

CROSS currents

by Wickie Stamps

This, the month of the woman, seems like a good time to reflect upon the feminist movement, a piece of history that is almost as misrepresented and maligned as the Black power movement.

First, let me clarify what the feminist movement was NOT. It did not consist of a bunch of white, academic women like Camille Paglia, Andrea Dworkin or Hillary Clinton. The true leaders of the feminist movement were the women — usually poor women of color, Violence against them — in prisons, on the job, or in the neighborhoods of bedrooms — was a daily reality. Many of these women, had been organizing for years. They had to. Otherwise they would have died. But, because of their poverty and skin tones, no one paid any attention to their efforts until women with more power and — less color to their skin — started screaming about their oppression. It was the media, and the race and class bias in this country, that perpetuated the image that it was wealthy white girls who forged a movement that came off of the backs of poor women and women of color.

Also, the agenda of the feminist movement's politic was not just anti-pornography. That politic emerged later and is held by only a certain segment of the movement. And when it emerged, at a time when women were just beginning to talk about the violence and abuse women truly face in this country, many women in the women's movement, fearing the direction this politic might take, fought against a shallow theoretical interpretation. But the right wing descended upon this politic like locusts — and war broke out in the feminist movement.

Women in the feminist movement were fighting to save their lives and the lives of their friends. Many of these less visible women fought and created significant change in our country. Some created alternatives to the psychiatric system which saw shock and dangerous psyche medication therapy as the cures for female troubles such as depression and other mental illnesses which stemmed from years of being directly and indirectly told they were garbage. Others, whose family members were incarcerated in state prisons or insane asylums that were merely prisons where the staff wore white, founded prisoner rights groups.

One of these Dorchester-based projects was shaped by a Muslim woman who provided transportation for the children of women who were incarcerated at MCI Framingham. She also implemented a Sesame Street program than ran during visiting hours to help humanize the prison visiting room.

Simultaneously, other women successfully blocked the opening of the "Violent Women's Unit" in MCI, Framingham. Like most psychiatric units, it was to house poor, uppity, i.e. militant women who wouldn't just shut up and act like life as a woman in the U.S. of A. was a groovy thing.

Other women from this movement went on to found services for black women addicts and their children. Also based in Boston, Roxbury to be exact, it also was the first program in the United States to let the women's children live with them while they recovered from their addictions. Throughout the U.S., women fought for equal pay and the right of women internationally. Prior to this, women were trapped in poverty or imprisoned in marriages, jails — or their own minds.

They opened — and often built with their own hands — battered women's shelters, something that did not exist. Despite their personal and political repugnance, they forced the idiotic cops to stop just patting male batterers on the back — men who beat their wives and kids so badly that the neighbors could hear the screams. These same women, *most* of whom came out as lesbian as a result of the feminist movement, thought that battered lesbians should receive services in the shelters they helped build.

The feminist movement was a great deal more than Hillary Clinton's feminist agenda which sees women's issues as only those things associated with improving our roles as nurturers.

Now don't get me wrong. The feminist movement was ripe with racism, sexism, classism and homophobia. But there were moments, usually after brutal political battles, when the barriers dropped and women saw and heard each other beyond the stereotypes this country — and their families — shoved down their throats. And it was usually the working-class women, lesbians and lesbians of color, who sparked these challenges and forced everyone to see to beyond their respective oppressions. Those who were more privileged learned that poverty is not a noble condition but a fungus that destroys lives. And that, if you are poor or a person of color, you become a faceless, nameless member of a hoard who will be gunned down, raped and neglected — and no one, save your peers, will care or even notice. And the sisters learned that just because you come from money or are white, that pain is pain and a fist will rip open flesh no matter what shade of your skin.

Few walked away from that movement without being changed. Most learned that they didn't have to take shit from anyone again. This attitude never won these women any popularity contests. But it usually kept the women alive long enough to get their two cents in before someone shot, raped, verbally humiliated or incarcerated them. Which is why these women, despite their differences came together in the first place.

So, please — let's stop focusing on the Camille Paglias and Andrea Dworkins (who, by the way, keeps many of us on our theoretical toes and who also, unlike Paglia, busted her ass fighting violence against women). They are merely blowhards fighting windmills. The rest of us were fighting real battles against real people — not selling our books and being begged to lecture at Harvard. More than likely, most women I know from the feminist movement have been picketing outside the Crimson gates, protesting yet another heinous act by that revered, repressive institution.

The feminist movement was a place filled with revolutionary vision — and revolutionaries. I thought I'd take our *one* month out of the year and just give people a glimmer of what really went on.