every walk of life were involved in and responsible for the changes that resulted from the movement. Notably, however, there were differences between the approaches to women's liberation taken by the African American feminist and middle-class white women feminist. The differences in approaches were founded in historical racial oppression and the reality of exclusion. White middle-class feminist fought mostly for social equality via equitable employment opportunities and compensation. To the contrary, African American feminist focused on overturning the limiting structure of racism. The structure was an additional burden to be overcome in an effort for African American women to achieve liberation. The varying approaches, when exclusive, were disunifying and digressive to the women's liberation effort.

Many different women were oppressed in the United States. The reality of racial conflict during the women's liberation movement made it easy for people to lose track of the fact that women's liberation organizations had a similar goal in mind. Whether in practice or statement, the women's liberation movement of the 1960's and 70's was inherently about women overcoming achieving social, political and economic equality.

Middle-class White women feminist in the Fifties...

The post WWII structure treated white women and African American women in different ways. Oppression based on gender, however, was real regardless of race and ethnicity.

From the middle-class white suffragist/liberationist perspective,

By the post-World War II era, such strong feminist voices were dwindling in number and volume; the momentum of the feminist movement that won suffrage and expanded women's rights in the early 20th century had waned. A negative media blitz proclaimed the death of feminism and celebrated the happy, suburban housewife.¹

Women's liberationist Betty Freidan credibly expressed the oppression of the fifties, as felt by middle class white women. Freidan shared the dilemma's facing white women in her text The Feminine Mystique. In her book, Freidan painted the women's liberation movement as the retaliation to an oppressive and repressive post WWII structure. Freidan, who became one of the main voices of the middle-class white women's liberation movement, explains the dilemma faced by many white middle-class women, would be activist, of the fifties.

It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slip cover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured cub scouts and brownies, laid beside her husband at night- she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question- "is this all?"²

The questioning of the gender structure led women to organize against its imposed mental/emotional dilemma. A prominent women's organization that worked to solve the "problem that has no name" was formed following the "The Third National Conference of Commissions on the Status of Women" in 1966. The organization was

¹ The National Organization for Women Webpage. <http://www.now.org/>. Date Accessed: 4/18/2007 7:59 PM

² Freidan, Betty. The Feminine Mystique. W-W Norton & Company. New York. 1963. pg. ADD

pioneered by Betty Freidan and Dr. Pauli Murray—a law professor at Yale and a member of the President's Commission on the Status of Women— and titled N.O.W. (National Organization for Women).

Freidan exposed that the post WWII structure repressed middle-class white women into the roles of “House Wife”. In the socio-industrial arrangement, men whom were privy to a housewife, expected women to complete demeaning and uncompensated labor. The structure of “housewifery” has been discussed in detail by Freidan, other feminist and academia’s. One prominent feminist was a London Women’s liberationist named Anne Oakley. Oakley is a graduate of Oxford and London University. She is a member of the London’s Women’s Liberation Workshop, and is often published in women’s scholarly magazines. In the preface of her text Women’s Work, Oakley explains the interconnectedness between the rise of post WWII capitalist industrialism and the establishment of repressive women’s roles. Oakley then points out the valid similarities between the American and British approach to development.

The housewife role is the shared experience of most women in modern industrialized societies...In particular there appear essential parallels between the British situation and the situation in the United States. The role of housewife is feminine in both countries, and the context of the housewife’s work- the patterning of marriage and family relationships is broadly the same. The privatization of the family, and the home with the housewife in it, is a shared ideal: so is the feminine ideal of fulfillment in marriage, motherhood and housewifery.³

The principles that create the gender structure in America and England are nearly identical. The structures are built to allow the men to impose the status of housewife onto women. The structure kept women alone at home, completing many hours of

³ Oakley, Ann. Woman’s Work. Pantheon Books. New York. 1974. Preface: x.

tedious house labor. After exposing the British and American structure that demands women's repression, Oakley defined the work of the housewife. She asserted that,

Housework differs from most other work in three significant ways: it is private, it is self-defined and its outlines are blurred by its integration in a whole complex of domestic, family-based roles which define the situation of women as well as the situation of the housewife. Housework is an activity performed by housewives within their own homes. The home is the workplace, and its boundaries are also the boundaries of family life.⁴

The labor involved in housewifery was time consuming, uncompensated and completed in solitude. Oakley thesis was that the imposed orient of women's work (House work) was a degrading and uninvited socio-industrial construction, yet, in its place, it is at least as difficult and necessary as any other form of work. To support her thesis⁵, Oakley compiled statistics that spoke to the "Average Weekly Hours of Housework" a woman had to complete. The chart showed that in 1956 rural United States a woman spent 67 hours a week completing housework. In an urban United States setting in 1945, women spent an average of 78-81 hours per week completing housework.

In addition to long uncompensated hours, the unsocial and tedious work was to be completed with a smile. The smile was expected to convince the dominating male structure that, "I am happy to embrace the American gender roles that limit and define women as housewives. Furthermore, I welcome the male imposition of restraints that lead to missed opportunities, experiences and lost independence."⁶

⁴ Oakley, Ann. Woman's Work. Pantheon Books. New York. 1974. pg.7

⁵ That a women's work (House Work) is a degrading and uninvited socio-industrial construction, yet, in its place, it is at least as difficult and necessary as any other form of work.

⁶ Author's Personal Narrative

N.O.W. is the time...

In the early 1960's white women organized to overcome repression. White women fought repression by advocating for the women's right to leave the home and enter the workforce. Freidan was among the women who organized to advocate equality in the workplace. The goals of Freidan and her co-organizers (N.O.W.) were to utilize Democracy to gain legal remediation for the impositions caused by established gender roles. The remediation was their ability to have unadulterated and unlimited access to an alternative work arrangement, which, in an industrial dependent nation, could uplift, make wealthier and empower women.⁷

In the organizations 1966 "Statement of Purpose" the organization defined their goals for combating the gender structure. The statement purposes that,

"The purpose of NOW is to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men."⁸

The National Organization for Women (N.O.W.) was founded on principles that called for equality for women with men. The organization espoused the animosity of former suffragist Miss. H. Griswold. Miss. H. Griswold had expressed her feelings in a letter to suffragist Susan B. Anthony 150 years earlier, "Words fail to convey the bitter hatred I have for the foul demagogues who would take from me the freedom they claim for themselves."(Griswold)

⁷ Rymph E. Catherine. Republican Women. UNC Press. 2006. pg. 188.

⁸ Freidan, Betty. "The National Organization for Women's 1966 Statement of Purpose". Adopted at NOW's first National Conference in Washington, D.C.- October 29, 1966-.

Initially and actively, N.O.W. challenged the contemporary demagogues' dispersal policies by supporting the empowerment of women through equal access to upward social mobility.

The gaps in privilege between the genders could prospectively have been decreased as a result of legal mandate which demanded allotment to the contrary. Therefore, with the intentions of achieving "total" gender equality, through mainly utilizing access to equal employment (literally and in the form of national childcare reform) and equal monetary compensation, hiring and advancement opportunity for all, N.O.W. was conceived.

The N.O.W. statement of purpose proclaims,

We believe the time has come to move beyond the abstract argument, discussion and symposia over the status and special nature of women which has raged in America in recent years; the time has come to confront, with concrete action, the conditions that now prevent women from enjoying the equality of opportunity and freedom of choice which is their right, as individual Americans, and as human beings.⁹

N.O.W. saw the passage of the "*Equal Rights Amendment*" as a crucial gain that could help women to escape the servitude status of housewife. The acquisition of equal rights would conclude a long fight that began during Miss H. Griswold's generation of suffragist. The Act was written:

Section 1: Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

Section 2: The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.

Section 3: This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.¹⁰

⁹ Freidan, Betty. "The National Organization for Women's 1966 Statement of Purpose". Adopted at NOW's first National Conference in Washington, D.C.- October 29, 1966-.

¹⁰ Equal Rights Ammenment.-The proposed 27th Ammendment to the Constitution of the United States- (1972).—*The Ammendment is still waiting for ratification--*

The NOW worked to equalize the gender structure by supporting the Equal Rights Amendment and activating in favor of women's labor rights[≈]. In 1966 N.O.W. petitioned the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) requesting public hearings about its gender specific advertising and ongoing sexual harassment in the workplace. In the spring of 1967 the EEOC decided to hold hearings in response to N.O.W.'s petitioning. The hearings provided no results. In response N.O.W. demonstrated at EEOC facilities across the nation protesting the empty effort made by the EEOC to end sex-segregated "Help Wanted" advertisement. After seven months of protest the popular newspapers ran de-sexigrated "Help Wanted" ads.

The idea was that equal employment and social access would ease the burden of housewife responsibilities, by accommodating the newfound gender equality in America, through dispersing it (social responsibilities) equally among the genders. The male would either pick up the slack or remediate and create a childcare initiative.

In 1970-71 N.O.W. campaigned in favor of the "Comprehensive Childcare Act". N.O.W. lobbied the act through both sides of congress only to have it vetoed by a former president of the United States named Richard Nixon. The simplistic Nixon was quoted as having referred to the act as the "Sovietization of American children".

The logical and legal approach was unrealistic for the time, but access via childcare and equal wages among genders were pertinent to the gender specific civil rights agenda. The logic, however, did not take into account the existing structure of white supremacy that would keep too many women from receiving the same equality, access and liberation as white women.

[≈] According to the timeline presented on the National Organization for women website.- <http://www.now.org/history/timeline.html>.
Date Accessed: 3/25/2007.

Different Strokes...

The differences in approaches taken to activism between white and African American women can be feasibly accounted for by the racial structure of America. The middle-class white women (NOW) pressed for access to social equality via employment opportunities. Yet African American women had been working outside of the home, and in titheable, second-class positions and conditions, since the country's conception. Therefore, the majority of African American women had yet to overcome continual racial oppression and receive access to circumstances that created the "Problem that has no name". Historian Maureen Honey shares the circumstances that lead to the reality of African American women's need to prioritize. Honey expressed that during the post W.W.II era through the liberation movement African American women were uncompensated and minimized as workers.

Negro women who completed high school or college courses, qualifying them as teachers or for business, have been forced to rely upon Negro schools, colleges, and Agencies or limited Negro business opportunities for employment. Unable to gain entry-employment in a white industrial economy, Negro women have been employed chiefly in domestic and personal service (the closest possible work-contact with whites), and today their employers are reluctant to let them go . . . to work in war industry.¹¹

The "domestic" and "personal service" that Honey alludes to, can be feasibly compared to "housework". The minimizing of African American women based on race, into subservient "housewives" away from home, and as second-class laborers combined with the overall structures of male white supremacy, which is the African American women's antithesis, made it necessary for African American women to approach liberation as overcoming racial and gender oppression.

¹¹ Honey, Maureen(Editor). Bitter Fruit : African American Women in World War II. Columbia, MO, USA: University of Missouri Press, 1999. p 127

Furthermore, in the 50's, 60's and 70's race was a predicator in the low hiring rates and slow advancement of African American workers. In addition, the difference in income between races was also a reality in America. The reality forced African American women to struggle against gender repression and racial repression in the workplace. The United States census bureau released statistics on the income based on race and gender from the years 1955 to 2005. The first table shows the median income, based on gender, specific to African Americans. The second table shows the median income, based on gender, specific to Africans. The income charts expose the reality of income discrepancies contingent upon race and gender in the 50's, 60's, and 70's and today. From the year 1955 to 1976 white men and women received substantially higher median incomes than the African Americans of the time.

Regardless of the advances made by the passage of the 1970 "Equal Pay Act"¹² or the 1972 acceptance of the "Equal Rights Amendment", African American women (\$5,595.00) in 1973 still made \$1,000.00 less than white women (\$6,598.00). In the same year white women made \$5,202 less than their male counterparts (\$11,800.00). The discrepancies are feasibly accounted to structures of racism and gender inequity. In both cases the results are a continuum of like results beginning in 1955 and continuing to the present.

¹² EQUAL PAY ACT: The Equal Pay Act 1970 makes it unlawful for employers to discriminate between men and women in terms of their pay and conditions where they are doing the same or similar work; work rated as equivalent; or work of equal value.-- http://www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/legislation/equal_pay_act.htm

Table P 36 Full-Time, Year-Round Black Workers¹³
By Median Income and Sex: 1955 to 2005

Year	Male		Female				
	Number With	Median income income (thous.)	Number With		Median income		
			Current dollars	2005 dollars	income (thous.)	Current dollars	2005 dollars
1976 17/		2,953	10,222	30,916	2,138	7,831	23,685
1975 16/		2,770	9,848	31,494	2,036	7,392	23,639
1974 16/15/		2,852	8,883	30,760	1,913	6,677	23,121
1973		3,171	7,953	30,268	2,038	5,595	21,294
1972 14/		3,033	7,373	29,817	2,060	5,280	21,353
1971 13/		2,882	6,771	28,226	1,823	5,092	21,227
1970		2,878	6,435	28,016	1,786	4,536	19,749
1969		2,994	5,917	27,002	1,718	4,126	18,829
1968		3,000	5,370	25,573	1,759	3,561	16,958
1967		2,925	4,837	23,957	1,716	3,268	16,186
1966		(NA)	4,508	23,009	(NA)	2,934	14,976
1965		(NA)	4,272	22,408	(NA)	2,672	14,016
1964		(NA)	4,234	22,584	(NA)	2,663	14,204
1963		(NA)	4,019	21,722	(NA)	2,280	12,323
1962		(NA)	3,577	19,594	(NA)	2,186	11,975
1961		(NA)	3,692	20,421	(NA)	2,264	12,522
1960		(NA)	3,683	20,571	(NA)	2,289	12,785
1959		(NA)	3,150	17,911	(NA)	2,125	12,083
1958		(NA)	3,209	18,357	(NA)	1,877	10,737
1957		(NA)	2,983	17,558	(NA)	1,810	10,654
1956		(NA)	2,767	16,809	(NA)	1,634	9,926
1955		(NA)	2,665	16,435	(NA)	1,468	9,053

As compared to,

Table P 36 Full-Time, Year-Round White Workers
by Median Income and Sex: 1955 to 2005

Year	Male			Female			
	Number With	Median income		Number With	Median income		
		income (thous.)	Current dollars		2005 dollars	income (thous.)	Current dollars
1976 17/		34,681	14,272	43,165	15,669	8,376	25,333
1975 16/		33,960	13,233	42,319	15,126	7,737	24,743
1974 16/15/		34,559	12,399	42,936	14,751	7,235	25,054
1973		35,903	11,800	44,910	14,930	6,598	25,111
1972 14/		34,728	10,918	44,153	14,393	6,172	24,960
1971 13/		33,591	9,902	41,278	14,022	5,767	24,040
1970		32,910	9,447	41,130	13,551	5,536	24,102
1969		33,693	8,953	40,856	13,541	5,182	23,648
1968		33,737	8,047	38,321	13,165	4,685	22,311
1967		33,389	7,505	37,172	13,035	4,307	21,332
1966		(NA)	7,179	36,643	(NA)	4,142	21,141
1965		(NA)	6,802	35,679	(NA)	3,935	20,641
1964		(NA)	6,457	34,441	(NA)	3,835	20,456
1963		(NA)	6,245	33,754	(NA)	3,687	19,928
1962		(NA)	5,994	32,834	(NA)	3,582	19,622
1961		(NA)	5,817	32,175	(NA)	3,429	18,966
1960		(NA)	5,572	31,122	(NA)	3,377	18,862
1959		(NA)	5,391	30,653	(NA)	3,300	18,764
1958		(NA)	5,102	29,185	(NA)	3,194	18,271
1957		(NA)	4,874	28,689	(NA)	3,096	18,223
1956		(NA)	4,628	28,114	(NA)	2,937	17,842
1955		(NA)	4,377	26,993	(NA)	2,858	17,625

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements.

African American women were not fully represented in the N.O.W.'s liberation movement because N.O.W. did not address racism as a factor that limited women's ability to gain equality. N.O.W. failed to publicly consider that the struggle for African American women had a duality that included overcoming gender and racial oppression.

N.O.W. did not make a concerted effort to support the many outer organizational African American women's liberationists¹⁴. In all the activism¹⁵ that occurred from N.O.W.'s founding in 1966, they never once officially confronted race and gender simultaneously until 1979. In 1979 NOW held the "NOW Minority Women's Committee organizes the conference "Racism and Sexism-A Shared Struggle for Equal Rights," in Washington, D.C. In addition the activist leaders of N.O.W. expressed their limited racial consciousness during the celebration for the fiftieth anniversary of the nineteenth amendment. The African American S.N.C.C. activist Frances Beal, who was present for the celebration, recalls a discomfoting experience.

"We had signs reading 'Hands Off Angela Davis' ...and one of the leaders of N.O.W. ran up to us and said angrily, 'Angela Davis has nothing to do with the women's liberation.'"

Beal responded, "It has nothing to do with the kind of liberation you're talking about...but it has everything to do with the kind of liberation we are talking about."¹⁶

The interaction paints an accurate portrayal of the misunderstanding and differences of approach to women's liberation. The pertinent agendas of both the middle-

¹⁴ To N.O.W.'s credit the organization did endorse Shirley Chisholm in the Democratic primary of 1972. Chisholm was the first African American woman to run for president and an active member of the N.O.W. organization.

¹⁵ According to the timeline presented on the National Organization for women website- <http://www.now.org/history/timeline.html>. Date Accessed: 3/25/2007.

¹⁶ Charlyne Hunter, "Many Blacks Wary of 'Women's Liberation' Movement," *The New York Times*. (November 17, 1970), p. 60.

class white and the African American liberationist collide to impede progress based on historical racial misunderstanding and oppression.

Only the Black Women can say “When and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole...race enters with me”

-Anna Julia Cooper (1862)-

Post W.W. II, Jim Crow America

In the years proceeding, following, and during W.W.II, African Americans were an oppressed ethnic group. W.W. II brought some promise and hope. The African American war effort brought an increase in finances for some G.I.'s; however, it was not worth the discrimination and dilemma of consciousness. In many parts of the United States African Americans, “in Uncle Sam’s uniform are being put upon, mobbed, sometimes even shot down by citizen and military police, and, on occasion, lynched.”¹⁷

The reality of racial oppression created a burden and a theme that would play out again during the women’s liberation movement of the 1960’s and 70’s. The theme portrayed was that even with patriotism and activism the racial oppression of African Americans is more likely than not to continue.

In the mid 1940’s, preceding W.W. II, the Labor leader and human rights activist Asa Phillip Randolph articulated the common sentiment of African America. The retaliation to the racial structure helped to spark 50’s, 60’s and 70’s civil rights activism. He explains the hopes of African America in his article “Why Should We March”. In the

¹⁷ A. Phillip Randolph. “Why Should We March?”. Survey Graphic. November, 1942.

article Randolph lay out the “Program of the March on Washington Movement” planned for July 1941. The first and most relevant article states,

1. We demand, in the interest of National unity, the abrogation of every law which makes a distinction in treatment between citizens based on religion, creed, color, or national origin. This means an end to Jim Crow in education, in housing, in transportation, and in every other social, economic or political privilege;¹⁸

In the early 1960’s most African American activist combated Jim Crow government by marching, boycotting and non-violent protest. African Americans began to organize and unite in numbers behind a sentiment proclaimed by human rights activist such as Martin Luther King Jr. Martin Luther King Jr. asserted the non-violent African American activism code that requested that people meet, “Physical force with an even stronger force, namely, soul force”¹⁹ The 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott was a major accomplishment/event that represented a beginning of a nation wide non-violent retaliation to racial segregation. The boycotts influenced many Americans to fight segregation by creating organized and initiative driven committees. The African American women approach to equalizing gender roles, in part by combating racial oppression, was mirrored by the words and approach of the civil right movement.

S.N.C.C. is born...

The circumstances of the 40’s, 50’s and 60’s were unpleasant, at best, for all African American people. These circumstances required African American women to mass activate against the racial structure. The peaceful activism that resulted from 50’s racial oppression was the major force that birthed the agenda for the African American Women’s Liberation Movement. One organization that came to fruition, and embodied

¹⁸ A. Phillip Randolph. “Why Should We March?”. Survey Graphic. November, 1942.

¹⁹ Martin Luther King Jr.

the agenda of overcoming racial oppression, and allowed for discussion around gender discrimination, was the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (S.N.C.C.).

SNCC stood for non-violent activism. The organization laid out their mission as a “Statement of Purpose”. The opening statement proclaimed,

We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our belief, and the manner of our action... [Nonviolence] seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step towards such a society... By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.

Although each local group in this movement must diligently work out the clear meaning of this statement of purpose, each act or phase of our corporate effort must reflect a genuine spirit of love and good-will.²⁰

SNCC lived up their initial claims through activism. The African American women involved in the SNCC organization used the platform to fight racial oppression. African American women fought racial oppression in an effort to bring African American women to equality with all other American residents. During 1961 the organization participated in the “Freedom Rides” in which groups of college students, many of whom were S.N.C.C. members, rode through the Southern states supporting the notion of racial desegregation. The group was viciously attacked by mobs of white racists. Historian Paula Giddings addresses the situation in her text When and Where I Enter: the Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America. Giddings explains the proceedings surrounding the “Freedom Rider’s” in the state of Alabama and beyond. The two busses that ventured into the state were met by mobs of white people, predominantly male. The people attacked the first bus they “...broke windows, slashed tires, and hurled a smoke bomb”. The second bus was met, stopped and boarded by “Heavily

²⁰ Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Founding Statement. (1960)

armed Whites” that, “forced passenger’s to the back, savagely beating anyone who resisted”.²¹ The organization continued to demonstrate through racially motivated torment, abuse and degradation, for basic societal rights. The retaliation proved to the S.N.C.C. demonstrators the importance of their struggle to overcome the, very real, burden of existing with racist. The organization moved its focus more towards uplifting African American’s rather than education or retaliation of the oppressive white structure.

Two years following S.N.C.C.’s involvement in the freedom rides the organization organized its support behind the “Freedom Ballot”. The “Freedom Ballot” was a mock election held in the South to prove that given the opportunity to vote African Americans would. Forty S.N.C.C. members, men and women, helped to organize and conduct the election in Mississippi. Almost 80,000 African Americans showed to vote and the campaign proved successful. The activism helped to promote African American women’s participation in the representative democratic process.

Piggy backing the success of the “Freedom Ballot” election S.N.C.C. decided to organize with southern African Americans to challenge racial oppression in Mississippi. The instances of racial oppression and bigotry existent in Little Rock and Birmingham helped to motivate African American women to activate to combat the realities of racial oppression. S.N.C.C. created the project called the Mississippi Summer Project with the hopes of registering African American voters, creating Freedom Schools²², organize Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party precincts and hold “Freedom Days”²³.

²¹ Giddings, Paula. *When and Where I Enter*. (Bantam. Oct. 1985), p. 280-281.

²² Freedom schools were educational facilities created to help empower African Americans by teaching an ethical, inclusive, accurate and empowering history of Africans in America. The schools uplifted and empowered young African American women by teaching the history of strong African and African Americans whom came before.

²³ Days when African Americans were encouraged to register to vote. The initiative’s goal was to remedy the historical disenfranchisement of African American women and male voter’s.

S.N.C.C. was founded as an interracial organization. White women and African American women worked closely together to activate against structures of oppression. The inclusive egalitarian approach, initially held by S.N.C.C., allowed every active member to participate in establishing the organizations agenda. The atmosphere was empowering to women. The multi-cultural approach also helped to break down longstanding fallacious and ignorant, racial and cultural presumptions. The stereotypes were weakened or destroyed by the intelligent and active African American women and the mobile and passionate white women. Eliminating the presumptions helped to lessen the burden of American race relations and allowed African American and white women, for this short period of time, to activate towards overcoming the forms of oppression that keep all women down; predominantly racial, gender and economic issues.²⁴ The racially conscious and inclusive approach culminated in the early spring of 1963 when, “whites compromised one third of the participants in the annual S.N.C.C. conference...by the fall, the staff itself was 20 percent white.”²⁵

Unfortunately, the collective approach nearly disappeared by the middle of the decade. A shift in the agenda and the consciousness of S.N.C.C. coincided with an adjustment of the racial makeup of the organization. The shift occurred as a result of the racial climate of the time. The interracial approach to fighting oppression²⁶ was superficial in the racial structure that existed.

In 1963 S.N.C.C. played an integral part in organizing the march on Washington. Along with notable civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, a long time S.N.C.C. activist, presented on the situations effecting African Americans and the

²⁴ Giddings, Paula. When and Where I Enter. (Bantam. Oct. 1985), p. 300.

²⁵ Giddings, Paula. When and Where I Enter. (Bantam. Oct. 1985), p. 296.

²⁶ Giddings, Paula. When and Where I Enter. (Bantam. Oct. 1985), p. 296.

relevancy of court won initiative. Lewis spoke concerning race relations and weightless and progressless civil rights legislate and activism,

We march today for jobs and freedom, but we have nothing to be proud of, for hundreds and thousands of our brothers are not here--for they have no money for their transportation, for they are receiving starvation wages...or no wages at all. In good conscience, we cannot support the administration's civil rights bill.

This bill will not protect young children and old women from police dogs and fire hoses when engaging in peaceful demonstrations. This bill will not protect the citizens of Danville, Virginia who must live in constant fear in a police state. This bill will not protect the hundreds of people who have been arrested on trumped-up charges like those in Americus, Georgia, where four young men are in jail, facing a death penalty, for engaging in peaceful protest.²⁷

Therefore, the student activists were forced to question why, “they tried at the expense of their lives” to fight for civil rights initiative, “...so they began to look for answers.”²⁸ The failures of civil rights initiatives and activism reminded S.N.C.C. that race was still a distinguishing factor, above and beyond gender, in deciding the fate of an African American women and men. S.N.C.C. activist Jean Smith comments on the notion when she states that, “In the end we learned that there are a thousand ways for a people who are weaker than the rest to be ‘kept in their place’”²⁹ The solution seemed to be focusing fully on overcoming oppression by focusing on the race agenda. As a result, of imposed, reactionary African American radical activism, S.N.C.C. lost almost all of its diversity and split into various disunited factions.

Above and beyond fighting racial oppression, in an effort to liberate African American’s and African American women, S.N.C.C. was active in the struggle to overcome limiting gender roles within the organization. In 1964, Anita Baker and other women in S.N.C.C. released a position statement that exposed the gender inequalities

²⁷ John Lewis. March on Washington. (*Speech*). 1963.

²⁸ Ella Baker, *Interview*, The Civil Rights Documentation Project (Mooreland-Spingarn Collection, Howard University, Washington, D.C.) pg. 65.

²⁹ Jean Smith, “I Learned to Feel Black,” *Black Power Revolt*, Floyd Barbour, ed. (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1968), p. 212.

within the organization. The position paper showed that women of every racial complexion were adamant and active about the ending of oppression, regardless of the historical circumstances surrounding one's ethnic culture. The women of S.N.C.C. asked people to "Consider why it is in SNCC that woman who are competent, qualified, and experienced, are automatically assigned to the "female" kinds of jobs such as typing...and the assistant kind of administrative work but rarely the "executive" kind."³⁰ The S.N.C.C. women's response to secular gender oppression asserted many concerns and issues that embodied the theme of the women's liberation movement. The women of S.N.C.C. placed a list of common inequities as a series of articles that opened the "Position Paper". Article one talked of the presentation of S.N.C.C. to the community as a male organization by excluding women from the opportunity to be involved in "in crucial constitutional revisions at the Atlanta staff meeting... A large committee was appointed to present revisions to the staff. The committee was all men.". Another inequity is exposed in Article 7 and Article 10; the articles explain the minimizing of accredited women to menial tasks and positions. Article 7 shows that, "A veteran of two years' work for SNCC in two states spends her day typing and doing clerical work for other people in her project.". In addition Article 10 generalizes the reality that in almost every instance "Capable, responsible, and experienced women who are in leadership positions can expect to have to defer to a man on their project for final decision making."

The position paper continued to explain other relevant concerns. The paper concluded by explaining the African American feminist supposition that, "Assumptions

³⁰ Baker Anita and the Women of S.N.C.C. *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Position Paper: Women in the Movement*. 1964

of male superiority are as widespread and deep rooted and every much as crippling to the woman as the assumptions of white supremacy are to the Negro. (Baker)”

Thus, Baker established/defined, knowingly or otherwise, the duality of the African American women’s struggle to gain access to become liberated. The struggle was indirectly explained, by Baker, as an attempt to dissolve the structures of racism and gender inequity.

Conclusion

The eras that preceded the movements of both white and African American women were influential to the varying approaches taken. The goals as stated were to eliminate constructions of oppression that held women (N.O.W.) and all humans (S.N.C.C.) from benefiting from the fruits bore from integrated human endeavor. Unfortunately, the racial oppression of the era kept the collective goal of the women’s liberation women from growing to fruition.

The confusion resulted, partially, from historically based racism that led to digressive contemporary actions and reactions. Women’s suffragist and the N.O.W. liberationist had been struggling to gain equality of privilege and access to the white man. African American women, to the contrary, were forced, out of circumstance, to combat historical racial oppression while and after fighting for gender rights. Venerated women’s suffragist Susan B. Anthony expressed the historical base for the white women’s liberation agenda as the demanding of equal rights for white women.

While the dominant party have with one hand lifted up TWO MILLION BLACK MEN and crowned them with the honor and dignity of citizenship...with the other they have

dethroned FIFTEEN MILLION WHITE WOMEN-their own mothers and sisters, their own wives and daughters-and cast them under the lowest orders of manhood.³¹

Freidan contemporized the logic when she spoke to achieving liberation for,

Middle-class White women [of the fifties and early sixties]...bored in suburbia (an escape hatch from increasingly Black cities) and seeking sanction to work at a “meaningful” job outside of the home. Not only were the problems of the white suburban housewife (who may have had domestic help) irrelevant to the Black women, they were also alien to them. (Giddings, 299)

To the African American women Freidan’s observations of the confinements, to be liberated from, were unrealistic, foreign and abstract constructions afforded through social privilege received based on race. Freidan observed that,

“I never knew a women, when I was growing up, who used her own mind, played her own part in the world, and also loved and had children.”³² Freidan’s approach, however progressed from Anthony’s logic, did not take into account the burden of combating the construction of white supremacy that African American women face. The reality of the African American woman (person) is that they will continue the struggle to uplift themselves in an oppressive structure, until the consciousness and representation of the nation becomes irracialized, culturally sensitive and truly representative.

Mrs. Frances Ellen Harper a historian and human rights activist articulated the reality and motivation imposed upon African Americans. Harper stated that “Being Black means that every white, including white working-class women, can discriminate against you.”³³ Until Harper’s words are no longer true, the reality remains as static.

Today women of all racial complexions wallow in the limited progress that has

³¹ Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, “Afro-Americans in the struggle for women suffrage,” Ph.D. dissertation, Howard University, 1977 (University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Mich), p. 82.

³² Betty Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique*. (New York: Dell, 1963, 1974), p. 68.

³³ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan Anthony, and Mathilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *The History of Women Suffrage*, Vol. II (Rochester, N.Y., 1881), p. 391-392.

been forged through inglorious, bloody and endless struggle. A necessary step towards limiting all women is to eliminate the racial restrictions and distractions that helped to impede, through exclusive approaches, the collective gain inherent to the motives of almost every woman's suffragist and liberationist. Women³⁴ must try to extract, acknowledge and ethically amend the dilemma for collectivity and all women to become liberated. In the women's suffrage period, women's suffragist Frederick Douglass articulated the unique struggle of African American women. The African American women's dual struggle, explained by Douglass, persisted throughout the 20th century. Douglass eloquently orated a cause, and therefore a solution, for the misunderstandings surrounding race within the American women's movements. The solution themed around acknowledging, learning and experiencing shared struggle. Douglass's presumption was that the experiences could result in conscious and culturally sensitive collaborative effort/activism. He stated,

When women, because they are women, are hunted down through the cities of New York and New Orleans, when they are dragged from their houses and hung upon lamp post; when their children are torn from their arms, and their brains dashed upon the pavement; when they are objects of insult and outrage at every turn; when they are in danger of having their homes burnt down around their heads; when their children are not allowed to enter schools; then they will have an urgency to obtain the ballot equal to our own.³⁵

"but was this not true for the Black women? Someone asked.

'yes, yes, yes,' replied Douglas.

'It is true for the Black women but not because she is women but because she is Black!''³⁶

³⁴ Women and all human beings existing within the structures.

³⁵ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan Anthony, and Mathilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *The History of Women Suffrage*, Vol. II (Rochester, N.Y., 1881), p.382.

³⁶ Giddings, Paula. *When and Where I Enter*. (Bantam. Oct. 1985), p.67