

# White Women and Women of Color Confront Racism in the Women's Movement

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The growing complexity of gender relations is due to the interactions between gender and power differentials, such as race, ethnicity, age, class, ability, and sexual orientation. The acknowledgement of such intersections is vital in understanding and working with social issues, such as gender relations, but even in contemporary activism, there is an ongoing lack of inclusivity

in certain groups. Given the history of racism within the women's movement, the negative response from women of color to the SlutWalk is to be expected, and the oversight on the white organizers' part is clearly a legacy of the multigenerational problem of racism in feminism. In understanding the factors that allow racism to persist and taking note of successful



**View of the Women's March on Washington from the roof of the Voice of America building  
Women's March. Taken by Voice of America**

models of intersectionality, contemporary feminism can begin to improve and further develop their approaches to activism. Looking forward, the women's movement would benefit from the establishment of more organizations like the Young Women's Christian Association, which views racism and sexism as blended and inseparable. The involvement and approach

of these intersectional organizations will ultimately be vital to the success of the women's movement. Consequently, the intention of this research is to advance understanding of the history of racism in the women's movement in order to appreciate and be more aware of intersectionality in modern society.

In 2011, a few thousand feminists gathered in Toronto, Ontario for SlutWalk, a controversial protest that has since been repeated in American cities. According to Jo Reger (2015), a sociology professor who attended the walk for observational purposes, SlutWalk was organized—mostly by white women—in response to a police officer’s comment that women who do not want to be victims of sexual violence should not dress like “sluts.” The goals of the protest were to empower women and to reclaim their sexuality. However, women of color were instead angered by the event. Many organizations representing women of color spoke out against the walk, explaining that the white women who organized the walk had disregarded the experiences of women of color, whose sexuality has historically been constructed by oppression, sexual violence and exploitation (Reger, 2015). Serving as a contemporary example of mainstream feminism alienating women of color, SlutWalk and its faults are proof of the continuous presence of racism in the women’s movement. Moreover, the women’s movement has transformed in many aspects since its origin, and has undoubtedly become recognized as more and more complex with each generation. While the labels “feminism” and “women’s movement” may be misleading, gender issues embrace much more than conflict between men and women. The growing complexity of gender relations is due to the interactions between gender and power differentials, such as race, ethnicity, age, class, ability, and sexual orientation; this complexity has been increasingly studied and recognized in academia, politics, activism, and other spaces (Lykke, 2010). The acknowledgement of such intersections is vital in understanding and working with social issues, such as

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## The Segregation of Feminism

Racism has persisted in the women’s movement due to the influence of overwhelming institutional factors, white feminists’ role in inhibiting alliance between white women and women of color, and the perspectives of women of color regarding the white feminist community and their non-inclusive priorities. The first of these reasons, institutional factors, are structures in society that guide behavior, and can be related back to the origin of the women’s movement. According to Jamie M. Grant and Sherry Parker (1998), the women’s movement developed from the disenfranchisement of women and black citizens in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. The document, which has served as the foundation for the United States, was strategically written in order to exclude women and people of color—particularly evident in the statement that “all men are created equal,” (The U.S. National Archives, n.d., para. 2). The overwhelming societal segregation during this early generation of the movement inhibited integration efforts of first-wave feminists, and the implications extended to similarly impact second-wave feminism on a structural level. These institutional racial dynamics led to white feminists’ role in racial exclusion because they internalized the racism established by previous generations.

The role of white feminists has also largely contributed to racism within the women’s movement. This factor has been noted as far back as the movement’s origins, when in 1848, women of color were discouraged from participating in the first women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls (Grant & Parker, 1998). Although it is apparent there are instances of intentional exclusion of women of color by white feminists in the past, second-wave white feminists’ role in preventing alliance between white women and women of color seems to be unintentional. The faults of second-wave white feminists are interconnected: an abstract anti-racism view, a lack of connection and understanding, and a privileged assumption of representation. Wini Breines, distinguished scholar and author of several books pertaining to racism and feminism, wrote an article which examines racial tensions in the second-wave of the women’s movement. She identifies these faults of white feminists while reflecting on feedback gathered in combination with her experiences as an activist during the 1960s and 70s. In general, white

women and women of color did not know each other; therefore, white women had little understanding of the issues women of color faced (Breines, 2002). White women's lack of connection and interaction with women of color could be considered a catalyst for white feminists' other shortcomings in racial-inclusiveness. Subsequently, this disconnect allowed white feminists to develop an abstract anti-racist ideology that dominated mainstream action and organization (Breines, 2002). White feminists' abstract anti-racism was an issue in which white women advocated for racial equality without truly understanding or attempting to understand the priorities and concerns of those affected. The results of their blind advocacy were insignificant for women of color, causing a feeling of invisibility.

Furthermore, white feminists adopted a privileged assumption of representation (Breines, 2002). Second-wave white feminists incorrectly assumed their experiences were representative and universal, and therefore failed to acknowledge and support the separate issues faced by women of color. Breines (2002) notes that this assumption was, to some extent, motivated by a desire to ignore differences in hopes of maintaining the image of female unity. Overall, white feminists of the second-wave contributed to racism by solely focusing on gender as the single oppressive factor. White women were oblivious to how racism, sexism, and class interact and affect women of color, which excluded and ostracized women of color and, consequently, damaged women of color's perception of and identification with the women's movement (Breines, 2002).

The perspectives of women of color regarding the white feminist community and their priorities largely contributed to perpetuating the racial separation. Regarding female conditions and corresponding concerns, white women and women of color differ in more than a few ways. In an article analyzing white and black feminists' relations in the 1970s, Jane Torrey (1979), gender studies professor and feminist leader in her community, highlighted several differences in perspectives and experiences that led women of color to disengage with white feminists (Love, 2006). As Torrey observed, one of the most common dissimilarities was the issue of homemaker dependency; women who depended on a husband prioritized liberation from the full-time housewife role

and the freedom to take on a job outside the home. Many women of color were not offered the luxury of depending on a man and had no choice but to fulfill both roles, provider and homemaker. Therefore, the white woman's concern with liberation from the homemaker role did not apply to women of color

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and was commonly perceived as naïve and ungrateful (Torrey, 1979).

White women's resistance to femininity, and the narrow role of a woman that it allowed, was another concern with which women of color did not identify. Racial distinctions in the issue of femininity could be related to the position of a female slave or working-class woman. Torrey (1979) noted that, historically, black women had to disengage from the notion of femininity to produce labor, and due to the lack of expectations for them to present themselves in a manner pleasing to the man, black women were not limited to dependent and domestic roles. Women of color were able to develop a stronger, more complex female identity as a result of the conditions they involuntarily experienced (Torrey, 1979). In contrast, white women of the second-wave struggled to achieve this development of the female identity by resisting the traditional view of femininity. White feminists failed to acknowledge that black women already embodied many of the strengths they were seeking; instead they assumed black women joined them in the quest to reject the feminine limitations. The *Feminine Mystique*, written by Betty Friedan and published in 1963, addressed the feminists' concerns with femininity and the consequential role of a housewife. Friedan, one of the most formative theorists of the second-wave of the women's movement, expresses “the feminine mystique” as an idealized image of domestic womanhood that emerged in the 1950s and prevented women from developing autonomous, educated identities (Friedan, 1963). The *Feminine Mystique*, intended to encourage men and women to reject the

notion that female fulfillment was found solely in the home, serves as an illustration of mainstream feminist concerns with which women of color did not identify. The fact that Friedan, who was such an influential feminist of this era, committed these errors that excluded women of color reveals how even leaders in the movement perpetuated racist and exclusionary ideologies.

Another feminist concern affected by racial differences is the issue of sexual abuse. The role of sexual liberation in the women's movement differed between white women and women of color due to contrasting attitudes toward sexuality (Torrey, 1979). According to Torrey, although both white and black women were victims of rape from the white man, the experience differs in that the black woman had been seen and used as a sex object that could be taken by force, as opposed to the white woman, whose sexuality could be acquired by "flowers and a decent living" (1979, p. 286). While white women were seen as something to be obtained through charm, the approach white men took regarding women of color was based more on a power dynamic and an attitude of entitlement. White women could use their sexuality as a bargaining chip in their power struggle with white men, while women of color could not. Fittingly, women of color held significantly different attitudes about sex and sexual abuse than white women, causing the role of sexuality in the liberation movement to differ between races. Frances Beale (2008) addresses these discrepancies concisely in "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" by claiming that the black woman in America can be described as the "slave of a slave," powerless in a situation in which she is physically, socially, economically, and emotionally manipulated (p. 168).

Furthermore, women of color diverged from white women in their perspectives of each other. Specifically, black women held attitudes toward white women that made it difficult for them to join and work together. Black women identified with each other more easily than they did with white women, likely due to the history of female slaves treated unjustly by white women (Torrey, 1979). Additionally, Torrey attributed these perspectives to a "high level of black consciousness," in which black women tended to focus on racial differences and tensions, instead of focusing on a common purpose (1979, p. 287).

Lastly, women of color often felt objectified, ignored, and rejected by white feminists, which contributed to their resistance to ally with white women. According to Breines (2002), black feminists felt that the feminist movement was not applicable to them, and white feminists, who largely defined mainstream feminism, seemed to only acknowledge matters that directly affected them. Women of color suggested that the privilege of white women inhibited their ability to understand that race and class were of equal concern to women of color as gender discrimination (Breines, 2002). A compilation of second-wave feminist writings, *Sisterhood is Powerful*, helps illustrate this imbalance (1970). The first edition anthology, edited by Robin Morgan, another key figure in the second-wave of the women's movement, included only one race-inclusive text—a document from the Black Women's Liberation Group in Mount Vernon articulating the group's demand for race-consciousness (Morgan, 1970; Brain, 2006). The inclusion of this document expresses the mainstream feminist intention to support all women and by helping increase awareness of the need for race-consciousness in the women's movement. However, the fact that the compilation does not include several texts discussing intersectionality indicates the imbalance of mainstream priorities during the second-wave. White feminists failed to acknowledge the equal importance of the concerns of women of color, therefore excluding women of color.

## **Intersectional and Interracial Alliances**

Despite opposing influences, the second-wave of the women's movement saw instances of successful alliances between white feminists and feminists of color that have made lasting impacts on the women's movement. According to Grant and Parker (1998), mainstream women's organizations, particularly the Young Women's Christian Association, focused intensely on fighting racism during the 1970s and 80s. The YWCA, now working through more than 1,300 sites across the United States, reports decades of dedication to their mission of "eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all" ("Mission & Vision," n.d.). According to the YWCA's history records, the organization has consistently made explicit and purposeful efforts in both the civil rights and women's movement, as well as efforts to integrate the two,

since 1946 when the YWCA adopted the Interracial Charter. The YWCA acknowledges and challenges the intersections of oppression, including gender, race and class, serving as an example of effective alliance and purposeful connection. Today, the YWCA provides direct services and programs related to racial justice and sponsors the annual “Stand Against Racism” campaign, which builds community for those working for racial justice and raises awareness about racial issues. The YWCA also supports the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), an international agreement on extinguishing gender discrimination in economic, political, and social spheres (“Racial Justice and Civil Rights”, n.d.). The YWCA is a model of successful intersectional alliance that modern activists should strive to emulate; the organization helps to increase awareness of the interrelated nature of racism and sexism and promotes alliance between women across race.

Previous research and experience have identified several factors that are necessary to make alliances among women across race possible. Torrey (1979) notes that women of color and white women must put forth a mutual effort to form successful relationships. White women must take initiative to correct their faults and be inclusive, and women of color must be active in the women’s movement to be sure their concerns are fairly addressed. Reciprocity of effort and purpose is essential to interracial cooperation. Furthermore, a necessary balance occurs when women of color have independent organizations supplementing their involvement in interracial cooperation. It is crucial for women of color to maintain a “separate base to protect their strength,” in addition to integrated groups; this beneficial type of separation allows women of color to maintain unity as a group while informing and working with allies (Torrey, 1979, p. 291). Eliminating racism within the women’s movement is possible if women of all races put forth a mutual effort to work together while maintaining unity in subgroups of women.

Furthermore, cooperative union across races within the women’s movement is critical in order to overcome racism and sexism in society as a whole. One of the most overt reasons to work together is the interaction between racism and sexism. Women of color cannot be truly liberated as women until racial oppression is eliminated. Although it is unclear if

women of color are more disadvantaged by their sex or race independently, it is evident that the interaction of the two not only contributes to the oppression of women of color, but it creates particular experiences that need to be fully understood. History has proven that activist causes are more successful when joined together to challenge intersecting oppressions.

In addition to the interrelated nature of discrimination, white women and women of color may be motivated to work together by the problems and solutions they share. The most commonly shared problem between women of color and white women is sexism. Torrey analyzes how sexism served both white men and men of color in gaining advantage at women’s expense. Instead of allying in the face of discrimination, men of color tended to disregard the concerns of women by adhering to a “more-oppressed-than-thou attitude toward all women” (1979, p. 288). Sexism for women of color and white women parallel in the manner that the men of their respective races have failed to include them in efforts for equality. Regarding common solutions for women of all racial backgrounds, Torrey (1979) identifies the economic objectives of the women’s movement as grounds for unity, including the desire for equity in job opportunities and sharing child care and housework with men. Although variances arise in details of these goals, the principles of the objectives address the concerns of women of color and white women alike.

Lastly, Torrey (1979) reports that women of color and white women suffer from similar psychological pressures. Some women have acknowledged that dependency on welfare and a husband elicit similar feelings of lost autonomy, and women of all races feel societal pressures to be subservient, passive, and feminine. However, it is important to note that common interest among women across race does not discount the importance of the aforementioned differences in concerns. Shared interests should serve to bring women together, not erase key distinctions in experiences. In an attempt to find commonality, key differences should not be ignored, but rather acknowledged and appreciated.

Given this history of racism within the women’s movement, the response from women of color to the SlutWalk is to be expected, and the oversight on the white organizers’ part is clearly a legacy of this multigenerational problem of racism in feminism. In understanding the factors that allow

racism to persist and taking note of successful models of intersectionality, contemporary feminism can begin to improve and further develop their approaches to activism. Looking forward, the women's movement would benefit from the establishment of more organizations like the YWCA, which views racism and sexism as blended and inseparable. The involvement and approach of these intersectional organizations will ultimately be vital to the success of the women's movement. Without the inclusion of all women, the women's movement cannot truly succeed. Modern feminists must reflect on the history of the women's movement in order to avoid committing the same detrimental mistakes made in the past.

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