WHOSE REVOLUTION IS THIS? GENDER’S DIVISIVE ROLE IN THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

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Final Draft

Gender and the Law in American History Seminar

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June 18, 2007
Paper Summary

The gender ideology of the Black Panther Party was a critical component of the Party’s formation, its membership, and its day-to-day activities. Founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale consciously set out to challenge alleged deficiencies concerning the role of black men as provider and defender of the black community. Early recruitment efforts, directed in large part by the Party’s Minister of Information, Eldridge Cleaver, focused on men, and early rhetoric asserted the Party’s hyper-masculine ideal.

As time passed, women became interested in the Party. Some women perceived the Party’s platform as gender neutral, while others were attracted to the Party’s unique gendered message. Whatever the reason, women would soon become a dominant presence within the Party. As male members were forced into exile, were sent to prison, or in some cases, were killed, women’s roles became increasingly important. Women’s membership reached sixty percent and eventually women were responsible for running the daily activities of the Party.

The increased presence of women in an organization that had quite deliberately organized around black men, raised questions about women’s role in the Black Panther revolution. The gender question was thoroughly debated, playing itself out on the front pages of the Party’s primary communications vehicle—the Party’s official newspaper, The Black Panther.

The nature of articles published in The Black Panther demonstrated the loaded and divisive role that gender played, both within the black community and within the Party itself. Gender added a layer of complexity and tension to intra-Party dynamics in a
way that could not have been anticipated in the Party’s early days. As a result, the gender
dynamic resulted in Party members asking the question, “Whose revolution is this?”
CALLING ALL MEN: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF GENDER'S ROLE EARLY ON

From its inception, “appropriate” definitions of gender were a primary concern for the Black Panther Party (“the BPP” or “the Party”). Founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale deliberately set out to challenge existing notions that black men had been stripped of their “manhood” and were not properly defined within the black community. According to Newton and Seale, the Civil Rights Movement had done little to address this issue. They were frustrated with the way in which the Civil Rights Movement had progressed, and the non-violent tactics it employed in combating racism and police brutality within America.

This frustration was not theirs alone, but was evident throughout much of young black America. In the 1960s, Malcolm X emerged as an impassioned challenger to Civil Rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and their “turn the other cheek” strategy. There was a growing dissatisfaction among blacks who were beginning to recognize “the limits of hard won legislation, especially its failure to ensure economic gains and tackle seemingly intractable forms of southern and northern racism.” Beginning in the middle of the 1960s, disillusionment, frustration, and economic disenfranchisement fueled a number of urban rebellions across the country. In the Bay Area, this frustration was apparent in a number of events that took place during the time period. In Oakland in

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2 Id. at 2.

3 Id.

4 Id.
October 1966, the arrest of a black woman on a traffic violation triggered a small uprising.\(^5\) In San Francisco in September 1966, the fatal shooting of a black teenager resulted in a rebellion calling for the National Guard to be sent into the black section of the city.\(^6\)

Newton and Seale set out to address the frustration that resulted from the Civil Rights Movement’s deficiencies. In writing about the founding of the BPP, Newton questioned, “What good, however, was nonviolence when the police were determined to rule by force?”\(^7\) While they understood that their struggle was common to all black people,\(^8\) they focused on reconstructing images of black men in particular. The BPP would thus be a man’s party and recruitment efforts would focus on men. The failure of prior organizations to address black men left them with little choice. As Newton wrote, “Bobby and I finally had no choice but to form an organization that would involve the lower-class brothers.”\(^9\) However, due to factors unanticipated at the time, women would ultimately play a larger role within the Party, and the gender issue became far more complex than the founders could have ever imagined.

The 1960s provided a powerful backdrop for the Party’s origins. Concurrent with Newton’s and Seale’s agenda were rebellions in black urban centers around the country

\(^5\) *Id.* at 3.
\(^6\) *Id.*
\(^7\) Huey P. Newton with J. Herman Blake, *Revolutionary Suicide* 110 (1973).
\(^8\) See generally, Huey P. Newton, The Founding of the Black Panther Party, reprinted in *The Huey P. Newton Reader* 49-52 (David Hilliard & Donald Weise eds., Seven Stories Press 2002) (discussing that the rising consciousness of Black people was almost at a point of explosion following events such as the Watts riots and Martin Luther King’s visit thereafter).
\(^9\) Revolutionary Suicide, *supra* note 7, at 110 (emphasis added).
and the growth of a student and youth led anti-Vietnam war movement.\textsuperscript{10} Young people throughout the United States, both black and white, were undergoing “a basic questioning of previously held values, morals, and practices [affecting] everything from fashion, music, and art, to lifestyle choices, and modes of political engagement.”\textsuperscript{11} Through the development of a Black Arts Movement in black communities across the country, blacks explored the beauty of “Blackness” through visual arts, music, dance, theater and literature.\textsuperscript{12} Organizations such as the US organization and the Congress for African People attracted blacks who sought to connect with previously disdained “African traditions.”\textsuperscript{13} At the same time, young, middle class, white students and youth rebelled against the norms of their parents’ generation.\textsuperscript{14}

Furthermore, the Party set out to challenge historically powerful ideas about black men’s “place” in America. During the 1960s there was a relatively widely held notion within the black community that black men had been metaphorically castrated by the racism of the larger society. There was also the belief espoused by Malcolm X that black men had been timid in the face of racism as a result of lynching in the South and police brutality in the North.\textsuperscript{15} In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan released \textit{The Negro Family: A Case for National Action} (“the Moynihan Report”), under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Labor.\textsuperscript{16} The \textit{Moynihan Report} drew conclusions about the matriarchal

\textsuperscript{10} Matthews, \textit{supra} note 1, at 10.
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Id.} at 11.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{15} See \textit{Id.} at 85-87.
makeup of black families in which female-headed households resulted in a “tangle of pathology” within the black community.\textsuperscript{17} Ironically, some historians have argued that the public hyper-masculine images of Panther men actually served to reinforce some of these racist historical stereotypes of black manhood.\textsuperscript{18}

In May 1967, Huey P. Newton wrote an essay entitled “Fear and Doubt.” In the essay, Newton discussed the unique plight of the black man in America, and most poignantly, his relationship vis-à-vis the black woman. Newton writes:

He [the black man] feels that he is something less than a man, and it is evident in his conversation: “The White man is ‘The Man,’ he got everything, and he knows everything, and a nigger ain’t nothing.” In a society where a man is valued according to occupation and material possessions, he is without possessions . . . Often his wife (who is able to secure a job as a maid, cleaning for White people) is the breadwinner. He is, therefore, viewed as quite worthless by his wife and children . . . Society will not acknowledge him as a man.\textsuperscript{19}

Newton’s essay addressed both academic and political discussions taking place at the time concerning the alleged deficiencies in black men’s abilities to live up to the larger (white) society’s patriarchal norms. Newton’s essay was a response to The Moynihan Report that had labeled black men as irresponsible social and sexual deviants.

Matthews discusses the Moynihan Report as one of three competing gender ideologies that existed at the time the BPP formed, leading to discussions within the Party regarding gender roles and relations. The other two are cultural nationalism (discussed \textit{infra}) and feminism.\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Id.} \textsuperscript{18} See \textit{generally} Matthews, \textit{supra} note 1 (commenting on historian E. Francis White’s critique of nationalist discourses that “can be radical and progressive in relation to white racism and conservative and repressive in relation to the internal organization of the Black community.”) (quoting E. Francis White, \textit{Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse and African-American Nationalism}, 2 JOURNAL OF WOMEN’S HISTORY 73-77 (Spring 1990)).\textsuperscript{19} The Huey P. Newton Reader 132-33 (David Hilliard & Donald Weise eds., Seven Stories Press 2002).
Newton’s essay did not reject this view outright. Newton seemed well aware of the need to address the existing relationship between black men and black women. Arguably, the BPP was Newton’s attempt to do just that. In 1971, Newton affirmed that the “contradictions between the sexes” must be “resolved within the community.” Thus, from the beginning Newton infused specific gendered ideology into the Party in order to address the deficiencies he felt existed between black men and black women throughout American history.

As is addressed throughout this paper, the Party’s male leadership was not the only faction within the Party who recognized the complex relationship between black men and black women. In 1971, female member Kathleen Cleaver, in an interview with The Black Scholar, also referenced the unique relationship between black men and black women. She said:

The nature of the position of black women vis a vis [sic] black men in a colonized society, is so entirely different from the nature of white women vis a vis [sic] white men in a colonizing society that the nature of the liberation of women under these two different systems has to proceed along very different channels. In the black colony, the oppression of women by the black man is something that is perpetuated and encouraged by the system of colonialism run by the white man. We must always remember that the basic enemy of the black woman is not her own man because her own man, the black man, is not the creator or perpetrator of the system that is dedicated to oppressing women. However, as black men move to assert themselves, as black men move to regain a sense of dignity, to regain a sense of manhood, to regain a sense of humanity, and to become strong enough and powerful enough and manly enough to fight against the oppressor, they many times take out their resentment of their position against their own black women.\footnote{Julia Hervé, Black Scholar Interviews Kathleen Cleaver, 2 BLACK SCHOLAR 59 (1971).}

\footnote{See id. at 199.}
Cleaver went on to argue that the primary means by which the system of colonialism was to be destroyed was through the liberation of women.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, Cleaver recognized that not only was the relationship between black men and black women extremely complicated, it was in many ways in direct conflict with one another. Black women, in the struggle to liberate themselves, faced resentment by black men. Black men, in their own struggle to “regain a sense of manhood” took out their frustration on black women. Therefore, within the BPP, these two groups faced additional challenges. Not only would Party members be fighting larger society’s racism and oppression, there existed internal Party conflict as well.

The Vietnam War provided another important historical event from which Panthers drew ideas about gender. Arguably, the evolution in the Panther’s gender ideology was, in part, a function of the Vietnam War. In “Panther Sister’s on Women’s Liberation,” a female Panther explained that, “We feel that the example given us by the Vietnamese women is a prime example of the role women can play in the revolution.”\textsuperscript{23} She went on to describe Vietnamese men and women fighting side-by-side against American imperialism. “The success,” she continued, “of their national struggle is just as much dependent upon the women continuing struggle as it is dependent on the Vietnamese men.”\textsuperscript{24} Thus members of the BPP, and Panther women in particular, modeled their revolutionary participation after the revolution being fought in Vietnam. However, not taking into account different socio-historical contexts, the Panthers

\textsuperscript{22} See id.
\textsuperscript{24} Id.
inevitably faced largely different intra-Party dynamics compared to their Vietnamese counterparts.

**Early Recruitment**

Party recruitment began in 1966. Convinced they had to take action, Newton and Seale developed a means to test their platform and ideas. They instituted a practice they called “patrolling” in which they reached out to black men in order to gauge their receptiveness to the formation of the Black Panther Party.\(^{25}\) They concentrated patrolling in areas they knew large numbers of men tended to congregate. Newton explained:

> It was the spring of 1966. Still without a definite program, we were at the stage of testing ideas that would capture the imagination of the community. We began, as always, by checking around with the street brothers. We asked them if they would be interested in forming the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which would be based upon defending the community against the aggression of the power structure, including the military and the armed might of the police. We informed the brothers of their right to possess weapons, most of them were interested. Then we talked about how the people are constantly intimidated by arrogant, belligerent police officers and exactly what we could do about it. We went to pool halls and bars, all the places where brothers congregate and talk.\(^{26}\)

Referring specifically to black men was no accident, nor was it simply the result of chauvinistic attitudes towards women. It was a necessary step in an effort to present hyper-masculine images of black men within the black community. The Panthers quite consciously displayed these images of masculinity and used them as a primary force in their recruiting efforts.

\(^{25}\) Revolutionsary Suicide, supra note 7, at 114.

\(^{26}\) Id.
In the late spring of 1967, Eldridge Cleaver joined the Party. Newton asked Cleaver to join the Party both because Cleaver was receiving wide critical claim for his book *Soul on Ice,* and because Newton perceived Cleaver to be a “fine writer, effective speaker, and an intelligent and talented human being.” Cleaver joined the Party as the Minister of Information, to write for and edit the Party’s official newspaper, *The Black Panther.* From the very first issue of *The Black Panther,* Cleaver, Newton, and Seale presented the BPP’s gendered ideology and continued its directed recruiting effort:

> The BLACK PANTHER PARTY FOR SELF-DEFENSE really has something going. These Brothers are the cream of Black manhood. They are there for the protection and defense of our Black community . . . BLACK MEN!!! It is your duty to your women and children, to your mothers and sisters, to investigate the program of the PARTY.

It is interesting to view the first issue of *The Black Panther* as both a sort of internal rallying cry and an external marketing vehicle. Internally speaking, the paper’s first issue illustrates the view within the Party of black men as both protector and defender of the black community. Thus, *The Black Panther* could be used internally to remind Party members of their roles and responsibilities and what was expected of them from the Party. Externally, *The Black Panther* served as the Party’s public relations vehicle to the greater black community. It publicized an image of Black Panther men as the “cream of Black manhood” and invited non-members to fulfill their duty to act like true black men by “investigating” the Party’s ideology. Cleaver used *The Black Panther*

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27 *Soul on Ice* would later become required reading for all Party members.
28 *REVOLUTIONARY SUICIDE,* supra note 7, at 133.
30 See *Matthews,* supra note 16, at 278. Matthews goes on to point out that self-defense was thus considered a man’s job. *Id.*
to infuse a gendered message into the Party’s directed recruiting efforts. Later in October 1968, Cleaver explained, “for the young black male, the Black Panther Party supplies very badly needed standards of masculinity.”

Cleaver’s influence on shaping the Party’s early ideology cannot be understated. *Soul on Ice* was required reading for BPP members and thus an influential source for both national leaders and the rank-and-file. Through *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver depicted vivid gender-based ideas regarding black men’s relationship to black women. Cleaver dramatically discussed the historical relationship between black men and black women. He asserted that for four hundred years black men were unable to look black women squarely in the eyes. The reason for this, he wrote, was because, “I [the black man] knew I would find reflected there a merciless Indictment of my impotency and a compelling challenge to redeem my conquered manhood.” Thus Cleaver described the way in which white men historically emasculated black men, resulting in black men’s inability to be “real men.” Cleaver, therefore, provided powerful reasons for why both black men and black women may have been particularly sensitive to issues of sex and gender within the Party. If nothing else, *Soul on Ice* provides fodder for the argument that male and female Panthers were extremely susceptible to an intra-Party power dynamic.

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32 See Matthews, *supra* note 16, at 279 (discussing *Soul on Ice* as required reading, especially on the West Coast, and often cited as an influential source by male Party leaders).
34 Id.
35 See Matthews, *supra* note 16, at 279 (“Cleaver hypothesizes that Black women hold Black men in contempt because of their inability to be ‘real men.’ ”).
This would have undoubtedly impacted the debate over the roles of female Panthers alongside Panther men.

**WOMEN GAIN INTEREST**

As a result of its concentrated recruiting efforts and early male dominated ideology, the formative years of the BPP from 1966 to 1967 were comprised of a distinctly male organization.\(^{36}\) In fact, even women who were interested in joining the Party were somewhat turned off by the “in your face” macho style of Party leaders.\(^ {37}\) For example, in her autobiography, former Panther Assata Shakur discussed her ambivalence about joining the Party.\(^ {38}\) Shakur visited the Oakland headquarters from New York to “check out the Party.”\(^ {39}\) When asked why she had not yet joined, she discussed her dislike for the Party’s machismo attitude:

> As much as [I] dug the Party, [I] also had some real differences with its style of work . . . Somebody asked [me] why [I] had never joined the Party . . . [I] told them [I] had thought about it but had decided not to . . . [I] had been turned off by the way spokesmen for the Party talked to people, that their attitude had often been arrogant, flippant, and disrespectful. I told them [I] preferred the polite and respectful manner in which civil rights workers and Black Muslims talked to the people rather than the arrogant, fuck-you style that used to be popular in New York. I said they cursed too much and turned off a lot of Black people who would otherwise be responsive to what the Party was saying.\(^ {40}\)

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\(^{39}\) Id.

\(^{40}\) Id. Shakur does not capitalize “I” except for at the beginning of a sentence.
Despite the Party’s early focus on the redemption of black manhood, however, many women were drawn to the Party’s rhetoric. These women did not seem to perceive the issues facing black men to be at odds with black women. To these women, the Party spoke to all members of the black community. Former Chicago Panther Lynn French recalled that:

The Black Panther Party was the first group that I heard that actually was talking about doing things to seize control of your own fate, which is what I thought was what we needed to do. Also, I only saw Malcolm twice, but he made an incredible impression and that was a key part of it . . . I had never heard anybody talk that way before. It was like a door opening to just whole unimaginable place. It was just a totally different tone, very affirming, but expanding ideas. It was just incredible.

French’s comment illustrates the BPP’s place within the other Black Nationalist movements that were sprouting up throughout urban black America. One of the most popular proponents of black cultural nationalism was the Los Angeles based US Organization headed by Ron Karenga. The US Organization stressed that cultural awareness was to be “gained primarily through the revival of African traditions (real or invented) of dress, language, religion, and familial arrangements, and the rejection of white supremacy.” While the relationship between the BPP and the US Organization changed over time, Panthers eventually critiqued the fact that the US Organization “promoted cultural nationalism (as opposed to revolutionary nationalism) and Black capitalism (as opposed to

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41 See Matthews, supra note 1, at 118.
42 Interview by Tracey Matthews with Lynn French (April 2, 1995), in Matthews, supra note 1, at 118-19.
43 See Matthews, supra note 1, at 13.
44 Id. at 14.
socialism and internationalism)." To the BPP, cultural pride "did not guarantee liberation, nor did Black skin necessarily identify one as an automatic ally."46

Panther Joan Bird also viewed the Party as confronting problems that crossed the gender line. Pending a trial on several charges, including conspiracy to commit murder, Bird spent nearly a year and a half in prison from 1969 to 1970. In October 1969, Bird sent a letter to the press telling the story of her persecution. She also wrote about her decision to join the BPP in 1968. Her letter was printed in The Black Panther in June 1970:

I first heard and read about the Black Panther Party in the summer of 1968 right after the incident in Brooklyn Court when 200 policemen violently attacked the members of the Black Panther Party. Having lived in Harlem all my life, I was aware of bad cops and police brutality, but this was more than I had ever dreamed of. I wanted to know more about the Black Panther Party and its purpose so I went to the office on Seventh Avenue and met a few of the brothers. They related to me the necessity for all oppressed people to be politically aware of the fascism which has crippled them for centuries. I read the 10-point program and what brothers like Malcolm, Huey, Eldridge and Che were talking about began to make sense.47

As French and Bird describe, many women did not hear the Party’s message to be one solely targeted to black men. Even the Party’s focused male recruiting efforts attracted female attention. Some female members described an attraction for the Party based on the images of black men that the Party was introducing to the community. In August 1968, Afeni Shakur went to a rally to hear Eldridge Cleaver speak and felt a strong reaction to the male Panthers in the crowd:

45 Id.
46 Id.
[O]n top of listening to all of this, I would still be confronted with these dudes that were walking around there taking care of the crowd, and they were brothers—they were concerned about the people that were in the audience . . . They told you about love . . . It was different, because they were talking about fighting at the same time that they were talking about things that were relevant to me right now. I just had to relate to it.48

It seems that Shakur was as moved by Cleaver’s speech as she was by the image of caring and compassionate black men taking care of the crowd. Her attraction to the Panther men in the crowd exhibits that some women may have been interested in joining the Party to be around the type of man that The Black Panther had called for—those protectors and defenders of the black community. Arguably, this illustrates that both black men and black women initially were willing to direct the Party’s attention toward producing images of strong black men. This gendered Party platform would be the subject of controversy within the Party for years to come.

For other women, the decision to join the Party may have reflected a lack of options. For example, while initially turned off, Assata Shakur finally decided to join the Party in 1969 in large part because of her feeling that the Party presented her only viable option:

The BPP was the most progressive organization at that time and had the most positive images in terms of . . . the position of women in the propaganda . . . Many of the other organizations at the time were so sexist, I mean to the extreme . . . There was a whole saturation of the whole climate with this quest for manhood . . . even though that might be oppressive to you as a human being . . . For me joining the BPP was one of the best options at the time.49

48 Matthews, supra note 1, at 123.
49 Interview by Tracey Matthews with Assata Shakur (July 30, 1993), in Matthews, supra note 1, at 117.
Amidst growing interest from women, as early as February 1967, Bobby Seale addressed inquiries from the Party’s rank-and-file male members concerning whether or not women would be allowed to join the Party.\textsuperscript{50} Seale said that if women wanted to join the BPP, the Party would welcome them.\textsuperscript{51} And so it did.

**WOMEN JOIN THE PARTY**

Tarika Lewis is generally recognized as the first woman to officially join the Party in 1967.\textsuperscript{52} Later in her life, Lewis noted that she did not receive special treatment because she was a female member.\textsuperscript{53} She attended the same political education classes as her male counterparts and learned to handle firearms.\textsuperscript{54} While Lewis advanced beyond a rank-and-file position into various leadership roles, her orders were not always respected. “When the guys came up to me and said ‘I ain’t gonna do what you tell me to do ‘cause you a sister,’ I invited ‘em to come on out to the weapons range and I could outshoot ‘em.”\textsuperscript{55}

Lewis’ “macho” response to Panther men says as much about gender’s role within the Party as their blatant sexism. It illustrates the way in which a hyper-masculine attitude was respected by, if not expected of, Party members. It also demonstrates women’s willingness to adopt such an attitude. In fact, once admitted into the Party, women’s roles and attitudes became a highly contested debate.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{50} See LeBlanc-Ernest, supra note 36, at 307.
\textsuperscript{51} Id.
\textsuperscript{52} Id.
\textsuperscript{53} Id.
\textsuperscript{54} Id.
\textsuperscript{55} Id. at 307-08.
\textsuperscript{56} Discussed infra.
Along with Lewis, other early female Panther recruits joined the rank-and-file in 1967.\textsuperscript{57} Then in October 1967, after moving to California and marrying Eldridge Cleaver, Kathleen Neal Cleaver joined the Party.\textsuperscript{58} Cleaver became the first woman who would serve in a prominent and influential capacity.\textsuperscript{59} She served as assistant editor of \textit{The Black Panther} and became the first woman to sit on the national Central Committee.\textsuperscript{60}

When Kathleen Cleaver arrived in Oakland in 1967 as a member of the BPP, many of the Panthers, including its two cofounders, Seale and Newton, were incarcerated.\textsuperscript{61} The Party was struggling to survive. In describing the circumstances upon her arrival in 1967, Cleaver admitted, “I went there in the midst of a total crisis. They didn’t really have any organization to speak of at that time.”\textsuperscript{62} As a result, women quite literally resuscitated the Party. In addition to Cleaver, women’s involvement in the Party expanded, and by 1968 Bobby Seale estimated that women represented approximately sixty percent of the Party’s membership.\textsuperscript{63}

\textbf{COINTELPRO: THE ATTACK ON THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY}

Women’s growing involvement in the Party was as much a product of necessity as it was of their acceptance by male members. During the summer of 1967, the FBI set up a “Black Nationalist Hate Group” COINTELPRO and a “racial intelligence”

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Id.} at 308.
\textsuperscript{58} Julia Hervé, \textit{Black Scholar Interviews Kathleen Cleaver}, 2 BLACK SCHOLAR 54, 55 (1971).
\textsuperscript{59} LeBlanc-Ernst, \textit{supra} note 36, at 308.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{62} Interview by Angela D. Le-Blanc-Ernst with Kathleen Cleaver (November 10, 1991), \textit{in} LeBlanc-Ernst, \textit{supra} note 36, at 308.
\textsuperscript{63} BOBBY SEALE, A LONELY RAGE: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BOBBY SEALE 177 (1978).
investigative section. As stated in a memo from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, the expressed purpose of these programs was "to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalist, hate-type organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesmen, membership and supporters, and to counter their propensity for violence and civil disorder . . . ." Intelligence gathered by the FBI was supplemented by the efforts of local police authorities, which led to the harassment and incarceration of BPP members. Local police harassment consisted of prosecutions of Panthers for minor offenses such as traffic violations, trespassing, or creating a public nuisance.

The Party became the primary focus of COINTELPRO activities by July of 1969. Law enforcement viewed politically and physically armed black people as a serious threat. The Party’s ideals, organizing young black people around socialistic and anti-racist principles that began to address some of the “problems” within the black community, were seen as particularly threatening. In addition to general police

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64 See Matthews, supra note 1, at 170.
65 Id.
66 Id.
67 Id.
68 Id. at 173. Matthews also discusses an undated document in the Huey P. Newton Records at Stanford University that claimed the following statistics regarding FBI surveillance: “The Bureau had thirty of its field offices with a squad from each of these offices investigating the Black Panther Party. Each squad consists of 25 men working on this project alone. Each of the members of the squad was required to have a minimum of five informants within the Party.” Id. at n.70.
69 See id. at 202 (“That young Black people would organize themselves around socialistic and anti-racist principles and attempt to implement them through community service, and at the same time begin to address some of the internal politics of Black communities that had crippled movements and leaders in the past, were a critical part of the “real” threat.”).
harassment, assassinations were carried out and/or instigated in the case of key BPP leaders.\textsuperscript{70}

In 1969 local and national law enforcement officials began to dismember the BPP. Newton remained in prison pending the appeal of a voluntary manslaughter conviction; Seale was also in jail on charges related to the murder of a BPP member who had been a suspected FBI informant; Eldridge Cleaver went into exile to avoid further incarceration; and Chief of Staff David Hilliard had been arrested on charges of threatening to kill the President of the United States.\textsuperscript{71} With the Party’s male leadership under attack, women took the opportunity to challenge existing attitudes about female participation in the BPP.

\textbf{THE VISIBILITY OF PANTHER WOMEN: GENDER DISCUSSED ON THE FRONT PAGES}

As women became more prevalent in the Party, their role as Party participants was debated front and center on the pages of \textit{The Black Panther}. Both rank-and-file men and women weighed in on “the woman question.” Their conflicting views demonstrate the divisive role that gender played in changing the Party’s early emphasis on reconstructing images of strong black men. Much of the discussion took place in the Party’s official newspaper—“public” sphere. The willingness to openly display the dialogue illustrates the prominent role that gender played in the day-to-day Party activities. The ongoing “public” debate provides insight into the Party’s internal gender

\textsuperscript{70} Primary examples include Fred Hampton, John Huggins, and Bunchy Carter. \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{71} See LeBlanc-Ernest, \textit{supra} note 36, at 309-10.
structure and helps to shed light on gender's role within the more "private" lives of BPP members.

In 1969, an unnamed male writer expressed a sense of discomfort with women taking part in a revolutionary struggle he felt was unique to black men. The writer even seemed to blame the black woman for the black man's place in society, perhaps leading to the black man's need to incite a revolution:

Black women are for the most part selfish and subjective. In past times Black men existed in a matriarchal society, where the women were the only members of the family to work. This condition created a feeling of superiority in Black women . . . To a great extent her attitude explains the high rate of divorce among Panthers and other revolutionaries.72

The writer's views, not surprisingly, are consistent with those discussed supra by the Party's leaders—that black men faced a unique set of circumstances in American society that placed them at odds with every other social group, including black women. This anonymous writer, therefore, sheds some light on the fact that there was dissension among male Party members concerning the role of women in an organization established to more effectively define black men. He went on to say, "Black women have failed to see that this unbalanced economic condition helped to rob the men of their manhood."73

The writer approached black women with a sense of disdain and resentment. It is thus hard to imagine that such attitudes, if proliferated throughout the Party's male membership, would have allowed women to be openly welcomed as active participants in the Party.

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73 Id.
Another article by a rank-and-file member weighed in on the role of women as revolutionaries. In 1969, an author who identified himself/herself as “Black Revolutionary” submitted an article entitled “Black Woman.” This author too, like the male writer above, presented the black man and woman in unique positions within American history. Yet the author viewed the black woman as a key player in a united struggle. In referring to the black woman, the author wrote:

She had been the sounding board for the black man and his frustrations for 400 years; she has been provider and sympathizer for the black man since his castration by the white racist when the slave ships arrived from Africa. Yet today, they are still waiting to be discovered by the black man. The black woman is in a peculiar position. As long as her man is deprived of his manhood, she is deprived of her man and her full womanhood. . . . [T]he black woman should take a supportive role in the bringing about of the awakening of the black consciousness of her man. Her main objective should be to assist in the re-birth of the black man’s mind. . . . It is a woman’s duty to find the beauty in life and to unfold this beauty before the eyes of her man and children.74

In contrast to the unnamed male writer above, this author viewed the black woman as “provider and sympathizer” for the black man as opposed to embodying a “feeling of superiority” over him. Thus, the author expressed the view that black women should serve a complementary role to black men in a revolution, so that the black man may regain his manhood, and as a result, she may regain her womanhood. The author wrote, “Just being a beautiful black woman [sic] is not enough; it is what the black woman can contribute to the black man that is important.”75 The author went on to say that black women should “[tell] their men that they are ready to take arms and fight along

75 Id. at 6.
side them for their freedom.” Therefore, the author saw a place for black women to take part in the BPP that was a bit secondary to black men. Though the black woman is urged to “fight along side” black men, the author posited that the struggle would end with the awakening of the black man. Thus the author recognized the centrality of black men in the revolution.

These two articles set the stage for the intra-Party gender dynamics that existed during the years ahead. They serve to illustrate the underlying tension among Party members who recognized the “peculiar position” of black women, in an organization focused on the “re-birth” of black men. While many women recognized their need to play a “supportive role,” they also recognized the “feeling of superiority” that many Panther men attributed to Panther women. This forced Panther women into a constant balancing act in which they had to determine how best to serve the Party’s objectives (however they may have defined them), while remaining wary of how they were being perceived by Panther men. In other words, though they came to view themselves as an integral part of the struggle, Panther women were reluctant to appear too integral, thus taking the focus away from Panther men.

Two weeks later, *The Black Panther* featured articles by two rank-and-file female members who joined the debate. In an article entitled, “The Black Revolutionary Woman,” Linda Greene discussed a new phenomenon of black women emerging. Greene wrote, “She is a change; she is inherently revolutionary.” However, Greene’s

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76 *Id.* at 9.
description of this new “revolutionary woman” does not alter much from the more traditional view expressed by the previous author. Greene wrote:

This woman is, and must be, a Black man’s everything. She is a worker. She is a mother. She is a companion, intellectual, spiritual, mental, and physical. She is what her man, and what her people need her to be, when they need her. She is the strength of the struggle.

She will, and does fulfill the needs of her Black man when they are made known to her, and when they are not evidence, she will and does seek them out.

In her work she does not distract the men with whom she works when it is the time for work. She is everything, because she is and must be the reservoir of life for Black brothers who fight and live and die in these desert sands of life as we know it now.  

Greene reinforced the idea of a complementary black woman—but again, one who was as integral to the black revolution as her mate. Greene’s description was more “traditional” than “revolutionary.” She painted the picture of a woman whose role was to stand by her man. However, Greene went on to add, “She is militant, revolutionary, committed, strong, and warm, feminine, loving and kind. These qualities are not the antithesis of each other; they must all be her simultaneously.” What many would have viewed as a contradiction between woman as “militant and strong” and as “warm and feminine,” Greene described as the new type of black woman. Yet even in her portrayal of this new black revolutionary woman, Greene illustrated her own wariness to stray too far from women’s traditional role. Thus she was careful to place black women’s

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78 Id.
79 Id.
purported obligations to take part in the revolution within an accepted, traditional framework.

Once again, Greene illustrated female Panthers’ internal conflict over their role in the revolution. Greene’s “inherently revolutionary” woman may have been the “strength of the struggle” but she was careful not to “distract the men.” It is somewhat unclear how black women would distract black men, according to Greene. Was Greene referring to women being a sexual distraction? Or was Greene more concerned with women’s presence serving to detract from the Party’s focus on the redemption of black men?

In the second article, Gloria Bartholomew continued the discourse on the black woman’s place in the revolution. Bartholomew answered the “woman question” rhetorically by saying, “What is a Black woman’s chief function, if it is not to live for her man.” She asserted:

Black women must drop the white ways of trying to be equal to the Black man. The woman’s place is to stand behind the Black man, so in the event he should start to fail she is there to hold him up with her strength . . . [S]top playing the role of a man, and take your place beside your man as a BEAUTIFUL BLACK WOMAN . . .

Like Greene, Bartholomew did not challenge the traditional role of black women as nurturer and caretaker, yet she too asserted their strength. Bartholomew suggested a role for black women in the Party to serve as a complementary reinforcement to black men. In advising women to stand behind their man, she did not take issue with the centrality of black men within the Party. After all, if the Party’s objectives were to imbue

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81 Id.
the black community with appropriate definitions of black men, what better image to convey than that of a woman standing behind her man?

Bartholomew’s words also indicate that she viewed the notion of “women’s equality” as a white woman’s ideal. This was a common notion within the Party as “women’s lib” was often talked about as a “bourgeois” concept. Therefore, while, according to Bartholomew, black women served an important function within the BPP, their place was secondary to black men.

While these articles provide good examples of the discussion going on within the Party’s rank-and-file concerning the role of the black woman as revolutionary, attention was also paid to the position of women within the Party itself. Addressing intra-Party gender dynamics, Panther women took a much more aggressive stance on the participation of women than those put forward by Greene or Bartholomew. Perhaps the reason for this shift from a theoretical to a more “practical” debate about intra-Party gender dynamics was the result of even greater female participation in the BPP, which resulted largely from the FBI’s COINTELPRO activities, discussed supra.

In May 1969, Panther June Culberson’s critique of the Party’s gender dynamics made its way into The Black Panther. She wrote:

[O]ur role is to fight in and participate in this revolution on an equal footing with our men. They have proved through practice that (1) it is a necessity that we be given equal footing and equal rank according to acquired abilities, (2) it can be done without the emotional hangups concerning our sex (female) in direct relation to theirs (male). We would like to be regarded as PANTHERS not females (Pantherettes), just Panthers.83

82 See generally Panther Sisters on Women’s Liberation, supra note 23 (discussing the “bourgeois” nature of the women’s liberation movements).
Culberson’s distinction between “Panthers” and “Pantherettes” referred to more than semantics. It symbolized a significant shift taking place in the Party. Long gone were the days of Newton and Seale referring to the Party as “an organization that would involve the lower-class brothers.” Instead, female Party members steered Party rhetoric toward the use of gender-neutral terms such as “comrades” or “soldiers.” For example, in 1969, Afeni Shakur and Joan Bird were among the 21 Panthers arrested in New York on charges of conspiring to murder policemen and bomb police stations.\(^{84}\) In an interview given to *The New York Times* while the two women were awaiting trial, they quite deliberately referred to themselves in gender-neutral terms as “soldiers in a class struggle.”\(^{85}\)

While it may not be correct to credit Culberson as the lone initiator of this dramatic change, her article in *The Black Panther* probably was the first to directly address the way that female members wanted to be referred to within the Party.\(^{86}\) Amid expanding rank-and-file female membership, Panther women were re-shaping the Party’s internal vernacular, and more importantly, the Party’s overall direction.

Culberson went on to challenge work assignments given to female members within the Party:

> Just as there are ‘rally’ panthers, the brothers have allowed the sisters to become ‘desk’ panthers by not educating them to what they can and should be doing in the streets and in the field . . . It will be the direct fault of the brothers when sisters become conditioned to the easy life and pampering of just doing office work, and they are unable to adjust to the hard life of fighting . . .

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\(^{85}\) *Id.*
\(^{86}\) See Matthews, *supra* note 1, at 327 (discussing Culberson’s article as the first to directly confront the position of women within the Party).
The sisters will turn into their ultrafeminine counterparts and will be unsuitable for revolution.\footnote{The Role of the a [sic] Revolutionary Woman, supra note 83, at 9.} Culberson provides insight into the level of female involvement in the BPP in 1969 with two important points. First, Panther women did not enjoy equal participation in the Party and were being relegated to more subordinate types of roles. Second, and more importantly, Panther women were unhappy with this type of work and wanted to be more involved on the Party’s front line. Thus, attitudes had clearly changed. Contrary to Bartholomew’s rejection of “women’s equality,” Culberson challenged the idea that the Party’s purpose revolved around Panther men.

Furthermore, implicit in Culberson’s critique was the idea that female membership was key to preventing the ultimate downfall of the Party. By calling out that “it will be the direct fault of the brothers” when the “sisters . . . are unable to adjust to the hard life of fighting,” Culberson is surely referring to the great numbers of Panther men being killed or sent to prison. Therefore, she is quick to point out to her fellow members that the future of the Party lay in the hands of Panther women. Along with her demand for a gender-neutral vernacular was a warning that it was time for women to be given equal roles within the Party’s day-to-day activities. A more prominent, and visible role for Panther women was at odds with the Party’s early hyper-masculine rhetoric, imagery, and objectives. Though such a shift was necessary to sustain the Party’s existence, it significantly altered intra-Party gender dynamics in a way that was unintended, or at the very least unanticipated, in the Party’s early days.
Later in 1969 Jackie Harper, another female member, wrote a quasi-BPP manifesto—from a woman’s point of view. In her article, “Sisters-Comrades at Arms,” she wrote:

We are to be (as well as the brothers) out and out cold-blooded. There is no need for sewing circles and cooking duty at home. We are Revolutionaries! . . . We are obligated to struggle on, to educate, to provide, to serve the people. We do not believe in male chauvinism, so therefore we are doing this on our own which makes it even harder to stick. We must show these brothers and the people that surround us, that we mean business.

We, the sisters of the Black Panther Party do declare that we will stand through thick and thin by the side of our brothers and declare open war against these fascist fools . . . These are pigs who don’t care whether you’re male or female.

The sisters of the Black Panther Party will stand and help one another achieve the goal set for our people.  

Like Culberson’s earlier call for women to be “on equal footing with our men,” Harper eliminated any distinction in the roles that should be given to Panther men and women. She also identified a common enemy to both black men and women. The “pigs,” she said, “don’t care whether you’re male or female.” Thus Culberson serves to illustrate how the Party was influenced by, and adopted, the way in which the so-called ‘dominant’ society treated all black people as a homogenous group. Since “the pigs” did not care who was male or female, why should Party members?

She also identified the issue of male chauvinism, and asserted that the way to deal with any sexist attitudes within the Party is to “show these brothers . . . that we mean business.” Harper’s advice for female members to show men they “meant business” may

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have been a common tactic among female members to command respect. According to Assata Shakur:

[A] lot of us [women] adopted that kind of macho type style in order to survive in the Black Panther Party. It was very difficult to say “well listen brother, I think that . . . we should do this and this.” [I]n order to be listened to, you had to just say, “look mothafucka,” you know. You had to develop this whole arrogant kind of macho style in order to be heard . . . We were just involved in those day to day battles for respect in the Black Panther Party.\textsuperscript{89}

Thus, while Harper’s article could be cast aside as internal Party rhetoric among the rank-and-file, Shakur provides an example of how such rhetoric played itself out within the Party’s daily activities. Like Tarika Lewis before them, Shakur and Harper demonstrated how the Party’s early hyper-masculine identity survived in the midst of greater female participation. Yet, arguably, in the midst of greater female participation such hyper-masculinity played an even more superficial role. That is, these hyper-masculine images had been constructed in the Party’s early days as a means of projecting positive images of strong black men to the black community. Now, women were forced to use these masculine tactics in an internal battle to gain respect.

Both Culberson’s and Harper’s articles illustrate that as women were becoming more and more prevalent in the Party, more than just Party membership was undergoing a transformation. Culberson and Harper signify the opposition to the earlier expressed views that women were to play a secondary or complementary role to black men in the midst of the revolution. They also demonstrate that women were becoming more comfortable in asserting themselves within the Party. With a clear numerical majority, women were more outspoken. They therefore had the ability to shape not only intra-Party

\textsuperscript{89} Interview by Tracye Matthews with Assata Shakur (July 30, 1993), \textit{in} Matthews, \textit{supra} note 16, at 290.
discourse, but also Party ideology. Yet as women continued to assert themselves as integral members within the Party, they grew even more aware of men’s fears that women had taken control over the Party’s goals.

These articles, and others that were published in The Black Panther, illustrate that there was a constant dialogue going on inside the Party about gender roles. While the editorial board determined which articles would be published in The Black Panther, it was significant that the board made a decision to put these issues front and center.

It was also significant how much the Party had changed. Both its membership base and gender ideology had undergone a rather dramatic transformation. A Party that had once justified itself by using calculated, heroic images of men was now downplaying any disparity between the sexes in order to pay greater attention to its women.

**Gender as an Increasing Source of Tension**

The gender issue became an increasing source of tension within the Party’s rank-and-file. Just as illuminating as the editorial board’s decision to feature articles tackling gender issues in the pages of The Black Panther, the Party publicized the gender issue outside the four corners of its newspaper. In September 1969, the Panthers published a four-page leaflet entitled “Panther Sisters on Women’s Liberation.” Six anonymous women addressed a wide variety of topics dealing with gender, and women’s roles within the Party.

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90 See Matthews, supra note 1, at 331.
91 Id.
92 Panther Sisters on Women’s Liberation, supra note 23.
When asked how women’s position within the BPP had changed, one interviewee answered, “I’ve only been in the Party about ten months and when I got in the Party the thing about Pantherettes was squashed, we sort of grew out of it . . . [But] [u]nless we speak against [male chauvinism] . . . it’ll still be here.” The respondent went on to posit that the added level of responsibility that Panther women had taken on, had, in part, resulted from the fact that “a lot of sisters have been writing more articles . . .” Thus the debate played out on the pages of *The Black Panther* had not gone unnoticed.

The women featured in the leaflet went on to speak about a significant change in Party ideology—one that June Culberson had envisioned in her article in *The Black Panther*. One woman explained:

> And I can see since the time I joined the Party that the Party has undergone radical change in the direction of women leadership and emancipation of women . . . It’s the fact that the political consciousness and the political level of members of the Party have risen very much since I joined the Party and because of the fact that we’re moving toward a proletarian revolution and because we have come to realize that male chauvinism and all its manifestations are bourgeois and that’s one of the things we’re fighting against. We realize that in a proletarian revolution, the emancipation of women is primary. We realize that the success of the revolution depends upon the women.

Whether the reasons put forward for the Party’s increased emphasis on women can be traced back to a deliberate shift in political consciousness is somewhat beside the point. After all, arguably such a change was the product of a dwindling male leadership and an increasing female base within the Party. Either way, the implications are extraordinary. To assert, even at the rank-and-file level, that the emancipation of women

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93 *Id.* at 258.
94 *Id.*
95 *Id.* at 259.
was primary to the revolution being staged by the BPP represented a dramatic shift from Newton’s, Seale’s, and Cleaver’s early rhetoric. This was clearly no longer an organization comprised of the “lower class brothers” nor was it one being used to typify the “cream of Black manhood.”

Throughout the interview, these Panther women repeatedly asserted a gender-neutral Party platform, in which participation was not determined by sex but rather by independent awareness in a politically conscious meritocracy. “It’s been proven,” one respondent contended, “that positions aren’t relegated to sex, it depends on your political awareness.” Yet clearly the Party did not exist in a vacuum. As a result, such assertions did not function without other socio-cultural “baggage.” As one respondent admits:

[S]ome brothers still have this fear of women dominating the whole political scene. It may not be voiced that often, but I think it’s a very real fear, and we’re going to have to be sensitive enough to recognize it. We’re going to have to be sensitive enough to say that we’re going to take more of a share of the political arena but, at the same time, we’re going to have to keep these things in mind.

Thus, contradiction existed between the Party’s shift in ideology and attempts to put that ideology into practice. It is somewhat unclear what was responsible for the recognition on behalf of female members that men feared female dominance. There are perhaps two possibilities. One may be that it stemmed simply from women’s numerical majority in a Party that had once been dominated by men. On the other hand, it may have reflected the broader social context in which black men and women tended to operate. In other words, did it have anything to do with those assertions made by the anonymous male writer in The Black Panther that there existed a “feeling of superiority in Black

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96 Id.
97 Id. at 262.
In either case, there was a less than subtle power struggle that affected the larger Party objective. Even if the Party’s overall objective had become less focused on images of black men, how could Party members focus on the primary struggle over, say, the fight for equality, while also having to remain conscious of such sensitive intra-Party gender dynamics?

A further example highlights the tension between male and female members within the Party. Such tension often took the form of unwanted sexual advances by male Panthers. Panther Regina Jennings recalled the kinds of sexual pressure that faced many Panther women, in the face of their total commitment to the Party:

Women in the Black Panther Party worked as hard as the men. We organized rallies, sold papers, fed the children in community-run breakfast programs, exercised, had target practice and guarded the party’s offices. But sometime we were expected to share our bodies against our will.

We demanded the right to control our own bodies through discussions and petitions to the Party’s central committee. Too often, however, we were overruled by brothers who made us feel we were bringing “bourgeois” beliefs into the vanguard army. Because we passionately loved the principles of the Party, we yielded our position for the sake of Panther unity. But it became a terrible strain to fight oppression in the streets and coordinate community programs during the day, then chase Panther brothers out of our beds at night. Although the brothers in the Party fought bravely against the racist practices found in America, toward us— their sisters and comrades in the revolutionary struggle—they were sexists who completely overlooked our rights as Black women.99

Jennings account illustrates the tension that existed over what was “expected” from Panther women. On the one hand they played vital roles in carrying out the Party’s day-to-day activities. This was consistent with their majority presence within the Party and the increasing responsibility they had been encouraged to undertake by those articles

98 “Subjectivism” . . . from a Male’s Point of View, supra note 72, at 9.
featured in *The Black Panther*. On the other hand, they were expected to submit to men’s sexual advances in the name of the Party. Such expectation, and the fact that many felt the need to acquiesce to these demands, is consistent with female unwillingness to dominate intra-Party politics. Just as the previous example showed how women felt it was necessary to be sensitive to men’s fear of female dominance, Jennings’ description implies that women felt men were justified in expecting sex. At the time, sex was delivered “for the sake of Panther unity.” Thus, once again, intra-Party gender dynamics served as a source of tension amidst an effort to focus on the Party’s primary struggle. As a result, these intra-Party issues erected significant barriers to the Party’s ability to remain united.

**Conclusion**

The BPP was initially established as a distinctly male, revolutionary organization that operated to challenge existing stereotypical notions of black men within both the internal black community, and the larger (white) society. Early rhetoric focused on the recruitment of black men, in an effort to produce powerful, positive images of black men who would combat racism and police brutality in America. The Party’s formation operated against a backdrop of its founders’ theories concerning both race and gender politics, in which they placed black men at odds with each and every other American social group. Yet over the course of the Party’s history, its membership and ideology went through dramatic transformations. This was partly due to a pragmatic need for survival amidst a decreasing male membership and increased female presence. Yet, as the Party transformed, it also lost the focus of its early days, and internalized the values and
circumstances of the larger white society. The Party had originally viewed black men as uniquely situated as a result of their treatment by the dominant group. Yet it eventually lost sight of key differences between black men and black women. Rather than embrace and address those differences, as it had done at the outset of the Party’s formation, it allowed gender to play a divisive role.