

## ON WOMEN'S AUTONOMY

While not denying ourselves the right to criticise the autonomous movements the main task for a general political organisation like BF is to change our political work as a consequence of learning from them, and building specific forms of solidarity with them.

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I've been concerned particularly since the summer school about BF's approach to feminism and relationship to the women's movement. I felt that the summer school was exactly the kind of mixed forum for discussion of sexual politics we need, but I've also felt that there has been a great deal of confusion around discussion of the summer school and sexual politics, and several assumptions made which I can't accept.

One which I've seen written and heard voiced is that there are women in BF who don't support BF's politics of the complex relationships of oppressions but rather put women's oppression first. I have yet to meet such a woman in BF and I think what that assumption hides is an attitude to women's autonomy which is confused and distanced. It is this relationship which we as BF women need crucially to be clearer about.

When I go on a reclaim the Night march called to demonstrate anger over the £2,000 fine for rape, and one of the slogans shouted is 'castrate rapists' which I don't support, even if I discuss it with the women around me, even though I feel bad about it, I can't in any way expect to prevent that slogan being shouted, and therefore by being on that march being seen to support it. Nor do I feel in this situation that what I'm offering as a woman in BF is 'critical support' for WAVAW - I am angry about that case and I've come to express the anger I feel about rape. I am in fact actively part of this demonstration. When male club owners or the police move in, I will fight with and for all the women on that march and if asked I will speak on behalf of all women of my anger and my despair of what women everywhere suffer from men.

This is the practical reality of my involvement with the women's movement and the question is how does that reality relate to my commitment to BF politics? I suppose my way of understanding BF politics is as a feminist. My commitment to women's struggles first does not mean that I believe that they're more important than anti-imperialist work, or a commitment to working class struggles, it merely reflects my experience as an individual middle-class white woman, which means my experience of oppression is as a woman, and therefore it is as a woman that I can identify with and organise around the oppression of others. It is my experience as a woman which commits me to revolutionary struggle, and to believe that to be a necessity for all oppressed groups.

In trying to be clearer about what women's autonomy means for BF, we must avoid making hierarchies of oppression, our politics won't be better for substituting one oppression for another, but rather by organising differently. In a letter in Nov BF 'Dissident' Manchester, tries to show that because in South Africa women will side with men opposite each other in the black/white conflict that the oppression of women through male violence is somehow less significant in that context. Yet we know that women in South Africa are oppressed through sexual violence as elsewhere, and what we learn from the women's movement is that black women will/are organising separately from men (as well as together), that they will be concerned particularly with certain issues which affect them separately like separation from children, and that we must build solidarity among women in Europe for all these things.

Another area of confusion is I think the issue of men's involvement in anti-sexist practice.

While I expect BF men to be able to explain, and defend anti-sexist work to men outside BF, I would have an unrealistic sense of what men and women directly stand to lose and gain by the liberation of women to think

if I thought that men could participate in the creation of feminist theory. In my experience raising feminist perspectives in campaigns both in and outside BF is not easy. Usually the beginning of what becomes a substantial feminist critique starts life as a vaguely generalised wondering, goes through a process of discussion with other women, which confirms experience and finds explanations, and is only then a theoretically useful argument. It is not my experience that men can help that development, rather I have been forced into arguments which I cannot substantiate through talking about wonderings with men before having arguments pretty well worked out.

I don't think this is either surprising or disappointing - Men don't have the experience which creates feminist theory.

At the same time I fear a tendency in myself and other women to tell men what to think or do about feminism, and I hate the effect that has on me as well as on men. Partly because of this I think it's essential that men organise themselves to talk about anti-sexist work and feminist theory, and to take action as they feel necessary/motivated.

At present I think this is an area of some concern for BF. We have to be really careful how we approach male involvement in feminist campaigns. First I'm worried by discussions on male violence ~~xxx~~ or abortion for instance, turn so much around what men should do because 'as we're a mixed organisation we have to give a lead on this' It can ~~xx~~ never be the most important issue. Women must work out their own ideas first no matter what demands men in the organisation are making.

I'm also concerned by how men seem to want to always be involved where they'll be most obvious and public - for instance in the discussions about a Reclaim the Night march in Hackney, the group has talked about whether sympathetic men should be allowed to join the march. I would like to see BF men questioning the whole notion of 'political work'. I think it's hard for men generally who've been traditionally invisibly supported in order to publicly act, to get away from valuing public politics above all else. But some men in BF have withdrawn from BF politics in order to be with children. And that's an isolated and individual decision for them. Is there some way ~~xx~~ that making childcare a priority (which has enormous effect on the political lives of women) can be a more collectively considered form of political action?

What's good about the sentence about autonomous movements at the beginning of these notes, is that it assumes a closeness to the struggle which makes it mean something. If I stand back and talk about a right to criticise the autonomous women's movement, my criticisms are irrelevant. If on the other hand I'm criticising from within, when we're making choices about strategy, or working out ideas, then my right ~~xx~~ as a BF woman - as any other woman - exists and it is BF politics which undoubtedly will inform my criticism. Similarly it is because of our else involvement with the autonomous movements that we can use those experiences within BF. Our learning comes from doing as well as thinking.

These notes were made for discussion with London Facing the Challenge ~~xxx~~ women. so not at all well put together or finished thoughts, but maybe useful.....fanny