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## Topic 1: Are the Issues a Distraction or Diversion?

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**TOPIC I:**

**IS THE CONCERN WITH ISSUES SPECIFICALLY AFFECTING CHICANAS AND RAISED BY CHICANAS MERELY A DISTRACTION OR DIVERSION FROM THE LIBERATION OF CHICANO PEOPLE AS A WHOLE?**

Speaker: Margarita Decierdo

Eleanor Leacock wrote in an anthology of Latin American women:

Although women bear the heaviest burden of national and of class oppression, they are often told that they must subvert their own cause at this time in the interest of the "larger" goals of the national, racial and class liberation from exploitation.<sup>3</sup>

What are the issues that arise when women are asked to separate their exploitation as women from the other forms of oppression that we experience? During the 1960's, while we struggled together against the structures that oppressed the Chicano/a community, the Chicana "had been cautioned to wait and fight for her cause at a later time for fear of dividing the Chicano Movement." Of course, this was unacceptable--and basically the issue evolved as to which of the two areas of discrimination the Chicana should adopt as priority--sexism or racism. Ana Nieto Gomez elaborates on the situation:

Many loyalists felt that these complaints from women were potentially destructive and could only divide the Chicano Movement. If sexual inequalities existed, they were an in-house problem which could be dealt with later. However, right then and there, there were more important priorities to attend to: Vietnam, La Huelga, police brutality, etc.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Eleanor Leacock. "Women, Development, and Anthropological Facts and Fictions," in *Women in Latin America: An Anthology from Latin American Perspectives*, by Latin American Perspectives, Riverside, California, 1979, p.8.

4. Martha P. Cotera. *Diosa y Hembra: The History and Heritage of Chicanas in the U.S.*, Statehouse Printing, Austin, Texas, 1976.

Well-known Chicana activist Yolanda Nava, for example, severely criticized this posture and stated, "It is unacceptable to separate racial-sexual and economic struggle in a heirarchical list of priorities. It must be realized that it is illogical to ask a woman to ignore and postpone her struggle as a woman."<sup>5</sup> Thus, our arguments were thought to be relevant only to Anglo women. Social and organizational ostracism were effectively used in the isolation of Chicana women. Anti-sexist criticism was interpreted as hatred of men, and women were warned: "El problema es el gabacho, no es el macho."

Thus, women, with or without their Chicano male counterparts, continued their struggle and began organizing to deal effectively with issues that concerned women. While the Chicano Movement activist strategized in dealing with the struggle against race and class domination, it neglected to embrace socio-economic, political issues critical to women--health, poverty, forced sterilization, racism, employment, child care, education, abortion rights, etc. We felt, therefore, that the fundamental criticism of the Chicano Movement was that it did not adequately incorporate the process of political strategies relevant to the Chicana. In other words, the movement could not survive merely on issues to liberate our people. The Movement, because it did not place nor identify the socio-political root of women's oppression, did not achieve as much as it would have if it had seriously dealt with the question of sexism. The political mobilization of women had to be linked with the liberation of a people and a class inasmuch as they were an integral part of these. By not understanding the dynamics of power, we failed to understand our own oppression.

**TOPIC I: DISCUSSION**

An audience member opened the discussion by pointing to an example that highlighted some of the contradictions of the 60's. One of her students did an analysis of Black writings in the 60's that were statements of rebellion against dominance. These writings, however, were replete with passages about rape--passages where raping white

5. Ibid.

women was the symbolic representation of striking out at the system. At the same time, nothing positive was said about their own Black women.

We have seen this depiction most painfully when it has been unaccompanied by respect for an ethnic/racial group's own women, usually absent because of a general disregard for women. Most important, this thrashing is futile, and achieves nothing except the demeaning of women (including their own).

The contradiction here is important because at one level we see the calling for the liberation and self-determination of people, "but while at the same time, talking about participating in very reactionary and oppressive kinds of behavior." Audience member pointed out that "this kind of posture would be heavily criticized now" but serves as an example of the kind of contradictions that were prevalent in the "60"s.

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A man stated, "I agree with your analysis that the Chicano Movement did not deal with sexism and as a result we did not accomplish much. I would generally state that it *did* deal with a lot of issues very adequately."

*Commentary:* There was an indication that there was shared sentiment on three points: 1) that the Chicano Movement fell short of greater heights because of its exclusion of women; 2) that credit is due for the accomplishments which were attained, with the necessary help of women; 3) that the time has come for the Chicano Movement (and we assume there is still one operating) to incorporate fully the needs and voices of mujeres.

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How is it true that we, together, as men and women, can begin to deal with feminism on a daily basis, especially in terms of organizational aspects?"

Panelist: "That's why we are here today. What you ask is an essential question and will need to be answered in process. That is, what we do today should be seen as the beginning of an ongoing effort."

*Commentary:* The question proposed here is essential and the answer is to be found in continuing conversations and work among us. The importance of the panel is our pledge to work together against a condition that leaves us as oppressed people. Still, some immediate suggestions were made for organizational amendments and strategies within the very structure of NACS.

A suggestion was made that decisions should be made in the plenary session to deal with issues of sexism. A panelist pointed out that we must keep in mind that women are not generally present at these meetings and that the men themselves should take the initiative to make progress rather than lean on a few token women who must not only bear the burden of responsibility for the issues of sexism, but bear the consequences as well.

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A male member of the audience responded by saying that before a man could do this, he had to be educated. Several responded to this by saying that sexism has been seen as a women's issue and not as a people's issue. "To say that women should educate men and make them responsible, not only for themselves, but for the men also, is ludicrous."

Panelist replied that it was a man himself who had to see to it that he was educated. It was clearly pointed out that "*It was not the task of women to educate men.* All we could do was to bring the awareness of what was going on. As women, we have discussed the issue among ourselves at length and essentially feel that it is a shared responsibility and that we want you to be responsible for educating yourselves."

*Commentary:* The men who raised this issue did so with sincerity. How do men become educated enough to rally against gender dominance without relying on token women who must bear the responsibility of raising issues and the consequences, once they have done so? The response to this was likewise sincere. The point being made is somewhat similar to that which was made to white people when they said they wanted to be educated about us. What we said then was, "Get off your high horse and try to know us as we are." "Don't make any assumptions about us on the basis of your stereotypes." "Listen to us, so that we may speak." Women are saying that men should assume responsibility for their own education. Read the literature of the feminists, hear us when we speak. Don't assume we are wrong or that our concerns are not legitimate before we have spoken.

The man was raising, I believe, an additional point. Shouldn't the women be providing the leadership? If this is so, then we now urge each of you to take seriously our concerns.

\* \* \* \* \*

One man stated that acts of sexism were often unconscious processes and often men are not aware that their words or actions may be reinforcing their dominance over the submission of women. Often these actions/words are a result of male privilege and deeply rooted assumptions. Our task now is to identify and challenge those assumptions and not to assume that *it must always be women who will identify and challenge sexist movements.*

Another man suggested that the breaking of the reproduction of dominance additionally requires that men talk about it; This includes talking about it among themselves.

--"What should we do, form our own groups?"

--"Yes."

--"What happens if we arrive at different conclusions... What happens if we give our sincere evaluation but we arrive at different conclusions?"

--"Then we have an ongoing dialogue. The answer to this question is solved in practice. We can no longer leave it at a hypothetical situation. We are tired of that."

*Commentary:* A sincere evaluation does not necessarily result in an accurate one. At the same time, a desire to make a sincere evaluation reflects a concern for its importance. If we imagine those conclusions to be drawn around a sense of dignity and for the liberation of both women and men in mind, then the conclusions cannot be so far apart.

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The remainder of discussion on this topic evolved around sexism in NACS. A woman raised the issue of child care as an example of an issue that demands shared responsibility. In its ten year history, NACS has never provided child care (except once at Berkeley). The handling of such issues as these requires shared responsibility and creativity.

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It was suggested that we should ask the following series of questions:

1. Has there been any progressive change since the 1960s?
2. Where have the improvements been since the 1960s?
3. What are the areas we need to work on further?

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"NACS to a certain degree has done much to break down some of the sexual barriers, but still has some way to go." Women need to participate more on panels and committees, and as FOCO representatives. Women are more apt to do this when they receive support not only from women, but also from men--without condescension.

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Women's mobility in the world of academia (among other places) is limited, both structurally and systematically. We do not have, for example, tenured Chicanas with a solid institutional base and very few who have solid histories of publishing. We need a commitment in our universities to recruit women and to support them once they are there. The networkings of women are important in these endeavors.

*Commentary:* There is much to be done in the struggle against sexism within the National Association of Chicano Studies. The apparent willingness of those present to do so, suggests that change may be forthcoming. It should be noted that the round table presented by Mujeres en Marcha was well attended and enthusiastically received. Such a mood leaves us optimistic that there are increasingly more women and men ready to seek the necessary change.