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Topic II: Chicanas Confronted Daily by the Limitations of begin WOMen in this Patricarchal Society

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TOPIC II:

CHICANAS ARE CONFRONTED DAILY BY THE LIMITATION OF BEING WOMEN IN THIS PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY: THE ATTEMPT TO ASSERT ISSUES AROUND "SEXISM" IS OFTEN MET WITH RESISTANCE AND SCORN. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MAJOR DIFFICULTIES IN THE ARENA OF RELATIONS AMONG OURSELVES? HOW ARE THE RELATIONSHIPS OF WOMEN TO WOMEN AND MEN TO MEN AFFECTED? HOW DO WE OVERCOME THE CONSTRAINTS OF SEXISM?

Speaker: Gloria Holguín Cuádriz

Whether subtle or blatant, sexism is our reality.
IT IS ALSO YOURS

Whether intentional or non-intentional, the fact remains that Chicanas face sexism on a daily basis. Just as our Anglo counterparts hesitate to deal with their racism, so must Chicanos and Chicanas learn to deal with their sexism. The examples are numerous; this is just one taken from a Latino magazine describing its monthly cover girl:

It's very, very difficult to imagine Patty Koteró barefoot and pregnant. Those sultry eyes were surely meant to gaze provocatively at the world from the cover of a glossy magazine; that lush body with fat only in the *right* places and just a hint of clothing to cover them must certainly have been put here to inspire women's envy and men's fantasies.

She seems to be the perfect Latina, the one who can make tortillas all day and never has a headache at night!⁶

6. *Q-Vol For Today's Latino*, May/June, 1981, Vol.3, no.1, p. 9.

One may ask of this portrayal: Is it intentional or non-intentional? Given what this perpetuates, does it make *any difference*? This is just one example of many. It just so happens to be a blatant one. But, how many times has the sexism been so subtle that when you had a few minutes to reflect on the interaction--you realized that it was sexist in nature?

The question we raise is:
HOW DO WE DEAL WITH THE SEXISM?

As we see it, Chicanas have two options.

ONE: WE CAN REMAIN SILENT

TWO: WE CAN CONFRONT IT

Yet in remaining silent, we:

1. Remain frustrated and internalize our oppression;
2. Reinforce a false sense of manhood;
3. Reinforce the oppression of both men and women, because ultimately, our struggle for liberation suffers.

Moreover, what are the consequences when we *do confront* the sexism? As we see it, the initial thing which occurs is that we become labeled. Be it as a "women's libber" or as a "radical feminist," by virtue of the labels imposed upon us and the reputation which accompanies it, often we are not only alienated but also ostracized from the "OLD BOYS NETWORK."

Commentary: Gloria is making the point that we, as women, are continually faced with instances of sexism and when we defend ourselves against the dominance, we are additionally faced with a rationale that rejects our protests. We are faced with a discourse of dominance. It is a rationale, an ideology, that portrays dedicated, assertive women as inappropriately pushy, or hostile. That is, it is an ideology which accepts women only as agreeably passive. La mujer does not need to be pushy or hostile, to be seen so by those who feel most threatened by her. Rather, women are embodied with a strength that can and should be utilized in the struggle against the very forces that oppress her.

TOPIC II: DISCUSSION

Many women, in response to the issues raised, expressed the frustrations they experience when attempting to achieve liberation from an oppression that is not only detrimental to women, but to the men as well. For example, women spoke of the defensiveness they encountered from men as a result of disagreeing with them. The hegemonic discourse requires them to be agreeably passive and they are considered out of place if they overstep this boundary. Many women asserted that if they were to achieve their dignity as scholars in a male-dominated world, then it would be necessary to refrain from being agreeably passive and instead assert their presence as thinking individuals. Because this is so challenging to assumptions long held about how the Chicana should behave, such assertion results in conflict.

Some felt that this conflict was a necessary consequence to the shake-up of any status quo. Others were more anxious to make the transition without stepping on any toes.

Some at the panel said that you shouldn't have to confront somebody, that you can make them aware in different ways. When the female audience member was asked in what different ways, she replied, "Don't have anything to do with them."

Another woman said, "How many times have we heard that from whites? How many times have we heard that we shouldn't be so demanding?"

One may ask of this portrayal: Is it intentional or non-intentional? Given what this perpetuates, does it make *any difference*? This is just one example of many. It just so happens to be a blatant one. But, how many times has the sexism been so subtle that when you had a few minutes to reflect on the interaction--you realized that it was sexist in nature?

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Commentary: The issue, nonetheless, may be seen as one of demand politics versus the politics of appeal. To insist that one approach is better than another is to ignore the complexities of politics. While this particular document will not elaborate on the issues of strategy, it will certainly acknowledge its critical importance in attempts toward progressive change. The point that many were making at the session was that women are currently engaged in many forms of strategy within the movement by women.

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Man: "Part of our reaction is because we have been trained to respond to debate. With a man it is an almost automatic response, 'oh yeah,' well it's a one-upmanship."

--"When you say we as a group, are you saying you as men or you as Chicanos? Who is we?"

--"Women are not allowed to engage in an argument that involves using our training, our ability to argue, our ability to make a point, our ability to respond to someone else's point."

--"Many times what I see with Chicano academicians, and I mean men, is that they have absorbed many of the values of the white academic world and are comfortable, although not completely, in engaging at that level of: 'Oh no, you are wrong...Haven't you looked at what's that study? Aren't you aware of such and such a place?' White men are infinitely more repressed and polite: 'You must not have looked at, or perhaps you have neglected, those kinds of things.' What I am discovering in the Chicana feminist movement is that we are saying that we not only despise that kind of dialogue, but that *we will not do it* and we will call you on it when you do it; and that calling may not come in a form you may want to hear. it may come with a reaction."

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A man said that the notion of confrontation was narrow. There are different kinds of responses and confrontation is one, and necessary under certain kinds of conditions. He further suggests that assertiveness and confrontation may be appropriate in women's attempts to fight for the rights, but that this should not be an attack on the men. "Don't rate it in terms of 'you male chauvinist pig.'" He was, therefore, differentiating between attack and assertiveness.

Commentary: Given the significance of historical and socio-economic factors, it is probably more useful not to "rate sexism in terms of 'you male chauvinist pig.'" The dilemma looms large of how much responsibility to attribute to the individual in light of structural contexts.

The immediate response to his comments: "We're talking about opening up a dialogue without stepping on anybody's toes first, but I never once in my life heard a male say, 'I'm sorry for stepping on your toes.' The men stepped on the toes first. Men are saying if there is a confrontation it is hard to communicate, but there has already been a confrontation."

Another woman added that assertiveness itself is not necessarily effective. "One thing that men aren't willing to do is to take you seriously as an intellectual. For example, when trying to contribute to a discussion, assertiveness does not guarantee that the woman will be taken seriously."

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Panelist: "Men are not aware of sexist acts and that's why they keep committing these sexist acts. If the woman brings this to the attention of men, then she has to pay the consequences, and she pays highly. The men have to want to educate themselves and become more aware. Men have to become aware of their own sexist acts, because men commit them."

Man: "What are those consequences you pay?"

Woman: "We are labeled, the word spreads and we are ostracized from the networks. If a job offer comes up, post doc, if you are too aggressive and too assertive, and possibly threaten the traditional role, you won't get considered. Rarely are qualified Chicanas pushed forward."

Woman: "Yes, there are consequences, but even without confronting men, you still get passed over. It is inexcusable, for example, that a faculty meeting is held to discuss funding possibilities, but the only woman faculty member is excluded."

Woman: "Even with the consequences it is important for us to examine the costs of sexism and the ways in which it hinders the growth of women and of us as a people."

Woman: "What about the kinds of things that women do to women?" Women who have internalized their oppression experience the pains of jealousy, spurred by their insecurities. Women, too, have internalized and accepted the criteria of what a woman is as well as the ideological reinforcement as exemplified by the photo that Gloria presented.

Woman: "There are a lot of unresolved contradictions that we as women have to deal with."

There seems to be a fear that conflict--not confrontation--is unhealthy. Diversity in such settings as the National Hispanic Women's Conference are often ignored. A theme of the conference was to parade around our unity without any sort of substance. Yet questions of gay women and of class were ignored. "There are a number of questions on the agenda for us as women."

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"I'm being forced to sit here. I'm trying, I really am, but I am a male chauvinist pig and I have to try because it even means my job security, literally. I am confused and unsure of myself because women have a wide variety of definitions of sexism. Some women you can get down with, you know, conduct yourself like you would with anyone else. Others you feel like they are hypersensitive and you feel like you have to control yourself. I'm kind of skirting feminist issues, male-female issues, because I'm afraid of screwing up. I haven't got tenure yet. I'm very confused. You see, Chicano men don't just deal with Chicana women who are the doctoral type in academia, but all kinds of women who have different definitions of who they are. Sometimes we run into women who are perfumed very nicely and who dress provocatively, and the pheromones work well, the way they are supposed to. In other words we run into women who want to deal with you like professionals, so we are confused a lot and I wish you had sympathy on us. And not only do we deal with different definitions from Chicanas, but from other women as well. Speaking for myself, I am a very confused individual."

Woman: "I, as a woman, dress for myself."

Woman: "Women also have to deal with many types of Chicano men."

Same man: "I'd almost like to see a list of what you want."

Another man: "You can't respond to your questions with a laundry list. It is a process. It has to be dealt with at every institution and every forum in which we are involved. Let's not only talk about issues of conflict and confrontation at the personal level. but at the level of concrete organizations. We have to discuss forms of dialogue, each campus for itself, that is, a forum by which conflict can be dealt with publicly, with the public forum. This would assist other relations, personal ones as well."

--"I'm a woman and I am confused myself, but I don't use my confusion as a smokescreen."

Man: "It seems to me that a lot of Chicano men in academia will deal with the whole question of sexism from the perspective of wanting a list that they can check off and say, 'Well, I'm not doing this and therefore I'm taking the correct political line.' And part of that is tied into the problem of how we think in certain ways and with a certain logic. That's the way we deal with other men and that's the way we deal with other women. That pattern of thinking itself has to be examined. We can't reduce the question of sexism to something you can quantify, or some kind of model or some kind of simple policy statement. We have to begin to look at where we as men are coming from and what we are feeling and thinking inside of ourselves in regards not only to women but to men also. I see a great deal of resistance to that. I find that most men want to see sexism as a policy decision only and that it is not tied into one's spirit and soul. In terms of men, we have to go back to step one and we have to look at ourselves and try to understand ourselves, and see what is going on inside ourselves and in our relations to people. We have to look at our patterns of thinking and see if we are trying to impose those patterns on someone else. Because we think this way, then we think that everyone else has to, and I think that this assumption is false."

Commentary: In these last few comments we see a wealth of critical issues raised. Many of the men seemed to relate to the exclamations of confusion. Indeed, there are many types of women and not all of these are making feminist claims. Because of variance in definitions of feminism and femininity, many men are confused about how to act toward women. Certainly this kind of confusion is understandable.

However, to ask that this confusion be resolved with a "laundry list" is not only to avoid the responsibility of engaging in the process of discovery, but it is a denial of the complexities of challenging a hegemony based on gender.

The comments of the last man who spoke are insightful and offer a call to action by men genuinely committed to the eradication of a hierarchy falsely based on gender.

It was unfortunate that for reasons of timing, the discussion was cut off at a point where it was particularly enlivened. It was additionally unfortunate that the transition from Topic II to Topic III was not made more smoothly. Nonetheless, we are impressed with the critical importance of issues raised in Topic II.