



phenomenon of being Black and female in a country that is both racist and sexist. The women's group . . . will remind the Black liberation movement that there can't be liberation for half a race."<sup>7</sup>

NBFO's first regional conference on November 30–December 2, 1973, at St. John the Divine Church in New York City sealed its existence. The conference's program committee also emerged from the original thirty founding mothers. They wanted a conference that would address the broad range of issues affecting Black women. There were about twenty workshops, focusing on Black women and the struggle for child care, welfare, women's liberation, politics, the church, media, labor force, homosexuality, cultural arts, female sexuality, prisons, addiction and education. There were also several notable keynote speakers. Eleanor Holmes Norton, Margaret Sloan, Flo Kennedy and Shirley Chisholm were among them. As Alice Walker recalled, "And we talked and we discussed and we sang for Shirley Chisholm and clapped for Eleanor Homes Norton and tried to follow Margaret Sloan's lyrics and cheered Flo Kennedy's anecdotes. And we laughed a lot and argued some. *And had a very good time.*"<sup>8</sup>

I remember Shirley Chisholm's emotionally uplifting speech. She supported our efforts to become a visible and articulate force. In this manner, we would help to insure the success of all liberation struggles. Her speech was echoed throughout the conference by many who were so happy to find a home for our beliefs. We were eager to develop our own definitions of self and our needs. We no longer wanted the Black male nor the white world to perform those duties.

However, the momentum generated by the first conference was not enough to counteract the many forces—both external and internal—which challenged the organization's existence. In chronicling those factors which led to the demise of NBFO, I will also demonstrate how it reflected the complex and difficult position of Black women in this country.

In 1972, the Louis Harris Virginia Slims Polls found that 62% of Black women (35% of white women) were in "sympathy with efforts of the women's liberation groups."<sup>9</sup> Despite this finding of Black women's significant support for feminist ideas, there were comparatively few Black women who were actively and visibly participating in the feminist movement.

For Black women, the ideological base for feminism was slender compared to other political ideologies. Although during the early 1970's there had been more written about Black women, few of the writings were directed towards our consciousness-raising as Black women. And when our position was addressed, particularly with regard to the Women's Movement, we were discouraged from setting priorities outside of the overall civil rights or Black nationalist movement.

Joyce Ladner reminded us: "African-American women continue to play the vital roles they have always played within the para-colonies of the United States. Yet, it is not necessary to take up the Women's Lib banner in order to do this. After all, it has not been necessary to do so in the past."<sup>10</sup> Johnnetta Cole was to say: "The importance of the women's liberation movement to the Black woman and Black liberation is debatable."<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Height also told us: "If the Negro woman has a major underlying concern, it is the status of the Negro man and his position in the community. . ."<sup>12</sup> Indeed we were instructed by many noted Black male leaders—Elijah Muhammad, Imamu Baraka, Stokely Carmichael, among others—

that our most effective efforts would be behind the Black male.

In addition, those Black women who were pivotal in the Civil Rights Movement were not given equally powerful and visible leadership roles as their male counterparts. We remember well Stokely Carmichael's participation, but Ella Baker is less vividly recalled by far too many given her enormous contributions to SNCC (Student's Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). Our role models were not sufficiently acknowledged, and as a result neither were our needs and contributions.

We were therefore more vulnerable to certain "justifying myths."<sup>13</sup> Our concerns being exactly the same as our brothers' was one myth. Another indicated that since we were equally denigrated (as the Black man) by slavery, we emerged equally into the 20th century. Black women, as the refrain goes, have always been free to work.

The myth of the "equal women" however is just not accurate. When we look at Black women's employment status, we find that we have the highest unemployment rates and "the lowest median income of any race, sex group in the population."<sup>14</sup> Even with equal educational levels, Black women consistently earn less than Black men or white women or men.<sup>15</sup>

There was also the notion that the civil rights and Black liberation struggles offered, if only vicariously, important avenues for Black women to articulate our concerns. Although we might not have been given our proper due, one cannot ignore our presence in the liberation struggles. For the white women, a comparable forum did not exist. Therefore she had to create her own movement which might not speak to our needs. As Ware explained: "One reason that women's liberation doesn't or won't attract Black women is that Blacks are suspicious of whites who might coopt their support, energy and drive. Feminists are perceived as whites before they are seen to be oppressed."<sup>16</sup>

It was a schism that was highlighted by the misinformation promulgated by the press. The press, by focusing on the more provocative aspects of the feminist movement, served to distort its purpose and alienated Black women. Our concerns were not about "burning our bras" but were about the fundamentals of survival like jobs, food, day care, good and accessible health care.<sup>17</sup> Although as Black women we resoundingly stated our interest in feminism, our formal, societal voices were mostly mute, if not actively hostile to those ideas. It was in this atmosphere of profound contradictions that NBFO was born.

After the founders of NBFO had their initial press conference in August 1973, they received over four hundred calls on the first day. These calls came from all over the country. The callers wanted to know how they could become members of NBFO.<sup>18</sup> The response was phenomenal and within the first year of operation, the organization had over two thousand members with more than ten chapters across the country.<sup>19</sup>

Within the first year, the founders had also organized an important conference which successfully translated our private concerns into public statements that demanded social changes. NBFO had to begin quickly an educational process that would establish its legitimacy and undermine the prevailing justifying myths. Along with the development of a statement of purpose, the organizers added a list of standard questions and answers about feminism. In addition, a bibliography was provided and a Speakers' Bureau was

established. All of these efforts were designed to develop tangible resources for the evolution of feminist thinking.

The rapid emergence of NBFO as a national force was the second significant strain. The small unpaid leadership was challenged to both establish the internal, operational structure of the organization and supervise its expansion. As Jane Galvin-Lewis explained:

There were two major problems from the first day. We didn't even have a permanent office yet and there were 400 calls the first day. We were not prepared to service the United States. We underestimated the overwhelming immediate response. So we ended up making all of our mistakes publicly, not in private. We thought we could be a little local and grow and develop philosophically.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, many noted Black women did not add their support nor did many of the established Black women's organizations, like the sororities and church auxiliaries. Therefore NBFO could not rely on these extensive and established channels of support.

Indeed the women who founded the organization tended to be mavericks outside the traditional Black mainstream. Their organizational experience with large, national institutions also tended to be limited.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the leadership was expected to give guidance and legitimacy to the rapidly developing chapters throughout the country. These chapters were also charting unknown courses as they helped to articulate the Black feminist perspective in their region. I would speculate that the members were also not participants of the usual Black women's groups and therefore were outside the preexisting communication networks.

We also had little access to tapping the traditional power reserves necessary for organizational stability. We had no wealthy benefactors and were not connected to any ideological umbrella that would provide established financial resources. At the same time, as a Black feminist group, we were a threat to traditional funding sources.

The leadership struggled to create a dues structure which would provide the needed funds and yet would not financially burden the membership. The dues were graduated according to income and members were trusted to select the appropriate fee. Although most of the women had professional careers, the membership was not able to sustain financially the organization. There were three major reasons for this difficulty: (1) members did not pay the total amount that was owed; (2) not enough of its membership paid dues; and (3) there were not enough members who paid dues at the high-income scale. As a result, NBFO had severe monetary problems throughout its existence.

NBFO did not amass enough money to have salaried officers. Although many hours were given, the leadership was always forced to seek outside employment. The organization was therefore deprived of both a leadership group and support staff that could exclusively devote itself to NBFO's survival and development.

Furthermore, our insistence on addressing unpopular issues—women in prisons, lesbianism, domestic violence—threatened the more established Black women who might have brought more organizational experiences and networks with them. It was also hard to bridge that gap, since the mass media distorted the presentation of the issues and contributed to mainstream Black women's possible fears. This, in effect, denied us clear communication around these concerns and

the more "accepted" issues of feminism, for example, equal pay for equal jobs. Nevertheless, these issues were important for our platform, particularly since they were not being addressed elsewhere. But in our attempt to reflect all Black feminists' concerns, we developed a heterogeneous membership with a significant proportion coming from the least powerful segments of our society.<sup>22</sup> In fact, we were the most heterogeneous group of any feminist organization.<sup>23</sup>

Our diversity, however, caused severe strains. In the beginning the leadership was particularly concerned that NBFO reflect its membership in its ideology, leadership group and organizational procedures. In addition, the leaders tried to develop an open and egalitarian form of cooperation among themselves and the members. In fact, the coordinating council was designed to support an egalitarian and accessible spirit within NBFO. Although there were officers—Margaret Sloan was the first (and only) President and Jane Galvin-Lewis, the Vice-President—the coordinating council was ruled by consensus. Members were also involved in the development of the organizational structures, goals and procedures by way of the open, monthly meetings. Margaret Sloan seemed particularly adept at encouraging women of all persuasions to express themselves. But the different factions soon erupted into open conflicts at the meetings.

Diane Lacey and Galvin-Lewis contended that the leaders were too egalitarian and democratic. They allowed people's input who were clearly antagonistic to the organization's development. They were not sufficiently aware of the many destructive reasons that women might have for joining NBFO.<sup>24</sup> There were, for example, women from political groups who disdained feminism. Sloan and Galvin-Lewis believed that these women deliberately wanted to undermine the group, since they saw it as draining women's investment from the larger liberation struggles.<sup>25</sup> There were also women who joined because they personally wanted to increase their own financial worth by associating with a potentially powerful organization.

But even more destructive was the friction between women of different backgrounds and political ideologies who were unable to compromise their differences for the common denominator of feminism.<sup>26</sup> To have enveloped these conflicts into constructive organizational positions and dissipate the frictions would have required more centralized control.

More control was in direct conflict with what the leaders were attempting to do. By attempting to delegate so much power to the membership, there was a naivete about institutional development and an assumption that feminism meant the same to all who identified themselves as adherents.<sup>27</sup> Power and control were seized by those who had little or no interest in the council's agenda. Unfortunately, the leaders discovered their mistakes too late.<sup>28</sup>

At the regional conference in Detroit, April 1975, there was a strong challenge to the New York City-based leadership. As the officers tried to solidify the operations of the organization, there were objections to the New York group leading those efforts. According to Galvin-Lewis, these protests stemmed from differences in personalities and some women's desire to undermine the efficacy of NBFO.<sup>29</sup> The tears in the organizational fabric became more apparent, with

little forward movement in the agenda.

The challenges continued the following year at the constitutional convention in Washington, D.C., and the New York City group became disillusioned. Not only were the attacks becoming more personal, but the business of the convention (i.e., to form a constitution) did not happen. Instead, there was a reorganization of NBFO's leadership. The coordinating council members were going to continue, but another group of women were going to handle the day-to-day operations of the organization. However the relationships had so deteriorated that the sharing of NBFO documents (needed to run the organization) between the two groups never occurred. No more meetings were called and the New York City/national chapter of NBFO folded.<sup>30</sup> I understand that the organization existed until 1979 with ten chapters throughout the country.<sup>31</sup>

Despite its relatively short history, NBFO made some significant contributions. The organization served its purpose as a catalyst for challenging myths about Black women and the feminist movement. NBFO was particularly successful in addressing and transforming the private concerns of Black women into public issues.

By providing leadership for the development of consciousness raising groups, we were able to discover that our experiences and reactions were not idiosyncratic. We were no longer as isolated. "We sat together and talked and knew no one would think, or say your thoughts are dangerous to Black unity and a threat to Black men."<sup>32</sup> Galvin-Lewis reports, "Even today women will stop me in the street and thank me for how important NBFO was in changing their thinking

and lifestyles."<sup>33</sup>

It was at the societal level that many of our efforts were stymied. But here too there were some successes. According to Galvin-Lewis, the Los Angeles chapter was influential in getting some of the more distasteful aspects of Black television shows eliminated. In New York, attention was drawn to the minimum wages of domestic workers and the reality of sexual abuse and harassment of Black women.<sup>34</sup>

The demise of the National Black Feminist Organization is indicative of the difficulties in creating political tools even when our numbers are significant and our goals worthy. However, we can learn from NBFO's story about organizing for the future. Most importantly, future leaders must not be afraid to clearly state and promote their vision of how the organization's mission will be accomplished. No organization appeals to all members of its constituency. The founding mothers are the ones who secure the ideological and structural foundation for the organization. In addition, certain groundwork has to be established prior to the group's debut. Short-term and long-range institutional goals can focus the leadership on: 1) anticipated costs and funding sources, both start-up and ongoing; 2) temporary table of organization with plans for transition to a permanent structure; 3) explicit decision-making process; 4) outreach to target population and potential allied groups and individuals; and 5) use of public media. The solutions to these tasks will then be tested and modified by the reality of the group's public reception. Organization building is a difficult but worthy challenge when we strive to create our own institutions.

#### STATEMENT OF NATIONAL BLACK FEMINIST ORGANIZATION

The distorted male-dominated media image of the Women's Liberation Movement has clouded the vital and revolutionary importance of the movement to Third World women, especially Black women. The Movement has been characterized as the exclusive property of so called "white middle class" women and only Black women seen involved in this movement have been seen as "selling out," "dividing the race," and an assortment of nonsensical epithets. Black Feminists resent these charges and are therefore establishing THE NATIONAL BLACK FEMINIST ORGANIZATION, in order to address ourselves to the particular and specific needs of the larger, but almost cast aside half of the Black race in Amerika, the Black Woman.

Black women have suffered cruelly in this society from living the phenomenon of being Black and female, in a country that is both racist and sexist. There has been very little real examination of the damage it has caused on the lives and in the minds of Black women. Because we live in a patriarchy, we have allowed a premium to be placed on Black male suffering. No one of us would minimize the pain or hardship or the cruel and inhumane treatment experienced by Black men. But history, past or present, rarely deals with the malicious abuse put upon the Black Woman. We were seen as breeders by the Master; despised and historically polarized from/by the Master's wife; and looked upon as castrators by our lovers and husbands. The Black woman has had to be strong, yet we are persecuted for having survived. We have been called "matriarchs" by white racists and Black nationalists, we have virtually no positive self-images to validate our existence. Black women want to be proud and dignified and free from all those false definitions of beauty and womanhood that are unrealistic and unnatural. We, not white men or Black men, must define our own self-image as Black Women and not fall into the mistake of being placed upon the pedestal—which is even being rejected by white women. It has been hard for Black women to emerge from the myriad of distorted images that have portrayed us as grinning Beulahs, castrating Sapphires and pancake box Jemimahs. As Black Feminists we realize the need to establish ourselves as an independent Black Feminist organization. Our above ground presence will lend enormous credibility to the current Women's Liberation Movement, which unfortunately is not seen as the serious political and economic revolutionary force that it is. We also will strengthen the current efforts of the Black Liberation struggle in this country by encouraging *all* of the talents and creativities of Black women to emerge, strong and beautiful, not to feel guilty or divisive, and assume positions of leadership and honor in the Black community. We will encourage the Black community to stop falling into the trap of the white male Left, utilizing women only in terms of domestic or servile needs. We will remind the Black Liberation Movement that there can't be liberation for half a race. We must together, as a people, work to eliminate racism from without the Black community which is trying to destroy us as an entire people, but we must remember that sexism is destroying and crippling us from within.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Interview with Jane Galvin-Lewis, 1988.
- <sup>2</sup> Interview with Margaret Sloan, 1988.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Interview with Galvin-Lewis, 1988.
- <sup>6</sup> Barbara Campbell, "Black Feminists Form Group Here," *New York Times*, August 16, 1973, p. 36.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 36.
- <sup>8</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), p. 277.
- <sup>9</sup> Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York: David McKay, 1975), p. 38.
- <sup>10</sup> Joyce Ladner, "Tanzanian Women and Nation Building," *The Black Scholar* 3(4), 1971, p. 28.
- <sup>11</sup> Johnnetta Cole, "Black Women in America: An Annotated Bibliography," *The Black Scholar* 3(4), 1971, p. 42.
- <sup>12</sup> Freeman, p. 41.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 38.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Jacquelyn Jackson, "But Where Are the Men?" *The Black Scholar* 3(4), 1971, p. 32.
- <sup>16</sup> Freeman, p. 41.
- <sup>17</sup> Interviews with Diane Lacey and Galvin-Lewis, 1978.
- <sup>18</sup> Interview with Galvin-Lewis, 1978.
- <sup>19</sup> Freeman, p. 156.
- <sup>20</sup> Interview with Galvin-Lewis, 1978.
- <sup>21</sup> Interview with Lacey, 1978.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Freeman, p. 156.
- <sup>24</sup> Interviews with Lacey and Galvin-Lewis, 1978.
- <sup>25</sup> Interviews with Sloan and Galvin-Lewis, 1988.
- <sup>26</sup> Interview with Lacey, 1978.
- <sup>27</sup> Interview with Galvin-Lewis, 1978.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Interview with Galvin-Lewis, 1988.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Patsy Fulcher, Susan McHenry and Mary Thom, "Black Women United: Sororities, Alliances, and Pressure Groups," *Ms.* 7(7), 1979, p. 90.
- <sup>32</sup> Walker, p. 273.
- <sup>33</sup> Interview with Galvin-Lewis, 1988.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.