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Topic III: Our Interests as Feministas are Unique from White Women and Men of Color

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TOPIC III:

IT IS NOT UNCOMMON THAT OUR INTERESTS AS FEMINISTAS ARE CHALLENGED ON THE BASIS THAT WE ARE SIMPLY FALLING PREY TO THE INTEREST OF WHITE MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN. WE CHALLENGE THE NOTION THAT THERE IS NO ROOM FOR A CHICANA MOVEMENT WITHIN OUR COMMUNITY. WE, AS WOMEN OF COLOR, HAVE A UNIQUE SET OF CONCERNS THAT ARE SEPARATE BOTH FROM WHITE WOMEN AND MEN OF COLOR.

Speaker: Deena González

White women and women of color come to feminism under profoundly different circumstances and with dissimilar issues in mind. What we define and interpret as our circumstances are primarily issues to white women. Therein lies what has come to signify the most crucial point of our divergence. Other distinctions demonstrate our differences, but this particular distinction between issues and circumstances holds great validity.

I discovered feminism largely under the auspices of the white women's movement. Through *MS.* magazine, through group discussions at Women's Centers and Women's Buildings, I came to the conclusion that I was a feminist, in political and social orientation. But only when I came to the realization that I was a Chicana and a Latina feminist did I realize how fundamentally different and often how diametrically opposed my opinions and ideas were to white feminism, in fact, how contradictory they ran to that which white, middle-class feminism was attempting to achieve.

I remember participating in hundreds of hours of conversation with white women, in groups and in friendships, and not being stirred by the things that excited them. I mean, Emma Goldman was important, but she did not bring out in me what she seemed to move in white women, or Jewish women. But when I found other Latinas searching for similar people in our past, in other words, when many of us began to re-capture a history and an identification that existed as it always has, in our communities, then I began to know what it was to admire a person from the past. When I read Julia de Burgos' poetry,

when I read about Luisa Capetillo, when I heard about women's groups in Mexico City, when I learned about Black women and Native American women struggling and fighting, then I felt comfortable. Then, too, I began to develop an analysis whose great contradictions continue to move me toward the kind of intimate liberation that feminism induces. Our first step, however, is that of self-discovery, of recovery, of renewed identification.

Contrary to what has been said and written about us (in or out of academia) we have lost nothing. But we have begun the necessary steps toward re-affirming, in new contexts, what we have always known. For one thing, race and class oppression are our reality, but to white women these are merely issues; "they" do not consistently encounter themselves in situations like ours. I have come to believe that until white women (and also all men) make our circumstances their own, subconsciously, what concerns us will remain topics for discussion, issues outside of their movements, and ultimately detrimental for their as well as our own liberation.

Neither our feminism nor our liberation depend on any white movement, but our hardest political struggles are pushed forward in alliances, no matter how tenuous or uneasy those might be. A similar parallel could be drawn over how feminism has infiltrated struggles around class. Our first step, however, must necessarily be that of self-discovery, of renewed commitment along with that re-established identification.

TOPIC III: DISCUSSION

The discussion generated by Topic III, opened with a series of declarations by women differentiating their needs as women of color from those of white women. These testimonies included explicit descriptions of incidents where women could not relate to aspects of white feminism yet they could clearly identify needs that were specific to women who also encounter oppression due to hegemony based on race.

Some men pointed out that they do have the tendency to see issues of women's liberation as a middle-class set of issues and consequently block out any claims by third world women. "I think that this feeling is alive and well among the men."

The women responded by pointing out that claims for women's liberation are not by any means necessarily bourgeois. Third world women have begun to speak out on issues such as health, poverty, forced sterilization, racism, unemployment, child care, education, abortion rights, etc. We can expect to hear more.

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A great amount of work needs to be done in promoting the elevation of women from a status of inferiority and submission to one of dignity and participation. In doing so, we encounter contradictions and dilemmas. This final comment by a woman reminds us of what we must do in spite of these dilemmas.

If we are going to take seriously the attempts toward social change, then we are going to be in a dilemma. People who don't want to accept the dilemma are basically supporters of the status quo. If we are going to challenge, then we have to accept the dilemma. It doesn't mean we have to remain in a confused state, but we have to clarify what we want for ourselves, accept the dilemma and accept also that it is not easy.