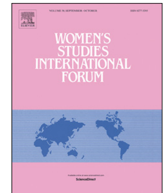
Women's Studies International Forum 69 (2018) 49–55

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif



Concerned, meet terrified: Intersectional feminism and the Women's March

Sierra Brewer, Lauren Dundes*

Department of Sociology, McDaniel College, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Women's March
Trump
Clinton
White feminism
Intersectional feminism
Pussy hat
Race
Gender
Intersectionality
African American

ABSTRACT

The first US Women's March on January 21, 2017 seemingly had the potential to unite women across race. To assess the progress of feminism towards an increasingly intersectional feminist approach, the authors collected and analyzed interview data from 20 young African American women who shared their impressions of the Women's March that followed Donald Trump's inauguration during the month after the march. Interviewees believed that Trump's election and his sexism spurred the march, prompting the participation of many women who had not previously embraced feminism. Interviewees suggested that the march provided white women with a means to protest the election rather than a way to address social injustice disproportionately affecting lower social classes and people of color. Interviewees believed that a racially inclusive feminist movement would remain elusive without a greater commitment to intersectional feminism.

Introduction

"If I see that white folks are concerned, then people of color need to be terrified."

In the above quotation, Women's March co-chair Tamika Mallory acknowledges that social locations shape reality (Cullen, 2017; Michaud, 2017; Tolentino, 2017), including how the intersection of race and gender relates to reactions to the first Women's March on January 21, 2017. The march occurred subsequent to the November 8, 2016 US election of Donald Trump, despite his blatant sexism (Darweesh & Abdullah, 2016). These events raise the question of whether a diverse group of women can unite and prioritize goals without making oppression specific to African American women invisible.

Media coverage of the Women's March, which drew over two million participants around the globe (Przybyla & Schouten, 2017), featured women wearing woven pink "pussy hats" as a symbol of their outrage about a Trump presidency. Trump had been elected even after bragging that male celebrities can do anything they want to women with impunity, including, to "Grab them by the pussy," a 2005 statement Trump dismissed as locker room talk. For many women, this comment that was taped on a hot mic and leaked by the media in October 2016 (Fahrenthold, 2017) seemed to be the tipping point to rally against the unacceptable treatment of women. News of the hot mic comment spawned t-shirts and pink "pussy hats" (Pussy Hat Project, 2017) that helped galvanize women, at least white women, in a way that other sexist revelations about Trump had not (e.g., Trump's body shaming of Latina Alicia Machado, crowned Miss Universe in 1996) (Chozick & Grynbaum, 2017). Indeed, the 2005 hot mic comment appeared to be a principal focal point of the march for white women galvanized by Trump bragging that fame allowed him to be sexually aggressive with women without their consent. Yet media coverage of the march left unanswered whether the *causes célèbres* for many white women had resonated in the same way for African American women whose goals were arguably at odds with the imperial feminism of the losing Democratic candidate in the 2016 presidential race, Hillary Clinton. Some believe that Clinton's approach to feminism constituted imperial feminism that centers on white narratives, depriving women of color of agency (such as ignoring how fair pay and child care affect women's reproductive decisions) (Eisenstein, 2016; Featherstone, 2016).

Disproportionate attention to the voices of white women at the march (Hancock, 2016; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017) exacerbated racial fault lines that were fueled by Trump's campaign rhetoric. Trump was well known for promising to protect Americans from Mexicans whom he labeled criminals, part of his election strategy in which immigrants were portrayed as threatening invaders who pose a financial burden (Ngo, 2017; Perez Huber, 2016), rhetoric that arguably warranted as much attention as Trump's pussy comment (as our data will reflect). The racial fault lines were clearly apparent in signs carried at the march that belied inter-racial cohesion.

There was some media coverage of signs that women of color carried that revealed fissures in the feminist movement. Tag lines included, "Being Scared Since 2016 Is Privilege," "White Women Elected Trump,"

* Corresponding author at: Department of Sociology, 2 College Hill, Westminster, MD 21157, United States.
E-mail address: ldundes@mcdaniel.edu (L. Dundes).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2018.04.008
Received 30 March 2017; Received in revised form 9 April 2018; Accepted 19 April 2018
0277-5395/ © 2018 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

"White Lives Matter Too Much" and "I'll see you nice white ladies at the next #BlackLivesMatter march, right?" (Richardson, 2017, paragraphs 9 and 10). There were also media reports questioning the genuineness of white women's commitment to feminism given their palpable excitement surrounding participation in the march, as noted by Ijeoma Oluo (editor at large of feminist website The Establishment): seeing white women "so excited — buying plane tickets, knitting hats, doing all of these things, getting ready to get out and march in the street, and you're wondering, 'Where was that need to get out and say something when we were being shot?'" (Richardson, 2017, paragraph 11). Oluo's comment about the urgency to act when Black people are "being shot" coincides with research showing that many African American women at the march prioritized issues of racial justice like police brutality (Fisher, Dow, & Ray, 2017). These examples suggest concerns that white feminists lack motivation to prioritize issues that disproportionately affect Black communities, including those spearheaded by the Black Lives Matter movement.

This paper provides context for the dissension between white and Black feminists, including historical background about the role of race in feminism. We explore African American interviewees' perceptions that white women focused on Trump more so than on broader issues of social justice, views that highlight the importance of intersectionality. These viewpoints expose a lack of cross-racial unity that fuels distrust of white women allies which in turn suggests the need for a more inclusive agenda in the modern feminist movement.

Historical basis of the divide between white and black feminists

The racial divide in the perspectives of white and black feminists dates back to both first-wave feminism (that includes the women's suffrage movement) as well as second-wave feminism of the early 1960s to early 1990s. Hallmarks of second-wave feminism, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW) (1966), and women's consciousness-raising in the late 1960s, reflect the movement's focus on the goals of middle-class white women seeking equality with men (Breines, 2006; Collins, 2002; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1982; Roth, 1999; Silliman, Fried, Ross, & Gutierrez, 2004; Thompson, 2002). Nevertheless, women of color were part of second-wave feminism although their contributions are sometimes overlooked, e.g., the southern Californian multiracial feminist Califia Community, formed in 1975, that was committed to the education of all women, independent of their sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity (Pomerleau, 2013).

Valk's (2008) exhaustive study of archival sources, publications, and oral history about activism in Washington, D.C. from the mid-1960s to 1980 details how Black Power organizations in the 1960s played an important role in the feminist and other social movements, documenting that the feminist movement involved Black women. Nevertheless, racial differences among feminists have been called hierarchical rather than interdependent, prompting an enduring sense of invisibility among women of color beginning in the second-wave feminist movement (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015).

The way in which information about the feminist movement has been reported also complicates conceptions of feminism among people of color. For example, crucial achievements of women of color have often been incorrectly presented as occurring *after* the gains of white feminists or ignored completely (Roth, 1999; Thompson, 2002). White feminists portrayed black abolitionist Sojourner Truth as a "strong and folksy ex-slave" in violation of Truth's preference for self-representation as "a middle-class lady" (Craig, 2002, p. 7). The social construction of hegemonic second-wave feminist accounts became "the official stories" of the white women's movement (Sandoval, 1991, p. 5), prompting women of color to demand that feminism expand recognition of the implications of social class and race (Thompson, 2002). In particular, Crenshaw (1989) has brought attention to the legal system's failure to redress compounded discrimination based on both gender *and* race.

Crenshaw developed the concept of intersectionality in her capacity as a Harvard Law School graduate and professor at UCLA and Columbia Law Schools. In particular, she decried an appeals court decision, *Degraffenreid* vs *General Motors*, 1977, in which five black women sued General Motors for both race and gender discrimination. Citing legal precedent, the court decreed that claims of race and gender discrimination must be examined separately. Crenshaw objected to the finding that race and sex discrimination must be assessed as separate entities, without consideration of compounded discrimination. She worries that overlooking how the intersectional experiences of Black women differ from both white women and Black men makes Black women invisible while in plain sight (Crenshaw, 1989).

Although there has been great variation in the multilayered feminist movement, some white feminists have been unable to see their status as "both oppressed and oppressor." As a result, a number of feminist women of color have viewed the politics of white women as bourgeois: "narrow at best and frivolous at worst" (Thompson, 2002, p. 342). This class and race "unconsciousness" among some white feminists (Roth, 1999, p. 99) resulted in second-wave feminist treatment of sexism as the ultimate barrier without adequate consideration of how it intersects with class, race and hetero-normative-based oppression, an insensitivity with lasting repercussions for a more racially united feminist movement.

There have been many obstacles keeping white and black feminists apart, however the failure to recognize how race and class intersect was "the key obstacle" to more complete cross-race acceptance of second-wave feminism (Roth, 2004, p. 101) At times, instead of reaching across differences in race, class and sexual preference in order to bond over shared political beliefs, white feminists have controlled the movement to facilitate their entry into the capitalist patriarchal power structure, seeking to become part of the same system they decried as oppressive (hooks, 1982; Yancy, 2000).

Some black women also feared that second-wave feminism would subsume the black movement (Breines, 2006; Newman, 1999). In response, groundbreaking movements like the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist lesbian organization (1974 to 1980) that split from the National Black Feminist Organization, demonstrated the critical role of identity politics and multiple interlocking oppressions that revealed how the white feminist movement was not sufficiently inclusive (Breines, 2006).

The Women's March provides a contemporary opportunity to examine racial solidarity during a time of socio-political tumult. The event has spawned calls for dialogue about the ability of women to unify despite divisive politics of difference (see Moss & Maddrell, 2017). To aid our understanding of the extent to which African American women felt excluded from the feminist movement, we analyze interview data from 20 young African American women asked to share their view of the 2017 Women's March in the month following the event.

Methods

Our study of African American women's perceptions of the Women's March was shaped in part by anecdotal observations of our Facebook newsfeeds in the days surrounding the march, and particularly the day of the march, January 21, 2017. Posts by numerous white women supporting the march sharply contrasted with an almost complete lack of commentary, positive or negative, about the march by either author's African American female Facebook friends.

The first author, an African-American college student, conducted Institutional Review Board-approved interviews of a convenience sample of 20 of her African American female friends, most of whom were college students at several different colleges, the majority of which are located within 1 h of Washington DC, where the largest Women's March took place in 2017. These friends were contacted via text message and asked to reply to the first author if they were willing

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6852302

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/6852302

Daneshyari.com