

WHITE FEMINIST RACISM WITHIN THE MARCH 8TH COALITION: OUR RESPONSIBILITY

White racism is here in this Coalition. Because white women are in this Coalition. Racism is part of who we are, how we were raised, how we see the world. White women in the March 8th Coalition made mistakes. And because of who we are those mistakes were racist. And we have got to talk about it. We are responsible for our mistakes.

White feminists cannot sit on the fence on racism. We cannot maintain a status quo which grossly exploits the majority of the world, people of colour.

Racism has been an issue within feminism in Canada since the early 1970's. Time and time again women of colour have educated us, asked us to deal with it, demanded that we be accountable, or responsible, for our own attitudes and actions. Women of colour have given us enough of a chance to come to terms with our fears and prejudices. Racism is not a so-called American import smuggled across the border at Buffalo in the trunk of a car. It's home-grown Canadian oppression.

International Women's Day is important not just to the Toronto women who organize it or attend it, but to millions of other women who, through the mass media, see it as a visible sign, or symbol, of women's liberation.

We cannot afford to ignore or smooth over what happened within the March 8th Coalition this year. It is silly to hope that things can be nicely hushed up in this or any other room. We hope that with this statement we can maintain our accountability as white feminists on white feminist racism. We owe at least that much to women of colour. We hope that this alternative view of what happened will be heard. We call for a readjustment of power within the March 8th Coalition and feminism as a whole. We call for women to inform themselves and to decide because to make no decision is to endorse racism.

We know that white women are angry; that some are very hurt; that others are bewildered; that some who should be here in this room are not. But some things have to be said, and heard. We claim that right.

White women chose the theme SAY NO TO RACISM FROM HERE TO SOUTH AFRICA and invited women of colour to join us. This invitation required an examination of our own racism, an examination that women of colour demanded we undertake -- and report on. We chose to protest racism with our theme, but they called our bluff!

From early on in the planning white women were in reaction to women of colour. Our anxiety about the presence of vocal and strong women of colour within the Coalition and our eagerness to escape the guilt of racism made us respond defensively as if WOMEN OF COLOUR WERE A THREAT. We escaped into fight or flight behaviour. We denied that racism existed within the Coalition. We said, "I'm not racist. I don't want to hear this stuff." We projected our anger onto women of colour and responded with aggression, even snickering when women of colour spoke.

Our lack of trust was evident.

We did not stop to think that without a thorough acceptance by white feminists of our complicity in racism, our adoption of SAY NO TO RACISM FROM TORONTO TO SOUTH AFRICA would be seen as an attempt to ride on the wave of third world liberation struggles, borrowing their energy, public support, media attention, and their heroes and martyrs in what might reasonably be called co-optation.

How would we feel if men offered to do International Women's Day for us and then refused to even talk about sexism within their progressive order?

Instead of asking these questions, we turned attention away from white feminist racism and blamed women of colour for disrupting our day.

We said, BUT WE MEANT:

They refuse to educate us about racism.

IT'S THEIR PROBLEM NOT MINE. IT'S NOT MY PRIORITY. WE DON'T WANT TO BE BOTHERED TO DO THE WORK TO EDUCATE OURSELVES. WHAT DO THESE WOMEN WANT ANYWAY?

They took over the Coalition.

MARCH 8TH BELONGS TO US. IT'S OURS. WE STARTED IT AND WE WON'T SHARE IT WITH ANYONE WHO DOESN'T BELONG TO US. AND WE JUST HAPPEN TO BE WHITE.

We don't like the way they took over the Coalition.

WE'VE ALWAYS DONE IT OUR WAY. AND OUR WAY KEEPS POWER ON OUR HANDS. WE DON'T HAVE MUCH, BUT AT LEAST IT'S OURS AND WE INTEND TO HOLD ONTO IT. WE KNOW BEST.

They got mad and walked out.

HOW DARE THEY! WE'RE DOING THIS FOR THEM AND THEY DON'T APPRECIATE US. OUR INTENTIONS WERE GOOD.

They were hostile.

THEY HURT OUR FEELINGS. THEY WERE IRRATIONAL, BUT WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT FROM PEOPLE LIKE THEM.

They formed alliances behind our back.

WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO DECIDE WHO WILL TALK TO WHO. WE DON'T RECOGNIZE THEIR SOLIDARITY OR EVEN RIGHT TO CHOOSE. WE KNOW BEST...WE HAVE AN ANALYSIS.

They won't socialize with us.

THEY WEREN'T NICE. WHY SHOULDN'T THE OPPRESSOR PARTY WITH THE OPPRESSED? IF ONLY THEY KNEW US, THEY'D SEE HOW NICE WE REALLY ARE.

They weren't willing to allow us to explain ourselves.

THEY WERE UNFAIR. WE AREN'T RACIST AT ALL. AND IF ONLY THEY'D LISTEN WHILE WE TALKED OUR EXCUSES AT THEM, THEY'D UNDERSTAND AND EVERYTHING WOULD BE O.K.

These things were said before March 8th, during March 8th, and after March 8th. And these things were no doubt thought. And these feelings felt: anger, hurt, guilt, rage, jealousy, resentment, and fear. And this is what we did.

We didn't talk, contribute, or say what we thought -- at least not openly. We withheld resources. We felt powerless and stole power by not giving information, by failing to communicate, by passive resistance, by non co-operation. We prevented other women of colour from getting involved in the Coalition by keeping knowledge to ourselves. We expected the approval or gratitude of women of colour because we took up THEIR CAUSE. We over-emphasized our differences while denying theirs, seeing them only by their colour. And we used this as an excuse to evade making a report on Coalition racism. Instead we responded as individuals, avoiding our collective responsibility. We denied we had an identity as white women. We refused to listen. We said, "It's not me." Regardless of our differences, our individuality, we, white women in this Coalition, are responsible for the racism of this year's March 8th and the disruption we caused.

It's our job to educate ourselves. Every white woman benefits from racism, even a welfare mother, even a working class woman, even a woman working in women's services, even a feminist academic. We all do. We must educate ourselves.

Feminism is not a white woman's preserve. It belongs to all women or none at all. We have to listen to and respect women of colour -- black women, native women in this country and all indigenous women, asian women, south asian women, latin american women -- the majority of the women in the world.

We must recognize our differences not just in word, but in deed. That means change, change in who has power, who calls the shots. It means a new structure in the March 8th Coalition. It means changes in communication, outreach and publicity, in meetings, in decision making, in accountability, in collective responsibility. It has to happen.

We can not ignore women of colour or invalidate them by claiming that they do not represent other women of colour, much as men invalidate feminists by calling us strident or hysterical, not real women.

This issue won't go away.

Racism is not just institutional. It's personal. It's not just out there in IBM land, but within, inside feminism. It's right here, and has to be fought on both levels. It's the Ronald Reagan in all of us.

We are so much a part of our own racism that we can't see it, just as water may be invisible to the fish which swims in it, breathes in it, lives in it. What is obviously racist to a woman of colour is normal to us. That's what they've been telling us and what we are accountable for. And that scares the shit out of us. And it should. And that is why we're so mad.

Feminism is for all or none. March 8th is not our personal white property. There is no room for a vanguard or elite of ideologically sophisticated feminists who refuse to be accountable. If we refuse to confront our white racism, we've had it! It's that simple.

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