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## Black Women Organizing

### *Brixton Black Women's Group*

The Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD), a now defunct group begun in 1978, sought to bring together Black women from a number of different backgrounds and political perspectives in Britain. It was an important chapter in the history of Black women organizing.

OWAAD initially provided a national link between Black women in Britain. But the task of uniting so many diverse and differing elements, particularly in the absence of a fundamental grounding and appreciation of the concrete experiences of each particular grouping, proved too much. Its demise in 1982 was important however, because of the opportunity it presented to analyse and assess and hopefully to learn something about where we are as Black women organizing.

### Growth of OWAAD

In February 1978 African women who were becoming active in the African Student's Union (UK) launched the Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent. These origins do not reveal the far-reaching implications of its birth and development. It was not the first or the only Black Women's organization. In other areas African women, such as ZANU Women's League were forming separate caucuses to their national liberation organizations. Black women resident or born in England were beginning to meet in study groups; still others had begun self-help groups like the Manchester Black Women's Co-op; others were spearheading the 'Stop Sus' campaigns. OWAAD performed a different function. It presented as a possibility a chance for Black women from all over England to meet with each other, share ideas and give help and support to what each were doing.

The guiding forces behind the first OWAAD meeting were women who had already been active in the few local groups there were. In the earliest months, African women students from Ghana, Ethiopia and Eritrea, for example, were prominent in the discussions about how best to organize a network federation of Black women. After a short while, women activists from the indigenous Black community became involved, and the proposal for a national Black Women's conference was developed. As the organization of the conference progressed, it soon became clear that the main thrust of the conference was to be the position of Black women in Britain.

Few of us expected the 250 women who turned up at the first conference. We in the Brixton Black Women's Group (BWG) had made informal links with other women organizing, but did not imagine there were so many ready and eager to begin to organize and articulate around the specific oppression of Black women. The conference discussed a wide range of issues around health education, the law and immigration; as we saw these to affect us. The women who came were greatly inspired and went away to form Black Women's groups in their own communities in places like Hackney, east London, west London, Southall and others around the country.

With this growth, we realized the need for a newsletter to ensure links were maintained with women who were intensifying their activities in their communities. There were many important issues and campaigns that had to be fought. The newsletter FOWAAD was launched to ensure that women from OWAAD knew what other women were doing, and could be called upon to give practical support. An example of this was the protest over the use of virginity tests at ports of entry. As soon as we were alerted to the use of this offensive practice on Asian women, OWAAD organized a sit-

in protest and picket at Heathrow Airport. This later culminated in a demonstration in central London against State harassment organized by women from AWAZ (Asian Women's Movement) and Brixton Black Women's Group.

In other cases, women from OWAAD gave support to women on strike (for example Fitters); women involved in education battles against sin-bins and expulsions; women fighting the Sus laws; and those facing deportation. OWAAD had all the energy and vibrancy that the Black Movement needed at that time.

By the end of the second conference of 1980, the organization, which was becoming very large, had developed a structure which we had hoped would facilitate the widest participation by both groups and individuals. Committees responsible for the coordination of the different aspects of OWAAD's work were set up. These were the newsletter, calendar and diary, media, and so on; each was then accountable to a large collective coordinating group, which was the final decision-making body. Ostensibly, there were no appointed leaders or spokeswomen.

Because the organization was made up of groups, campaigns and individuals, leadership was exercised according to the demands of each situation. Between the second and third conferences, some contradictions started to surface. Some were structural, the umbrella structure proving unwieldy; others were centred around Black women's sexuality; whilst still others dealt with the complexities of putting the political principles of Afro-Asian unity into practice.

By the third conference, these cracks in OWAAD presented themselves visibly as major rifts. Meanwhile, the internal contradictions of some local groups led to their demise. Moreover the third conference, held in 1981, coincided with the uprisings in the Black communities nationwide. Consequently, much energy, time and organization was devoted to the coordination of legal and political defence campaigns. The urgency of the situation reinforced the drift away from involvement in women's groups.

At the conference itself, the major points of friction were over sexuality and the general line of organization. Both of these were political questions which it was impossible to discuss properly, let alone resolve, without any agreed political framework to guide the debate, and any necessary re-organization. The impact of the breakdown of political consensus was particularly acute at this time. Consequently, OWAAD, as an organizing body, was left with virtually nothing for the year. Attempts were made to draw the organization together and to reconstitute the coordinating committee with the few groups and individuals that continued to attend meetings. The result was the fourth conference in 1982 which was inevitably a debacle. Few of the older founder members were left. Moreover, the theme of this conference — 'Black Feminism' — brought angry criticism from newer members, who did not understand the history behind the theme, and/or were 'hostile to feminism', and therefore saw its choice as a retrogressive step.

The failure both to discuss the differences and develop a way forward for OWAAD was illustrative of our inability to explain the historical trajectory of OWAAD and to integrate a feminist analysis into our practice, whilst retaining socialism as our major foundation stone.

Since then, several attempts have been made to revive OWAAD, but the organization is in fact now dead.

## **Contradictions**

The demise of OWAAD is very important because it exemplifies in specific terms, the general difficulties that Black women face when organizing. In its very early history, an issue which appeared to us a relatively small, became crucially important, since it

highlighted the way in which concrete political situations affect the specific kind of analysis developed by a group. The issue at hand was that of Afro-Caribbean and African unity. This became important in itself because, whilst we all recognized such unity as an objective reality, we were unprepared to deal with the kinds of differences between us, which resulted from our concrete experiences.

At one level, such differences of approach revolved around the form of struggle we could wage. There were sisters from the African continent who were involved in liberation struggles there, which they wanted us to focus on. On the other hand, those of us from the indigenous Black community saw the need to integrate these issues into our overall work. We were also concerned to keep a focus on Black political struggle in Britain and the Americas. How could we all come under one banner? How could our primary fight against racism and sexism be reconciled with our African sisters' fight?

Differences over emphasis raised analytical questions such as the place of Black Consciousness in situations outside Europe, the Americas and apartheid States. What we were beginning to learn very quickly, was that the concept 'black', had very different meanings for those of us living in white-dominated societies and regions, compared to those of us from societies which were ostensibly independent. Whilst all of us were dominated by imperialism, the manifestations of this domination were obviously very different in the two types of situations. In our attempt to develop a political analysis and practice which recognized the anti-imperialist base of all our struggles, we had failed to take account of the subjective impact of specific situations and their practical implications. Thus, the fact that our aims and objectives were all-embracing, might have avoided rather than confronted the problem.

Paradoxically, it was the recognition that we had to be more specific on our platform, coupled with the involvement of even more local women, that led to our concentrating on Black women's lives in Britain, that a second, but related, contradiction emerged.

In focussing on Britain, it became clear that an organization of African and Afro-Caribbean sisters could not take up the issue of racism without responding to the questions being raised by Asian sisters. The aims and objectives were seemingly contradictory, even when applied to the British situation. In one sense, we were all-embracing, but in another, more practical, way we had not widened our base consciously to include all of those who could and should be involved.

It was not until the Winter of 1978 that OWAAD became the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent. Perhaps it was because the issue of Afro-Asian unity had not been there from the beginning that it was problematic. More fundamentally, perhaps, it was problematic because our political line, whilst basically correct, was still unable fully to realize itself in our practice. Just as our practical focus had led to the *de facto* exclusion of African sisters, so too was our line to prove unable adequately to deal with cultural differences within the indigenous Black community. There seemed to be a fear that recognizing such differences between us would lead to a breakdown or denial of the objective unity which contemporary British racism and historical colonialism imposed on us. Thus, when some sisters raised the cultural aspects, differences between us were seen by others as divisive.

Consequently, the unwitting exclusivity of OWAAD's focus, which resulted from the numerical strength of Caribbean sisters in the organization, became symbolic of our inability to grasp the fact that recognition of cultural differences can be a political strength which helps us to transcend the divisions which our colonial and neo-colonial masters (and mistresses) and their agents attempted to foist on us.

## Sexuality

Another issue that played a major part in exposing our differences was that of sexuality — the questions of our relationships with men, with other women and society at large. From the first conference there had been questions asked about the absence of a debate on sexuality. We who had been founder members of OWAAD attempted to defend ourselves, and thereby deflect the criticism, by showing how we had attempted to widen the definition of Black women's sexuality by relating it to the way in which imperialism structured women's lives.

Our argument was that imperialist relations structured and determined not only our role in production — in factory and field — but that these relations also determined the emotional, sexual and psychological aspects of Black women's lives. Consequently, we could only understand our sexuality in terms of the interplay between, on the one hand, class and race relations, and on the other, those relations between men and women. It was inevitable, therefore, that the specificity of our social, psychological and emotional dependence on men would lead to a different kind of feminism from that of white, European women. The struggle for a new and self-defined sexuality was therefore part of the anti-imperialist struggle, since such self-definition, centred around the nexus of relations of production and relations of gender, involved a challenge to both our traditional cultures and cultural imperialism.

The potentially explosive issue of sexuality was now taken out of the realm of sexual activity or sexual preference, and into the wider more 'politically respectable' terrain of gender relations.

This was, however, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, many of us felt (and still feel) that this was a positive development for two reasons. Firstly, we felt that we had begun to place gender relations and women's oppression onto the political agenda of black organizations. This was certainly a progressive step since, as feminists, we knew that revolutionary analysis and practice had to address itself to the fact of women's oppression and particularly, to the structures and processes which reproduced the conditions of that oppression. Secondly, we also felt that a full understanding of women's sexuality could only be gained in relation to, and as an aspect of, the total complex of social relations of class, race and sex. Such an approach could keep us from falling into the trap of making sexual orientation the basis of organizing, or the basis of divisions between us. On the other hand, however, this approach served as a guise NOT to discuss the construction of sexual orientation (rather than sexuality in its broadest sense) at all. We thereby rendered sexual preference to the realm of the 'private', even though our argument was that ALL aspects of life were social. There was, therefore, an inconsistency in our approach.

The fact of the matter was that we were unsure how to deal with an issue that, more than anything else, showed the weaknesses which became exposed when oppressed women try to organize around both the 'traditional' areas of struggle and those issues specific to our oppression as a sex. Stated bluntly, we became the unwitting victims of our own and our communities' 'homophobia'.

It was felt that sexual activity, as it came to the fore, was too sensitive to be discussed publicly. The question was constantly posed as to how could we 'waste time' discussing lesbianism, heterosexuality and bisexuality when there were so many more pressing issues. It was, besides, a weapon the brother could use against us, as supposedly illustrative of our lack of seriousness. Political men who had witnessed the disintegration of the Black movement and felt threatened by a vibrant Black women's movement could, and did, use it against us. Perhaps the favourite and most effective line of attack against Black women organizing has been, and still is, that we are all 'frustrated lesbians'. And Black ones at that! A charge which was effective in the sense of under-

mining our sense of legitimacy, since it nurtured either our own belief that such issues were irrelevant, or our lack of confidence in raising these issues at a political level. Moreover, the irony in this situation was that it was supremely illustrative of the dependence on men, which we argued was a part of women's sexuality and oppression.

Another popular way of undermining Black women organizing consisted of accusations about 'dominant, middle class bourgeois women', who are isolated from the 'woman on the streets'. We succumbed and continue to succumb to the fraudulent and divisive analysis that 'women on the streets' could not discuss, articulate and somehow begin to fight their oppression. The argument goes that because we are organized, we are no longer 'typical' of Black women; and therefore, the campaigns and issues we take up are misguided. This was based on the assumption that we are middle class because we are all supposedly the recipients of higher education. It would be facile to attempt to refute this notion by giving a head count of how many of us had done so. But two points do need to be made. Firstly, since when were we in the business of attacking Black people for gaining access to higher education. It seems somewhat contradictory to accuse us of selling out or being irrelevant when some of those same people are actively engaged in the struggle to ensure that Black children 'achieve' in the education system. Secondly, since when did access to education and the fact that we may occupy 'middle-class' jobs automatically lead to petty-bourgeois politics. Our opponents are guilty of conflating two issues in the attempt to absolve themselves of the responsibility to challenge women's oppression. But at the time these kinds of attacks seriously undermined the early unity of OWAAD.

At a practical level, events such as the uprisings had an enormous effect on many women. Black women took a leading role in some defence campaigns. Women were arrested and involved on the streets. Many had fathers, brothers and lovers who were arrested, while others had to contend with their homes being broken into and destroyed in the aftermath. Despite this, the input of women — as women — somehow became marginalized. Part of the reason for this was that when women became involved in defence campaigns, we could not devote the time to our own women's groups, and many felt they should not. Consequently, the strength we gained from our women's groups, did not play the major role it should have done. Why was this and what input should we have made?

What these developments pointed to was some uncertainty about what we were struggling for — or more correctly, what our priorities were. Overt feminism, that is, raising the question of women's specific oppression, seemed sometimes inconsequential, eclipsed by the larger Black struggle. These ideas went back to the heyday of the Black movement, when it was felt that women's issues or 'the woman question' was a secondary matter that could divide the struggle.

One other difficulty that OWAAD highlighted was the internal weakness in our organizations and groups. Many of us had rejected the male idea of leadership through the totem pole. The backward idea that had existed in the Black movement was that leaders were singularly the baddest, toughest towards their own comrades; and that leadership was the prize after a cockfight. What could we put in its place that was less destructive and individualistic?

OWAAD provided the alternative of co-operative organization without positions of leadership to be fought over. Working through committees provided women in OWAAD with the supportive ground to develop their political consciousness. However, it left too much space for dissension — for political shifts from the anti-imperialist base. It was open for any small group to attempt to take over the organization and try to move it in a different direction.

The problems highlighted here seem large. It might cause some to wonder how OWAAD lasted so long, and how Black women are still able to organize. It is clearly because the problems of women organizing are not insurmountable; and we still need

to form strong organizations. We should, however, learn some lessons from the demise of OWAAD.

## Lessons

The first of these involves the need to develop political unity without minimizing the differences between us as Black women, whether these be of a cultural or tactical nature. Such differences have come about as a result of the different colonizing influences we have experienced. These need not and should not continue to be viewed in a negative way, but rather accepted and made use of, so long as there is no major difference in ideological perspective.

The oppression we have suffered (and continue to suffer) as Black women, whether in Britain, the Americas or Africa, serves to keep us divided, but this oppression must also be the objective basis of our unity. We must learn to appreciate our different cultures, understand our different experiences and distinguish between these differences and objective political differences. It is from this perspective that we can then attack the various forms of oppression which divide us. Only in this way can we facilitate our continued growth as Black women and thus be in a better position to react against the source and substance of our oppression in a strong, informed and concerted fashion.

Another important lesson to be learned from OWAAD's demise must be the acceptance that we must continue to stress the importance of keeping the question of gender relationships on centre stage. This will inevitably involve an understanding of the relationship between sexuality and women's oppression; but the traditional resistance amongst the Black community to such an examination, must not prevent us from publicly declaring the need to look at the construction of sexuality; and to publicly support lesbian women.

Similarly, our focus on gender relations is the only way in which we can ensure that the question of Black women's oppression is not relegated to a secondary level of political consideration. As Black socialist feminists, it is incumbent upon us to point out that women's oppression is inextricably bound up with the issues of race and class; and that it is right and necessary to tackle all three simultaneously, and with equal determination.

However, having declared the inextricable links between sex, race and class, we have the responsibility to carry through the political arguments with regard to feminism. This means that the thrust of our work will have two strands. On the one hand, we will continue to organize autonomously and address the issues we face as Black women. On the other, we must bring a feminist perspective to the work of our comrades in mixed, progressive Black organizations. In this way, we will be raising the consciousness of the Black community within the context of the totality of Black socialist politics.

Brixton Black Women's Centre (BWC) is at 41 Stockwell Green, SW9. The BWC aims to give help and support to Black women in the community. We do this by: providing a welfare rights information and referral service; participating in a health group; providing meeting facilities; holding open days on themes reflecting Black women's lives and struggles; having a small but growing library; running children's projects at Easter and summer holidays.

In the near future we intend to develop a craft centre; a girls' project; a film group; regular women's socials; relaxation sessions. If you have any ideas and/or want to participate come and join us. For further information, phone 01-274-9220.