



News & Views



Women of colour

Struggle, Resistance and Grudging Acceptance

by Leela MadhavaRau
Canadian University Press

When people look at me, I represent a nation, an entire race. Whatever they think of that race, that's what I become."

Women who are from the Third World (including American and Canadian blacks), 'women of colour' or 'black' women do not identify with the white, middle class attitudes common in feminist thought. They are often frustrated with the direction and approach of the women's movement.

Even among this group of women, there is a need for two different approaches: one for women living in the Third World, and another for 'women of colour' living here. Both approaches must be different from mainstream western feminism. For both share an added factor to feminist analysis - oppression on the grounds of race, as well as sex.

Many of the frequently cited examples of abuse of black or coloured women come from Britain. Asian women, coming to Britain to meet their husbands, were tested to ensure that consummation of marriage had taken place prior to immigration.

Yet Canadian treatment of black working class women is often little better. It is, however, much more subtle. Makeda Silvera, in her book *Silenced*, writes of the lives of black domestic workers in Toronto. Most of the women work in homes where they are little more than skivvies for professional white families, Silvera says:

"What is never talked about, or made clear to many of these women is the widespread prejudice they will come up against in Canada and the racism imbedded within a system which thrives on the labour of women of colour from Third World countries, women who are brought to Canada to work virtually as legal slaves in the homes of both wealthy and middle-class Cana-

dian families."

Most of the workers were hired and supervised by the woman of the family. Husbands remain as peripheral characters entering the scene often only to sexually harass or rape the employee.

Coloured women who become involved in feminist, anti-racist activities often find themselves isolated within the so-called women's movement. Coloured women have created a different feminism based on race. This is necessary because the women's movement as a whole has never incorporated racial discrimination into its platform.

However, the white response was not always positive. White feminists believed the feminism of the coloured women was separatist rather than constructive. So, many coloured women are forced to see the white perspective on feminism while white women will not even acknowledge that a black perspective exists.

Women of colour living in North America have radically different perspectives on many basic 'feminist' issues such as birth control, abortion, the involvement of men in the women's movement, and social services.

Contrary to the many women who are currently fighting for the right to choose to have an abortion, many black women are fighting for the right to oppose forced sterilization. In several cases in the southern United States and southern Africa, black women have been sterilized after the birth of a child without their consent or knowledge or even that of their husbands. Yet among the hundreds of different pro-choice buttons seen recently in the Toronto Women's Book Store, only one button called attention to the problem of sterilization abuse.

For women in the Third World, the problem has become equally evident recently. In India, women have undergone sterilization in order to obtain baby formula for an infant. In Bangladesh women were sterilized in return for three dollars. Desperation is the only thing that could possibly

cause these women, who often need more children, to take such measures.

It is also women in the Third World who are the guinea pigs for the testing of birth control devices and innovations. Well known Toronto critic and physician Morton Schulman commented on the testing of the Pill in India on the nightly CBC news saying "there's enough of them over there. We won't miss a few so why should we test it on our wives and sisters."

Depo-provera is the newest in the line of dangerous contraceptives. It is the most frequently prescribed birth control method among black women in Namibia and South Africa, who are not given a choice in the decision. Use of this injectable contraceptive sometimes results in sterilization, a result much desired by the white supremacist government in South Africa.

For women in the Third World problems also

arise as the position of men within the feminist movement. For women of colour it is often more important that men be included within some of the deliberations that are ongoing. The men, after all, also an oppressed group.

However, this inclusion of men often stops at the point of oppression on the grounds of race. Most "women of colour" agree that it is they who should decide the direction and outcome of their actions.

The inclusion of men is of importance in the Third World, especially in those countries just celebrating independence. For women in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, admittedly inequality still exists. Yet prior to independence all citizens were forced to defend the common colonial enemy. Women fought alongside men; although many were not commanders they were acknowledged as a vital force.



Wearing the Hijab in Canada isn't for the Weak

by Zarqa Nawaz
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I wear a scarf on my head; everyday, every where I go. I think some people will be very surprised to know why I wear it. I am not a militant, orthodox fundamentalist foaming at the mouth ready to hurl a grenade at the first person who criticizes the Ayatollah. Nor am I a repressed female who believes a woman's place is scrubbing floors and obeying every whim of the thug in the living room.

So why would a sane woman born in the 'west' who lives without any compulsion willfully tie a piece of cloth around her head and let no man other than her father, brothers and uncles see her hair? Because I believe dressing modestly is the purest form of liberation.

You gotta have guts to walk the streets of Toronto in Hijab and face all the stars and snickers and insults. Weak women don't wear hijab. Only strong ones - you couldn't last if you didn't have the nerve. Wearing hijab makes you more confident about yourself because you are forcing people to judge your character and not your appearance. You develop a personality.

Madonna may be rich and independent. But how did she get that way? She had to sell her body to make that money. Let's face it. If she didn't expose herself she wouldn't be where she is today. (Who are the highest paid women in society? Models and prostitutes.) Islam says women are

not objects of men's lust and desires. They are human beings with the right to be treated that way. And to make sure a woman's body is forever

sacred, she covers it. Dignity, respect and honour are key to a Muslim woman's identity.

I've never believed Muslim women pose any threat to North American society because of the way we dress. So when I came across the Bijan ad in which a woman with a seri-

ous expression is wearing a black head covering and on the other page the same model is laughing, wearing a Bijan baseball cap and carrying a bat, I went cold.

It doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure out what's going on. If you wear a scarf, you're a boring old bat and if you don't you're a wild woman. First of all, this ad is racist. The association of derogatory words such as "submissive" with a Muslim woman is implying a certain stereotype. If the photograph had been a black man with words

such as lazy, shiftless and criminal, all hell would break loose. Why then is a Muslim woman a target in fashion magazines?

I came up with my theory after reading *Sex, Lies & Advertising* by Gloria Steinem, consulting editor of Ms. magazine. In 1980, she sent reporter, Robin Morgan, to the Soviet Union to write a story about the lives of Soviet women. The story won the Front Page award and Revlon refused all advertising in Ms. after that. The reason given was that the Soviet women on the cover appeared without make up.

So now I wonder, are women in hijab a threat? Women's fashion magazines that sell thin, young images to women, are selling insecurity. In my opinion, Muslim women have inadvertently become a threat to multinationals who offer beauty in a bottle.

Chances are they don't like us very much. We're bad for business. If we influence women to be satisfied with their natural looks, weight and age, we will destroy the foundation of the cosmetic dream - addiction and dependence. Oh well. It's going to take more than racist advertising to break our spirit.

Scarf heads are a tough bunch of gals. Anyways I have to run now. I'm meeting some friends. Something about bungi jumping off cliff while skeet shooting rats on the way down. Hope my scarf doesn't get wet.

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