

## U.S.A. : Women in the Black Panther Party

Tuesday 11 December 2018, by [FARMER Ashley](#), [PHILIPS Mary](#), [SPENCER Robyn C.](#), [YELLESETTY Leela](#) (Date first published: 1 December 2018).

**Leela Yellesetty spoke to three authors of recent books that highlight the contribution of women in the Black Panther Party and draw out some of the lessons.**

In February 1970, Kathleen Cleaver, communication secretary of the Black Panther Party (BPP), was asked by a reporter from the “women’s page” of the *Washington Post* what she thought was a woman’s role in the revolution. She responded, in part: “No one ever asks what a man’s place in the Revolution is.”<sup>1</sup>

To many, the BPP conjures up a hypermasculine image of Black men in leather coats and berets carrying shotguns. Yet at its height—according to a survey conducted by Chairman Bobby Seale in 1969—the party membership was over 60 percent female.<sup>2</sup> These women were integral to every aspect of party life, including serving as prominent leaders. Yet until recently, much of their work has been sidelined in historical research and popular media.

Recent scholarship is shedding light on the role of women in the BPP and the Black struggle more broadly. For activists involved in today’s struggles—from women who have been at the forefront of the Black Lives Matter movement, to the widespread impact and identification with #MeToo (which among other things has prompted a reckoning with sexism within activist spaces), to the popular use of the term “intersectionality” to make sense of the interlocking forces of racial, class, and gendered oppression—the experience of women in the BPP offers a host of lessons.

The BPP emerged in an era of global mass revolt. In the United States, the struggle against anti-Black racism was the central flashpoint that opened up a mass radicalization around a whole host of issues—from war and imperialism, to women’s and LGBT oppression, to class inequality and capitalism. By the end of the 1960s, millions of young Americans believed a revolution was necessary in this country and thousands flooded into revolutionary groups like the BPP.

The BPP’s Ten Point Program outlined a vision for liberation, encompassing demands for jobs, housing, education, and self-determination. In its early phase, the party’s activity focused on “point 7”: the fight against police brutality. Making use of their Constitutional rights, the Panthers boldly asserted their intention to use arms to defend the Black community from police violence.

By most accounts, the first woman member of BPP was Tarika Lewis, also known as Matilaba. Lewis was a student activist at Oakland Technical High School and one of the first students to agitate for a Black history club there. At age sixteen, Lewis walked into the Panther office and declared: “Y’all have a nice program and everything. It sounds like me. Can I join? Cause y’all don’t have no sisters up in here.” When Seale responded in the affirmative, her next question was: “Can I have a gun?” The answer was also yes.<sup>3</sup>

Lewis quickly advanced to taking on various leadership roles, including teaching drill classes, leading educational sessions, and working on the newspaper. As a female section leader, she recalls she was not always respected, but “when the guys came up to me and said ‘I ain’t gonna do what

you tell me to do 'cause you a sister,' I invited them to come on out to the weapons range and I could outshoot 'em."<sup>4</sup>

The BPP had a stated policy of gender equality from its outset, in stark contrast with many left groups at the time. Assata Shakur stated that she joined the BPP in New York after coming around other Black nationalist groups whose gender politics bothered her:

The BPP was the most progressive organization at that time [and] had the most positive images in terms of . . . the position of women in the propaganda . . . I felt it was the most positive thing that I could do because many of the other organizations at the time were so sexist, I mean to the extreme . . . There was a whole saturation of the whole climate with this quest for manhood . . . even though that might be oppressive to you as a human being . . . For me joining the BPP was one of the best options at the time.<sup>5</sup>

One important reference point of this era was the publication of the Moynihan report in 1965. Commissioned by the US Department of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* argued that a "tangle of pathology" in family life lay at the root of problems facing the Black community. In particular, the report claimed that Black men were unable to fulfill their roles as men in a patriarchal society, leading to a "matriarchal" structure of female-headed households.

Echoes of the Moynihan report can be found in the writings of male Panther leaders, although to be clear, they lay the blame on a racist social structure rather than a "tangle of pathology." Nonetheless, the focus on the idea of restoring Black manhood left little room for the active role of women.

Sexist attitudes and formulations among party leadership were evidenced perhaps most starkly in the case of Eldridge Cleaver, who joined the party and became minister of information in 1967. Cleaver, a convicted rapist, wrote in his influential book *Soul on Ice* that he considered the rape of white women to be a revolutionary act, and that he "practiced" on Black women to start.<sup>6</sup> While this book was written before he entered the party, he never officially repudiated these views before joining.

Early on, female members were referred to as "Pantherettes" and there was a separate hierarchy and chain of command for female members (although this was dropped rather quickly for reasons discussed below). During his 1968 presidential campaign with the Peace and Freedom Party, Eldridge Cleaver popularized the idea of "pussy power"—that women should withhold sex from men who didn't vote for the party.

These examples and others have subsequently been held up as evidence that the BPP was a thoroughly misogynist organization. Yet this assessment fails to account for both the social context in which the party operated as well as the tremendous evolution the party underwent on these questions over the course of just a few years. As Kathleen Cleaver pointed out:

What I think is distinctive about gender relations within the Black Panther Party is not how those gender relations duplicated what was going on in the world around us. In fact, that world was extremely misogynist and authoritarian. That's part of what inspired us to fight against it. When women suffered hostility, abuse, neglect, and assault—this was not something arising from the policies or structure of the Black Panther Party, something absent from the world—that's what was going on in the world. The difference

that being in the Black Panther Party made was that it put a woman in a position when such treatment occurred to contest it.<sup>7</sup>

A number of important developments formed the backdrop for this contestation. The massive campaign of police and FBI violence and surveillance resulted in the death and incarceration of prominent male leadership early on, and women often stepped in to fill the vacuum. At the same time, female members were not spared from state repression. In May 1969, Ericka Huggins and the rest of the New Haven chapter leadership were arrested on murder charges. Of the eight defendants, five were women, three of whom were pregnant. The incarcerated Panthers organized their fellow prisoners to demand better health care and treatment.

The Connecticut trial prompted attention from the national leadership. Eldridge Cleaver (who just a year prior was advocating “pussy power”) issued a statement in the newspaper, which read in part:

Let it be a lesson and an example to all of the sisters, particularly to all of the brothers, that we must understand that our women are suffering strongly and enthusiastically as we are participating in the struggle. The incarceration and the suffering of Sister Ericka should be a stinging rebuke to all manifestations of male chauvinism within our ranks . . . That we must too recognize that a woman can be just as revolutionary as a man and that she has equal status . . . That revolutionary standards of principles demand that we go to great lengths to see to it that disciplinary action is taken on all levels against those who manifest male chauvinism behavior.<sup>8</sup>

This was followed by similar statements by party leaders Huey Newton<sup>9</sup> and Bobby Seale<sup>10</sup> underscoring the centrality of combating all forms of oppression and forming united fronts with the women’s and gay liberation movements.

The party’s focus on survival programs, most prominently the Free Breakfast for Children Program, also catapulted women to leading roles in the party and their communities. While this emphasis on the survival programs certainly helped attract even larger numbers of women to the organization, they were not considered “women’s work.” Male comrades were expected to and did play an active role in all these programs, in the process breaking down ideas about gender roles in the party and the broader communities they served.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, women overwhelmingly played a leading role in organizing and running these programs—based, by all accounts, on their superior abilities. As former Panther Malika Adams pointed out:

Women ran the BPP pretty much. I don’t know how it got to be a male’s party or thought of being a male’s party. Because those things, when you really look at it in terms of society, those things are looked on as being woman things, you know, feeding children, taking care of the sick and uh, so. Yeah we did that. We actually ran it.<sup>12</sup>

Women in the BPP developed their own intersectional theory and practice around questions of race, sex, and class that informed the party’s approach. While the BPP allied with women’s groups on a number of occasions, the Panther women stressed that their experience of sexism was distinct from that of white women—especially the middle-class white women who predominated in the leadership of some organizations.

Even as they experienced sexism by Black men, Panther women also recognized that they were bound together in the fight against racism and capitalism. In a roundtable interview in *The Black Panther* newspaper, women Panthers argued that the problem of sexism was something to be dealt with inside the movement:

There are some people who talk about the contradictions among men and women as one of the major contradictions in capitalist society and therefore they take that contradiction . . . and develop it into an antagonistic contradiction, when actually it is a contradiction among the people. It is not a contradiction between enemies.<sup>13</sup>

Women Panthers took an active role in combating manifestations of sexism in the pages of the party's newspaper and in day-to-day organizing. As BPP Minister of Culture Emory Douglass remembered in a 2015 interview in *Socialist Worker*:

We had to deal with the issues of chauvinism in the Black Panther Party by having political education classes, and those brothers who didn't want to work under women or were using the "b-word"—those things that cause the deterioration of party—had to be corrected. Because women demanded that. So when those brothers did that and refused to listen to sisters, they were required to take orders from sisters to learn to respect them as their comrades.<sup>14</sup>

As the party consolidated in Oakland in its later years, women increasingly dominated the party leadership. In 1974, Elaine Brown became party chair and appointed a number of women into the central committee. These women conducted important work in the community programs, including the establishment of the Oakland Community School, which became a model for liberatory education.

Women Panthers also pushed the party around questions of reproduction. The communal living situations of most Panthers afforded a chance to experiment with an alternative model of parenting outside of the nuclear family, one in which all members of the community were expected to take part in the cooking, cleaning, and raising of children, both their own and others.

In 1972, Audrea Jones issued a position paper on birth control for the party suggesting that both women and men attend BPP clinic sponsored birth control classes, arguing that expecting women to bear sole responsibility for birth control was "backward and unprogressive."<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, while women were gaining more prominent roles in the organization and beginning to challenge sexism and rigid gender roles, this was occurring against the backdrop of the overall deradicalization and decline of the movements. The party was in the process of degenerating as well, ultimately collapsing under the weight of state repression and internal conflicts.

Despite its short existence, the experience of the BPP provides an important source of inspiration and lessons for activists today. In an article on the British socialist website rs21, Shanice McBean noted:

The leadership of women in the struggles that have emerged in reaction to police brutality and in affirmation of Black lives today is . . . a sign of the strength of these struggles. Still, the struggle against sexism is a continual and active struggle, or, it is a

dead one. . . . Unity in a society built on oppression has to navigate thorny, dirty, and difficult terrain. The history of the BPP is instructive here. Unity certainly cannot come about by ignoring the oppressive social relations that divide us; they have to be righteously confronted. But we cannot expect our movements to be sanitized. The BPP women were instrumental to building the organization and developing the basis for an anti-sexist BPP; something they achieved by challenging the sexism of their brothers while standing shoulder to shoulder with them against the police.<sup>16</sup>

---

### **Roundtable with Mary Phillips (MP), Ashley Farmer (AF), and Robyn C. Spenser (RS)**

**In many people's minds the Black Panther Party conjures up an image of macho Black men with guns. Likewise, much that's been written about the party is focused on the role of certain prominent male leaders. Yet at its height, women made up nearly two-thirds of the party membership. Why do you think they are often absent in the popular memory of the party?**

**MP:** I think it has a lot to do with the power of patriarchy. Our nation's patriarchy and sexism colors our world. Oftentimes the legacies of women remain absent, their contributions are lost, and the dominant narrative is male-centered. But when we look at the BPP, much of the work is due to the tireless activism of women. Women were active in every aspect of leadership across ranks. They were critical to the operationalization of the BPP. They kept the engine running throughout the duration of the organization. Women occupied virtually every position in the BPP. They were artists, poets, writers, organizers, and theorists among others. They were key players.

To understand BPP women's experiences it's going to take some more work because so many of their stories haven't been documented yet. It requires a lot of oral history and reading through archival documents. The legacy of women is all over the archives because their hands were all over the work. We have to look for women's work in nontraditional places because women did not always have the luxury to write down their experiences.

**AF:** I think this happens for a couple reasons. First, that the propaganda and the images that the party put out were overwhelmingly male from the start, and these images, particularly the men in black berets, black leather jackets, sunglasses, stuck in people's minds. Second, the most famous Panthers were typically the ones who were also political prisoners, including Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Seale. To be sure, women such as Ericka Huggins were also political prisoners, but because there was so much notoriety around the three men, I think that these are the main names that come to mind when people think about the party.

Finally, I think it's because of the way scholars write about the group and this period in history. When historians examine a group or period, they usually begin by focusing on founding roles and leadership roles. Because of the sexism of the 1960s (which still continues today) scholars are not going to find women as much in these spaces. As a result, women are obscured in the scholarly record and this trickles down to popular memory.

**RS:** Despite recent scholarship on women and Black Power, commemorative events around the Panthers fiftieth anniversary in 2016 that centered women, and the ongoing public presence of Black Panther women such as Kathleen Cleaver, Ericka Huggins, Charlotte Hill O'Neal, Judy Juanita, and others sharing their history in books, essays, and speeches, the public perception of the Black Panther Party continues to pivot around charismatic male leaders.

When truth and perception vary so wildly the culprit is typically ideology. In this case, the belief system that men lead and women follow; men theorize while women act and strong heroic men protect militantly while weak women need protection provides blinders, which minimize the contributions of Panther women to the Black freedom movement. Persistently spotlighting Black women's involvement in the Black Panther Party as leaders, theorists, mobilizers, and strong advocates of everything from self-defense to community empowerment has much transgressive potential. It can feel like an uphill battle because it challenges so many ingrained ways of thinking but it is essential at this moment of grassroots insurgence under the Trump administration.

### **How does BPP women's leadership fit into a broader pattern of women's leadership in the Black freedom movement historically?**

**RS:** Women in the Black Panther Party stood on the shoulders of women in many freedom movements past. Scholars can look back and draw the connections between women leaders such as Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Panther women. If one were to ask Panther women who inspired them, they would likely offer examples of leadership from local movements, community institutions, and their own family, which reinforced the idea that gender was not a barrier to vocal and visionary leadership. It's also important to note that Panther women were also inspired by Malcolm X and Robert Williams and other men, as well as by the image of Vietnamese and Algerian women as guerilla fighters. And in some cases where there was no "model" they had to literally invent themselves. When teenaged Tarika Lewis went into the Panther office in Oakland in 1967 and asked them if women could join, she was boldly staking a claim of belonging and opening a door for many others to flood through.

### **Why did women join the BPP and were their reasons different from those of male members? What kinds of roles did women play in the party and how did this shift over time?**

**AF:** Women joined the Party for many different reasons. Some joined because they found the group to be one that was taking clear action to support the Black community and combat its most pressing problems—whether that be organizing around victims of gun violence, feeding children through the free breakfast program, or forming solidarity with other groups in the community. Others became members because their friends and family joined. Some women told me they joined because they liked the Panthers' political ideology. The Panthers started out as Black nationalists, espousing a separatist, Black-centered ideology. This attracted some women during the height of the Black Power movement. As the group evolved, they started to form more connections with other communities of color and other oppressed people. Some women, particularly those who joined a little later—maybe around '69-'71—were expressly interested in this kind of coalition-building politics.

Once they joined, they were part of every aspect of party life. They were artists and writers for the newspaper. Women also helped produce the newspaper—which you could argue was one of the most influential aspects of the party, particularly as it was read and sold worldwide. They also were officers in different chapters. Some women were field officers, meaning they worked with a group of Panthers to go and do organizing in the community. Some of them were chapter founders or leaders. Others such as Audrea Jones, who started out in Boston and eventually moved to Oakland, helped start the Panthers' free medical clinics. As the organization developed, women took on what many think of as more traditional leadership roles including becoming members of the Panther's Central Committee. By the 1970s, women such as Elaine Brown, Ericka Huggins, and JoNina Abron ran the party, its programs, and its newspaper. This is where the party departed from some of the other groups in the movement. Having this many women in leadership positions soon after the organization was founded was something that set it apart from other organizations.

**MP:** Women, just like men, joined the BPP for many different reasons. Some women shared with me stories about experiencing racial discrimination and the terror of the Ku Klux during their formative years. Some women were looking for a practical way to get involved in the movement. At the age of fourteen, Ericka Huggins talks about her attendance at the March on Washington as a turning point in her life. At the march she decided that she was going to serve her community for the rest of her life. Four years later, she joined the Panthers and was asked to sell the newspaper, clean the office, and type and answer the phone. I remember she pointed out that her lover at the time, John Huggins, was asked to do the very same thing. She was also asked to stay up all night and hold watch of the BPP office because of police surveillance.

Some women shared first-hand accounts about the Panthers serving the community. The Panthers were very visible and they were conscious of the role of media. I remember talking with a community member in Detroit about the Panthers and she talked about their visibility and how much their community programs directly impacted her life. For others there's a legacy of activism in their family and they wanted to continue that tradition. In terms of women's roles, as I mentioned women were organizers, orators, strategists, theorists, artists, the list goes on and on. There was not a position in the BPP that women did not do. There are men in the BPP who credit women for their knowledge and skills. Some talk about the sisters being able to really deconstruct and explain heavy theoretical concepts.

**RS:** Women played a variety of roles in the Black Panther party. They served at all levels from the rank and file on up. They exercised leadership in action in positions of authority within the organizational structure as "Officer of the Day," which was a de facto office manager position. They also played important roles as spokespeople for the organization. In some chapters they were the public face of the organization. Kathleen Cleaver wrote press releases and held press conferences. She was highly visible as Panther communication secretary during her time in the organization. By the 1970s in Oakland, women played increasingly visible roles in the Central Committee.

**Can you give a picture of the gender dynamics within the party and how these both reflected and challenged the dominant narratives at the time? In particular, what was the impact of the Moynihan report on popular ideas about the Black family and what impact did it have on the BPP?**

**MP:** Gender politics did not look the same across all branches and chapters of the BPP. While there were some chapters that did not discriminate against gender, we do know that misogyny and sexism did occur in the organization. You can follow discussions of gender politics in the Panther newspaper. The newspaper covered these internal issues and highlighted the voices of women. You can see the evolution of gender politics in the organization over time in the newspaper.

The Moynihan report was dangerous because it was loaded with stereotypes about Black women. It's a patriarchal and deeply sexist report that perpetuates the matriarchal thesis and places the blame for the breakdown of the family on Black women. It became a centerpiece for national conversations about Black families and gender relations and promoted divisions. It deeply impacted social policy and structural systems and worked to the detriment of Black families. We are still living with the ills of that document and its devastating effects today.

**AF:** I would describe the gender politics of the Black Panther Party as nuanced and fluid—definitely far more dynamic than many people have given it credit for until recently. Some women found it to be an incredibly sexist organization. Others confirmed that sexism and an emphasis in traditional gender roles existed within the group as it did everywhere and that they didn't find the BPP to be worse than other organizations. In fact, they appreciated that within the party, members were at least talking about gender roles, sexism, and organizing. Finally, there were women who found that

there was very little sexism or emphasis on traditional gender roles. You know, when you're in the trenches, whether that be serving the community or involved in a shootout with the police, it doesn't really matter if you're a man or a woman. Folks were just trying to survive and get things done.

So it really did run the gamut. However, it was an organization that was grappling with these questions both internally and externally. The Moynihan report brought a renewed urgency to these conversations. Men and women in the party were already debating about their roles in bringing about Black liberation. However, the fact that some Black men seized the rhetoric of the report and tried to use it to justify marginalizing Black women made debates about gender roles more common.

**Many of your writings touch on how life in a revolutionary organization—and their presence in the larger community—transformed traditional attitudes about gender roles for both men and women. Can you give some examples of what that looked like?**

**RS:** For the women and men who flooded into the organization, membership was a full commitment. The BPP provided a circle of associates who were joined by shared political ideas. Panthers read together, often lived together, and spent endless hours discussing political goals or carrying out political work. The organization was also a social space where young people did what young people do. They enjoyed music, built friendships, and embarked on romantic relationships. Gender roles and expectations often shaped these interactions. Because the Panthers examined structures of domination in society and were determined not to replicate them within the organization, their official rhetoric rejected assumptions based on male supremacy, sexism, classism, and even homophobia at some moments in their history. The results were uneven but the presence of official language around gender equality armed women and men to push a more progressive agenda.

**AF:** One of the central goals of the Black Panther Party was to try to figure out how to imagine and bring about a new, more just world for oppressed people. From analyzing their communities, they realized that one of the main ways Black women struggled was with traditional gender roles and expectations. For example, traditionally it was the women who were expected to stay at home while the men worked. The Panthers came to see traditional ideas about childcare and parenting as a manifestation of bourgeois gender roles and the kind of capitalist structures that they were fighting against in their other realms of organizing. As a result, they started to experiment with communal housing and childcare in which all members took an active role in caring for the children in their community. This willingness to live and organize outside of traditional gender roles offered new examples for the community. Another example would be women's leadership within the organization. The fact that so many women were in highly visible and influential roles within the group challenged contemporaneous ideas about a woman's "place" in the revolution.

**MP:** In my work I talk about the everyday labor of BPP women. I talk about their ideas on gender and feminism to complicate the narrative. Ericka Huggins, the social activist I am writing about, was feminist-minded and deeply spiritual. In my work I discuss Ericka's theories on gender and feminism. The incarceration of Ericka Huggins, I argue, transformed traditional attitudes about gender. BPP members, including men, were able to directly witness the ways in which women were impacted by state-sanctioned violence. Her incarceration fostered progressive gender politics within the organization. Kathleen Cleaver also comes to mind. She was the mastermind of the Free Huey movement, but there are countless women who shaped the BPP in very meaningful ways.

**What role did state repression play in pushing women's leadership to the forefront in the party?**

**RS:** The Panthers faced an organized campaign of state political repression at the local, state, and federal levels. They were ensnared in the FBI's COINTELPRO campaign of harassment, spurious



arrests, raids of offices, wiretaps, phony letters, and negative propaganda. Traditional male leadership was most legible to the FBI, and while women were also perceived as threats for everything from their community work to their advocacy of self-defense and suffered at the hands of the FBI in many ways, men bore the brunt of arrests. Women served as the backbone that kept the organization functioning in the face of this reality. It was their organizational skills, perseverance, and sacrifice that allowed the organization to survive.

**AF:** State repression played a very important role. The patriarchal underpinnings of programs such as COINTELPRO meant that the FBI, the CIA, and state agencies targeted Black men. They believed that if they cut out the male leadership they could undermine the organization. This approach wiped out a portion of the male leadership, which was detrimental to the party. However, it also created spaces for Black women to take on these leadership roles and thrive. I also think that it is important to remember that the state certainly targeted Black women. When they engaged in shootouts or widespread arrests, they did not spare Black women in any way. They also surveilled Black women and their families for years. We as a scholarly community have not fully explored this aspect of the Panthers' history, including all of the psychological and physical repression that women in the party experienced.

**What role did the survival programs play in pushing women's leadership to the forefront in the party?**

**MP:** The survival programs were essentially the heartbeat of the BPP. Women were at the forefront of the survival programs making sure the operations ran smoothly. The Panthers provided resources and valuable necessities to the community through the survival programs. Poverty, racism, and discriminatory practices created structural barriers for Black communities across the nation. The Panthers were about protecting the community, which meant creating parallel institutions to make sure disenfranchised communities survived and thrived.

**AF:** Women ran the survival programs both locally and nationally. They were largely responsible for the daily administrative tasks, partnering with other organizations within the community to sustain the programs, and connecting the programs to the Panther's larger political ideology through artwork and articles in The Black Panther newspaper. Survival programs were also one of the main ways the community interacted with the party. When community members saw women confidently running these programs, it bolstered their support for women's leadership in other areas.

**RS:** When the Oakland Panthers centralized survival programs as a key element of their political work, women and men in the organization stepped up to run and staff these free community development programs. They taught classes in the school, they staffed free clinics, coordinated giveaways of food and clothing, and they escorted seniors to the bank at the start of the month. These experiences were particularly meaningful for Panther women who raised the issue of childcare, birth control, and education for the community and for themselves as members of the organization. These issues were being raised in the larger feminist movement and although Panther women sometimes distinguished themselves from the movement, they were part of the same political crosscurrents and debates around gender roles, sex, and sexuality as women who identified explicitly as Black feminists.

**At the time of the BPP's rise, we also saw the rise of the women's liberation and Black feminist movements, often in response to rampant sexism in the movements. On the other hand, many Black women (more than joined Black feminist groups at the time) chose to stay within groups like the Panthers, despite sexism they may have encountered. Why do you think that was?**

**MP:** Some women chose to work through the sexism alongside their brothers. There is a long legacy of Black women who show up and are always there. We show up, we will fight the battles alongside our brothers and work through our differences and carry it through.

**AF:** Sexism looks different and feels different to every woman. Some women were completely turned off by the Panthers' original endorsement of Black male bravado and traditional gender roles. Others found that the party's sexism wasn't really any different from anything they weren't already experiencing in life, but at least the organization offered a way to challenge these ideas while doing good work in the community. In addition, party leadership did take some steps to rectify the sexist practices that had existed in the group. For example, Huey Newton openly declared support for women's rights in 1970. Others, such as Eldridge Cleaver, backtracked on their sexist statements and wrote in support of treating women as equals. Now, just because they repudiated sexism didn't mean that it was eradicated within the party. But they were trying to take steps toward equality. Some of the female members found this to be encouraging.

**RS:** Women in the Black Panther party experienced sexism. Their writings demonstrate it, their oral testimonies provide evidence of it, and they injected gender equality into organizational discussion and debates, sometimes abetted by male allies, over and over again. Sexism was a constraint on their activism and it hindered the full potential of the organization. This needs to be examined by anyone invested in the politics of liberation and looking to history for answers. Women in the Panthers engaged in complicated calculus. They understood the sexism within the organization to be a manifestation of the sexism in the larger American society. They knew that other organizations like the Young Lords, the American Indian Movement, and Students for a Democratic Society, were also facing internal tensions and conflict around gender.

Likely, they believed that the gender struggle would find them anywhere they chose to set down their political stake. They committed to the Panthers not because they were blind or naïve, but because they saw potential to transform, they saw women who were vocal and visible, and they found support for the fight against imperialism and capitalism. They did not typically use the word feminist as a descriptor, but their actions and legacies are part of the larger Black feminist tradition. The women's movement—which was itself being roiled by debates around racism and white supremacy—did not likely appear to be a safe haven to many Panther women. It was simply another site of struggle involving its own set of soul-crushing sacrifices and liberating opportunities.

**Mary Phillips and others have used the phrase “Black Power Feminism” to describe the feminism of women in the BPP—how did this differ from other forms of feminism? Why did many BPP women decline to describe themselves as feminists?**

**MP:** For me the term Black Power Feminism is a theory that reflects self-determination and agency while placing gender at the center of analysis. It differs from other feminisms because as a theory it engages the tenets of Black Power. As for why some BPP women did not identify as feminists I think it is because they did not feel like the term applied to them or their lived realities. Feminism was a term associated with white women and their needs. Many of them called for white feminists to broaden their agenda to include the needs of Black women and women of color. At-large Black women did not see themselves or their major concerns reflected in the movement so they created their own feminist organizations that spoke directly to their needs. Some Panthers believed in feminist politics but didn't use the term at the time. There are some Panthers who choose not to use that term, and some who did then, or do so in hindsight. It varied across the organization.

**AF:** I agree with Dr. Phillips in that I found that many women in the BPP “operated” as feminists but did not adopt the term or the label. This is primarily due to the fact that they felt that women's liberation movement members were correct in their critique of patriarchy, but did not offer a sound

enough understanding of how sexism intersected with the racism and class oppression that Black women faced. As a result, some of these women adopted for “Black Power Feminism” a term, in the way that I use it, that comes from historian Stephen Ward in his assessment of the Third World Women’s Alliance. I use the term to explain the ways in which certain Black women activists were invested in the central principles of Black Power—community patrols, self- defense, and self-determination—but interested in using those principles to advance gender equality and Black women’s rights. For example, an activist may have believed in the ideal of self-determination. However, she might have interpreted and expressed this principle as the right to determine what happens to her own body or as reproductive rights. This is one of the ways in which Black Power activists were able to express they were committed and grounded in Black Power principles while also using these principles in a way that supported the advancement of Black women and other women of color.

### **How did the BPP work with other forces in the women’s liberation movement and Black feminist groups?**

**MP:** There was coalition work between the Panthers and women’s groups/feminist organizations around a plethora of issues including the plight of political prisoners. The Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA) and the BPP formed a coalition on infant mortality at Highland Hospital in Oakland, California. Black women who were pregnant were being denied proper medical treatment at Highland so the Panthers linked up with TWWA and pushed the hospital administrators and staff to change their negligent practices. The Panthers were well aware that they needed to create coalitions to do their work. If you look at the BPP newspaper—they were interviewing Black feminists organizations during the women’s movement. They did not shy away from coalition building. Coalition building is critical to the history of the Panthers.

**AF:** A lot of these coalitions really happened at the local level. One example was the work in the Bay Area around lowering infant mortality rates. In other moments the Black Panthers worked with women’s liberation or Black feminist groups in supporting individual women who had been unjustly incarcerated or discriminated against. The BPP also participated in and supported feminist groups each year during International Women’s Day local and national rallies. Through all of these efforts, the Panthers’ expressed their support of women’s equality and put their name and organizing power behind groups who espoused feminist politics.

### **Can you speak specifically to the public pronouncements of Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and Bobby Seale in coming out in support of the women’s and gay liberation movements and women’s equality in the party? What precipitated these statements and what impact did they have?**

**AF:** The party was always evolving in terms of its position on key issues—especially as they tried to put their ideas into practice. By 1970, when male leadership came out in support of women’s and gay rights, many of them had spent extended time behind bars or in exile. During this time, women were running the party. In addition, several women had also been incarcerated on false charges. As a result, they realized that they could not continue to champion the idea that only men could lead the organization or the community or that women were any less revolutionary than men. This realization helped precipitate these statements. In addition, the Panthers needed to remain at the vanguard of the liberation struggle and this meant aligning the party with larger movement trends. I suspect that Newton, Seale, and others already believed in gender equality, however formally stating this position helped the BPP continue to be able to be part of a leftist movement coalition.

**MP:** Huey’s open letter in support of the gay liberation and women’s movement is one of my favorite pieces by him because it’s a moment when he’s being so vulnerable and honest. The way he calls

attention to these issues in that public letter, talking about homophobia and the feminist movement is unapologetic. He challenged his readers to think critically. His theory and practice did not always match, but that open letter drew attention within the organization. Eldridge Cleaver talked about Ericka Huggins when she was incarcerated and said that she helped him better understand the ways in which women were impacted by COINTELPRO violence. Bobby Seale also, in one of his books, talked about how women can aim and shoot a gun with more precision than some of the men. When you look at a lot of the biographies written by some of the national male figures in the BPP you find these sorts of statements where they credit women for their genius-level work.

**With the recent explosion of the #MeToo movement (the phrase originally coined by Black activist Tarana Burke), there has been a renewed focus on challenging sexism within activist spaces. What kind of lessons can we learn from the experience of women in the BPP?**

**MP:** Their tireless devotion to the daily work. The Panthers left a blueprint. We can learn from their shortcomings as well as their wins. The work does not necessarily look the same today but the issues and needs are certainly the same. We must study the Black women freedom fighters and their theories and politics. The Panthers were voracious readers so studying their activism gives us a roadmap to help us understand our role in carrying forth their legacy.

**AF:** Women in the Black Panther Party are a great example of how to challenge movement sexism from within organizing spaces. They had a two-pronged approach. They fought back against sexism both publicly and privately. This included publishing critiques of the organization in its own newspaper, *The Black Panther*. They also challenged sexism on the ideological level. They studied the theory and principles of the group, applied them to their own lives, then demanded that their male counterparts live up to these ideals by applying them to women as much as men. These strategies had varying success. But they do offer ideas for how to move forward today.

**RS:** Black women in this era struggled mightily against racism in the women's movement and against sexism in the Black Power movement. Their strength and survival—and deep sense of political pragmatism—reveals the depths of political commitment. While the corrosive nature of the sexism of the Black movement is a widely disseminated critique, the corrosive nature of the racism and white supremacy in the women's movement needs the same sort of sustained and critical examination, especially in 2018 when activists are facing the same struggles.

Building bridges between the sites of struggle where Black women drill deep with their political work is one key element. Organizations against police violence are increasingly including intimate partner violence (Black Women's Blueprint) along with state violence when considering the constraints on Black women and femmes' ability to live fully actualized lives. Male supremacy and sexism are being vigorously debated not as something to "overcome" but as continually reproduced ideologies that must be continually and actively dismantled.

**What was the BPP's attitude towards questions around reproduction (abortion, birth control, the nuclear family) and how and why did they evolve over time?**

**MP:** As the feminist movement progressed you see those conversations evolve in the Panther newspaper. Early in BPP history the rhetoric was babies for the revolution. There was a shift as the women's rights movement emerged that advocated women's rights to their own bodies, abortions, and planned parenthood.

**AF:** Like their gender politics, the Panthers' reproductive rights politics evolved over time. At the outset, they championed a more conservative position that framed Black men as the heads of the

family and the community and that argued that birth control and abortion were tools of the state designed to exterminate Black communities. However, as the organization progressed, gained more women members, and worked within the context of the reproductive and women's rights movements, their position changed. By the early '70s if you look at Panther correspondence and other writings you see that members became more supportive of women's reproductive rights and access to birth control.

You also see them start to rethink how to support Black women in terms of communal childcare. It is one of those things they definitely moved to the left as the party continued. And I'm sure that was in some part because of the very real demands of organizing, but also because it was in line with their politics.

**The BPP saw itself as part of an international movement against imperialism and took inspiration from the liberation struggles of oppressed nations around the world. One point of reference for BPP women was the women fighters in Vietnam who were fighting side by side with the men. How did this international component impact discussions of gender in the party?**

**MP:** The party looked at these women as examples of the kind of work they wanted to model in the organization. The Panthers studied international struggles and looked to key leaders in these movements in developing the party praxis. The BPP had international chapters and were on the cusp of global issues.

**AF:** Women fighting in international liberation movements around the world allowed BPP women to push their male counterparts to uphold their revolutionary ideals and apply them broadly. Many Panther men idolized these international movements and called on Black Americans to emulate them. BPP women noted that a key element of these movements was that women were considered equal to men and involved in all aspects of the struggle. In their writings and conversations, BPP women emphasized this point and used it as evidence of the need for women in the party to take on a more active role. In many instances men agreed with their assessment and adjusted their understandings of gender roles.

**RS:** You can see the same thing today as activists are developing a common language around the structural roots of oppression in systems of capitalism and empire. Like Panthers inspired by Vietnamese women, contemporary activists are drawing inspiration from women in occupied Palestine, Africa, and the Caribbean as well as Indigenous communities around the world to articulate an anticolonial critique.

**Many people forget that the BPP considered themselves socialists, how did these politics inform their understanding of the intersection of class, racial, and gendered oppression?**

**MP:** It shaped the work of the BPP. They engaged a class analysis that worked in the interests of all people. They critiqued bourgeois analyses that did not work in the interests of the people. They believed in basic human rights, of serving the people, body and soul. They believed that everyone had a right to live and thrive. The BPP praxis was that everyone deserves a right to freedom and equality.

**AF:** There is a great conversation among a group of Panther women which was transcribed in the Black Panther newspaper that I think encapsulates this point. In the conversation, the women explain that as BPP members became more aware of the inner workings of capitalism and imperialism, they began to better understand how class dynamics influence gender roles. They realized that traditional gender roles not only restricted their ability to effectively serve their

communities, they also fed into capitalist-driven ideas about the family, consumerism, and race.

After coming to this conclusion, they realized that they could not organize against economic oppression without acknowledging the ways in which it specifically affected Black women. Or as they say in the interview, that in a socialist revolution, the emancipation of women is primary. Now, they are certainly borrowing some of these ideas from other discussions of socialism and imperialism at the time. But one of the key points is that the Panthers, and particularly Panther women, were really trying to incorporate gender critiques into their understandings of capitalism, imperialism, and racism in American society.

### **Can you talk about the Intersectional Black Panther Party History Project?**

RS: Scholars in the Intersectional Black Panther Party history project (IPHP, online at <https://iphpcom.wordpress.com/>), founded in 2016 by Angela D. Leblanc-Ernest, Tracye Matthews, Mary Phillips, and myself, are researching, writing, and creating films based on our analysis of the history of women and gender in the Black Panther Party. As the activists of the 1960s reach their twilight, IPHP amplifies the lessons of Black Panther women's struggles for freedom so that they are not forgotten.

**MP:** We came together because we wanted to preserve the history of gender and women in the BPP. There are so many people who have misunderstandings of the legacy of the BPP, particularly when it comes to the role of women. So part of our work is to make accessible the history, the stories, and the archives to the broader public, and to share the mic with BPP members to propel their platform. We have a couple projects we're working on. One is an anthology we're putting together on women's written contributions. It will include key documents authored by women as well as some oral histories to showcase their work. We also do blogs and presentations. The goal is to bring forward the legacy of women and shed light on their activism.

---

**Ashley Farmer, Mary Phillips, Robyn C. Spencer and Leela Yellesetty**

*[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.*

---

**P.S.**

International Socialist Review

<https://isreview.org/issue/111/women-black-panther-party>

1. Bobby Seale, *A Lonely Rage: The Autobiography of Bobby Seale* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 177.
2. Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 44.
3. Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, "'The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job': Black Panther Party Women, 1966-1982," in *The Black Panther Party (reconsidered)*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 307-8.
4. Tracye Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is': Gender and the Politics of The Black Panther Party, 1966-1971," in *The Black Panther Party*

- (*reconsidered*), ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 244.
5. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 14.
  6. Kathleen Cleaver, "Women, Power & Revolution," in *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and Their Legacy*, ed. Kathleen Cleaver and George N. Katsiaficas (New York: Routledge, 2001), 126.
  7. Eldridge Cleaver, "Message to Sister Erica Huggins of the Black Panther Party," *The Black Panther*, July 5, 1969.
  8. Huey P. Newton, "The Women's and Gay Liberation Movements," in *Huey P. Newton Reader*, ed. David Hilliard and Donald Weise (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 157-9.
  9. Bobby Seale, "Bobby Seale Explains Panther Politics," in Foner, 81-7.
  10. See Mary Phillips and Angela Leblanc-Ernest, "The Hidden Narratives: Recovering and (Re)Visioning the Community Activism of Men in the Black Panther Party," *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 5, no. 1 (2016): 63-89.
  11. Matthews, 291.
  12. "Black Panther Sisters Talk about Women's Liberation," interview, *The Black Panther*, September 1969, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/nc...>
  13. Emory Douglas, "We Always Had Solidarity," interview by Khury Peterson Smith, *Socialist Worker*, May 13, 2015, <http://socialistworker.org/2015/05/13/we...>
  14. Audrea Jones, "Memorandum To: Responsible Members . . . Re: Establishment of Birth Control Policy for Party Members," July 22, 1972, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 1, Health Cadre Reports, Newton Foundation Records, Stanford University.
  15. Shanice McBean, "'Shoot As Well As Cook': The Black Panther Party, Sexism and the Struggle Today," *rs21*, December 31, 2014, <http://rs21.org.uk/2014/12/31/shoot-as-w...>