

The Black Panther Party... from a Sister's Point of View.



An interview of Dr. Phyllis Jackson

Written by Mzuri Pambeli

Sis Phyllis Jackson is a professor at Pomona College and former member of the Black Panther Party. Through this interview, we better understand why this sister and many people joined the struggle, gave their lives for the struggle of liberation and came out better for it.

When did you join the Black Panther Party?

I joined the party in July of 1969. I joined in Oakland California. Actually, I wasn't from Oakland but was from Tacoma Washington. I was in Oakland for the summer after my first year of college. I was going to college in Allensburg Washington where there was only 42 people Black people in the whole town. I decided to visit my sister in Oakland and on the streets I met a man selling Black Panther newspapers. They were advertising in that issue for a conference that was going to be held July 17-19, called the United Front Against Facism conference. I had gotten involved in the BSU in college and was becoming politically aware. I had gone to college as a colored girl but I left a Black woman. I was completely and totally apolitical. I joined the Party in 1969 as a result of the United Front Against Facism. I

went to the conference by myself and the one night Bobby Seale gave his keynote address...he said towards the end "And to all you college students...would you please come home. The white man is not going to teach you anything about how to free your people on those college campuses." That didn't make me join the party. It did make me want to get a little more involved so the next week I went in the national headquarters office which was located in Berkeley on Shattuck Ave at the time. While the party started in Oakland, when I started in 1969, the headquarters had moved to Berkeley. I went in to volunteer some time. They put me to work right away on the community control police petition. I made the decision that I was not going to go back to Washington and that I was going to join the Black Panther Party.



Was there a program for recruiting/training women?

There was no notion that a revolutionary needed to be either a male or a female. It was about the person willing to stand up against injustice and capitalism. The party did not target either. It was a program of attraction not promotion. The focus was on attracting people to the work of the party. It was about raising people's consciousness so that they could choose to make decisions on their own. To make decisions to get involved or not get involved to bring about a more just society.

When women and men came into the party, they received the same training and same treatment. It wasn't about male or female, in 1969. When I joined

the party in 1969, 50 percent of the people in the party were women. The majority of the people in leadership were men, but there were lots of women in the party and even more as time went on. Rather than it being a gender based issue, it was more of a skilled based issue. If you came to the party and you had skills such as typing, driving, photography, the party used you based on the skills you had.

So many of the women who joined the party came from the campus, they often had more skills than the brothers and so many were used to write or develop the newspaper.

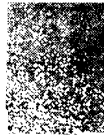
Why weren't there more women in leadership?

When I joined there was already a sister in Boston running the party there. Depending upon where you were in the party geographically, the ratio of men to women was different. And the way in which the gender politics played out, that had some impact.

I joined at the central hub of the party in Oakland and thus party practices, policy and strategy was followed more stringently. When I joined, it was about day to day work, during the height of the breakfast program.

Also, the party had a structure called democratic centralism

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up arms. It was completely opposite from what was taught in this society. The party ideology changed all of that.

Probably the most important part was to see myself as a political agent for change and having a goal beyond being a mother and housewife. Having agency and vision that was beyond my own personal wellbeing but that was broader than I and my family opened me up to know what it meant to work for the collective agenda and the collective concerns and needs of Black people in America. And to do that in a way that was principled, studied and informed, and to understand that as a Black woman, there was *nothing that I couldn't do*. To have no fears as a Black woman, that changed me from this shy person growing up to this fearless woman. As a woman, I shed many of those inhibitions that were socialized in us to pretend to make ourselves small, to make ourselves acceptable for a man. In many ways, being in the Black Panther Party gave me a different notion about what women should do and be. The party really changed me in that way and you might say the party made what we call a feminist today.

How did the BPP change your life as an African Woman?

I grew up in a working class family. My father worked two full time jobs. Part of that was that although they were working class, they had middle class aspirations. I was in the church and choir. I was a really good girl. I never skipped school, never broke the rules. But it was that first year of college and taking a black studies course that for the first time I heard of black leaders like W.E.B. Dubois and Malcolm X.

I still thought of myself in very traditional ways. The goal during that day was to go to college and find a boyfriend and get married. But to instead marry the revolution and the Party changed my life in ways I can't even enumerate.

Panther Women

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which means they had central committee leadership. People like Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, Donald Cox, Albert Howard, Emory Douglas. Towards the end of 69 and 70, women started rising to higher level positions. Paper (assigned to the newspaper) cadre had men and women on it. There was a sense publicly that women weren't on leadership, but that was not true. Chapters and branches were reconfigured all the time. You started to see women taking on more of a leadership role. Elaine Brown being transferred to Northern California from Los Angeles eventually became the editor of the paper and on leadership. It was about the skills you had.

Was there male chauvinism inside the Party?

There was an incident where one sister was selling newspapers with a brother and this brother hit the sister and he might have called her a name too. That issue was discussed at a meeting, they both gave their side of the

story and that brother was found fully out of line and in need of methods of correction. So in my very first meeting, I became really clear that sexism was not allowed inside of the Party. That wasn't other people's experience. That was mine. But with that mindset, I knew I didn't have to take it from anybody because our party had principles to guide us. It really depends on the individuals where you organized or the locality. There was no way the party did not recruit folks with chauvinism because we recruited from the masses and the people brought all of that stuff with them into the party. The difference was that we had a structure with which to deal with it and a set of principles to go by. At this point, the party was really modeling itself with revolutions around the global. Whether it was revolutions against colonialism like in Vietnam or the revolutions in China or Cuba or across the continent of Africa, one of the things I always heard was that there was no difference between the revolutionary, man and a woman. The woman like the man in Vietnam was picking up arms, just like the women in amerika had to pick

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