

Perspectives from Women Organizers: Views on Gender, Race, Class, and Sexual Orientation

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ABSTRACT. This paper compares the perspectives of a diverse group of women in relation to their views about the impact of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation on their organizing and feminism. It uses data from a group of women organizers who first came together in 1989, and who were interviewed in 2002 as part of this follow-up study. The study found both commonalities and differences in comparing white women with women of color. While all the women identified as feminists and most used a feminist model of organizing, the women of color were more likely to express frustrations and divisions within the women's movement and its organizing goals than were white women. They were less likely to embrace coalitions as a current strategy, and were engaged in or focused on the local versus global picture. Neither group of women addressed issues of sexual orientation in their work regardless of their background or affiliation. Using an intersectionality framework, the paper assesses the

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The authors express appreciation to Emma Babar, Yula Nakleushev, and Tania Romero for their research assistance.

The authors thank the CUNY (City University of New York) Diversity Fund for providing funds for this study.

Journal of Community Practice, Vol. 14(3) 2006
Available online at <http://com.haworthpress.com>
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doi:10.1300/J125v14n03_06

challenges the women face, especially women of color, as they attempt to negotiate the complexity of their identities and achieve important goals for women. Notwithstanding their differences, many of these organizers were working to bridge the divisions and envisioned a humanistic and equalitarian women's agenda. doi:10.1300/J125v14n03_06 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Women organizers, feminism/feminist organizing, women of color, intersectionality, race/racism, sexual orientation, community organizing

INTRODUCTION

Issues of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation (a.k.a. the “isms”) continue to be critical factors in building any effective social movement in the United States. While the women's movement gained prominence in the 1970s, there was always an uneasy alliance between white women and women of color (Jagger & Rothenberg, 1984, 1993). The differences among diverse groups of women have continued as the country turned more conservative beginning with the Reagan administration in the 1980s through the current Bush administration in the twenty-first century. The insensitivities shown by the dominant group toward minority women's concerns have affected the ability of women organizers across the country to unite despite the presence of exceptional leaders trying to bridge the great divides.

This paper presents the perspectives of women organizers as to their differences and changing views about the impact of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation on women's organizing and feminism. We use a sample of women organizers who first came together in 1989, and who were then interviewed in 2002. The qualitative data presented here are part of a larger study that examined the career tracks of these women organizers as well as the context and their ideologies on organizing over time. In a companion paper, the first author focuses on the commonalities among this group of women organizers in those two time frames (Mizrahi, 2007). This paper specifically compares professional white women organizers and women of color as they attempt to negotiate the

complexity of identity within the women's movement, and ends with the challenges and approaches for women who want to build an inclusive movement.

***DIVERSITY, DIFFERENCES, AND DIVISIONS
WITHIN THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT:
A REVIEW OF LITERATURE***

There already exists a body of work based on feminist critiques of a male model of organizing, which assumes that gender is the primary, if not the only lens through which a feminist organizing alternative is generated (Naples, 1998; Weil, Gamble, & Williams, 1998; West & Bloomberg, 1990). While there are many differences in emphasis among these and other feminist writers, the essential features of a feminist model have included attention to process, shared decision making, holistic goals, humanistic values, connecting the personal to the political, consensus building, and an enabling role and facilitating style of the organizer (Joseph et al., 1991).

The literature review here concentrates on those theories and empirical studies that acknowledge or found differences among women organizers within the women's movement related to race, class, and sexual orientation. The omission of color and other attributes in most white feminist organizers' scholarship in the past is striking. Hyde (1986), in one of the first small, in-depth qualitative studies of women activists, used a feminist orientation early on. However, she did not reveal the color of the participants; the presumption could be that they were all white, or that their color didn't matter. Years later, Hyde (2004) recognized that feminist organizing needed to be more multicultural. Other writers on feminism and social work practice, including community organizing, omit or minimize issues of diversity and the "isms" (Dore, 1994; Weil, Gamble, & Williams, 1998).

Increasingly, however, literature has begun to focus on the diversity, differences, and divisions within the women's movement. Anthologies first celebrated the diversity of women organizers and minimized the tensions (Garland, 1988; West & Blumberg, 1990). The literature has become more critical, both about assumptions related to a gender focus and omissions of various groupings of women, including lesbians, women of color, disabled women, working class, right wing, and elderly women (Blee, 1998; Hirsch & Keller, 1990; Naples, 1998).

The Focus on Race and Ethnicity

In reviewing the works about the impact of the “isms” on organizing, the lens of racism and the racial divide has received the most attention (Glick, 1998; Rivera & Ehrlich, 1998). Tensions and conflicts are portrayed between people of color and mainstream white middle-class professionals, as well as between white and people of color-led organizations. Graham (1998) provides a case study of one mainstream women’s organization that attempted to organize and include women of color. She identifies the gaps in the way that inclusiveness and organizing have been conceptualized, which resulted in the omission of networks of women of color. In another case study related to organizing around school reform, liberal white corporate male electoral strategies dominated and suppressed a grassroots, predominantly women of color’s organizing efforts (Howe, 1998). In their attempt to bridge the divide among women, scholars Gutierrez and Lewis (1994) address the limitations of traditional feminist theory in analyzing the lives of women of color and their experiences, and suggest organizing methods that simultaneously address race and gender.

The Conundrum of Class

Much less attention has been paid to class—the experience and perspective of working class and poor women as subjects/clients, actors/leaders, or scholars (Plummer, 1999). Class has become another prism from which to critique the white middle-class women’s agenda. In the 1970s, the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (1992) was one of the first organizations to focus on this group of women (sometimes defined as “white ethnic”) whose identity was more community focused and less oriented to issues of equality and upward mobility.

Haywoode (1998) specifically emphasized the issue of class in describing working class (usually white) women’s styles of organizing and activism. She defined a “working class” feminism to include women’s ties to traditional structures of home, family, culture, and church. Several studies document the differences when bringing in differences in income and culture. Seitz (1998) digs deeper and exposes both unity and division within an Appalachian poor and working class white women’s organizing campaign in support of a labor strike involving the men in their community. Lee and Weeks (1991) explore class, poverty, and unity assumptions present in community-organizing theory, and conclude that these are both important to and challenged by women’s movement

organizing. Combining class with ethnicity, Prindeville and Bretting (1998) examine the political identity and experiences of Latina and Native American environmental justice activists. As a result, they develop a model of grassroots activism and an alternative conceptualization of feminism from the perspective of indigenous women leaders.

The Invisibility of Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation and lesbianism in particular, is another layer that defines identity, but one which still remains “in the closet” within the organizing community. It has been characterized in organizational life as the “lavender ceiling” (Kivel & Wells, 1998). A rare exception is Wehbi (2004) who presents five case studies of organizing against homophobia and heterosexism. She attempts to document the marginality and complexity of gay and lesbian groups and the many divisions that arise within and between them when race, gender, and class are added to the mix, and attempts at coalition building are made. However, all the studies in her volume are from countries other than the United States.

Very few authors address the contributions of lesbian feminism to the women’s movement. Taylor and Rupp (1998) chide the women’s movement for not acknowledging the sexual orientation of many of its leading figures. They critique the theoretical and practical separation of various types of feminism: cultural, radical, liberal, etc. Naples (1998, p. 338) notes that “few of the urban community activists I interviewed included gays and lesbians in their definition of community.” Some suggest that this absence could be explained by the fact that gay and lesbian organizations are, for the most part, “white and colorblind” and are modeled after the feminist women’s movement approaches to sexual violence. Preoccupied with homophobia, these organizations were less concerned with institutionalized heterosexism and patriarchy (Jenness & Broad, 1994).

Conceptual Framework

Various perspectives have been utilized—implicitly or explicitly—to characterize an effective organizing approach that includes the complexity of women’s lives (Examples of these are given in Table 1). These include the “colorblind” approach, emphasizing common experiences of women, for example, oppression, domination, and marginalization; “multiculturalism” models which underscore the interrelationships among diverse groups, equality, and the additive nature of disadvantage;

TABLE 1. Conceptual Frameworks Used to Understand Identity

Conceptual Model	Color Blind	Cultural Compete	Multiculturalism	Intersectionality
Proponents	Cooper, S. (1973); Griffith, M. S. (1977); Thomas, A., and Sillen, S. (1976)	Cross, T. L., Bazron, B. J., Dennis, K. W., and Issacs, M. R. (1989); Green, J. W. (1982)	Johnson, S. D. (1990); Jagger, V., and Rothenberg, P. S. (1984, 1993); Logan, S. M. L. (2003)	Lal, J. (1999); Lorde, A. (2004); Crenshaw, K. W. (1995)
Key Components	Developed in the 1970s; Assumes equality; Ignores race and ethnicity as major dimensions of individual's self identity; Focuses on salient factor, for example, gender; Often criticized as unrealistic	Developed in the late 1980s; Focus on creating awareness, sensitivity, and respect for racial, ethnic, and cultural differences; Assumes practitioner can attain cultural competence	Developed in the 1970s; Borrows heavily from earlier waves of feminist theories; Addresses differences and interrelationships among diverse groups; Assumes equality between different groups; Sensitive to ethnic and racial aspects of identity; Ignores the complexity of identity	Developed in the 1990s; Draws from post-modern and feminist discourse; Acknowledges complexity of identity—interaction among race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on; Underscores influence of combined effects of diverse identities on perception and interpretation of reality

“cultural competence” models, which emphasize the realities of clients’/communities’ racial and ethnic background and other cultural dimensions (Abram, Oxford, & Roffle, 2001; Cooper, 1973; Griffith, 1977; George & Tsang, 1999; Johnson, 1990; NASW, 2001; Logan, 2003; Thomas & Sillen, 1976; Yan & Wong, 2005).

While these frameworks have been useful in highlighting the role of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and various “isms” in influencing organizing approaches and outcomes, they do not adequately address the issue of how the different identities embodied within women organizers position themselves with respect to the other and intersect to influence their perception and interpretation of reality. New terms are now attempting to integrate the multiple and evolving categories to incorporate the differences—such as “lesbian feminism” and “womanism” (Van Voorhis, 1999); the former focuses on the intersections of gender and sexual orientation, and the latter, on the intersections of race and gender.

This study utilizes the “intersectionality” perspective, drawing from post-modern and feministic discourse (see Table 1). This perspective acknowledges the complexity of women’s identity and the interconnection between the various components that form identity, including gender, race, class, sexuality, and how each of these characteristics may influence perception and definition of issues (Lal, 1999; Lorde, 2004; Tsang & George, 1998; Crenshaw, 1995). Much more work is needed to move across and beyond these multiple and intersecting divides of women organizers. This may demand exposing deficiencies, acknowledging the complexities, and presenting alternatives all of which are raised by women in this study.

METHODS

In 1989, forty-eight women attended a national gathering called *Women on the Advance (Not a Retreat!)* [ECCO, 1990]. They completed questionnaires about their attitudes and experiences as women organizers. That diverse group of 48 self-identified organizers was selected by reputation to reflect class, color, sexual orientation, age, and ethnic differences. Our sample consisted of 31 white women and 17 women of color (8 African-Americans, 4 Hispanics, 2 Native Americans, 1 African, 1 Arab-American, and 1 who identified herself as being part Black, Native American, and European). At least 6 of the 31 white women were group identified as “ethnic working class” by virtue of

being selected from the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, a grassroots organization using that terminology. Ten of the 48 women were self-identified lesbians—mostly white, with a few women of color. In 2002, the lead author who had helped organize “*The Advance*,” received a grant to follow the career paths of the 48 participants. After an exhaustive search to locate the 48 women, 27 women were found and interviewed, primarily by telephone. Of those participating in 2002, 21 were white, 1 of whom defined herself as working class; 5 were women of color. Six of the 27 were “out” lesbians—5 white, and 1 woman of color. In both timeframes, these women still identified themselves all or in part as organizers regardless of the specific job they held, or whether they were acting in a volunteer or paid capacity.

Interview Questions

The findings discussed here are based on the following questions posed in 2002:

- How has your feminist orientation affected your definition of the issues in which you are involved?
- If you currently work with women and people with diverse backgrounds, what are some of the current challenges you experience? What strengths do you bring to your work? Have these changed over time? If so, how?
- How has race/racism affected your work in the past or currently? Are there other “isms” which have affected you/your work or you think are important to address today?
- How has class affected your work in the past or currently?
- What is your vision for women’s agenda?

It should be noted that although no question was directly asked about sexual orientation, this issue was raised in response to an open-ended question about “isms” and other questions.

The interviews were taped with permission and transcribed. They were read and coded by the lead author and a second reader using grounded theory (Mizrahi & Abramson, 1994). Each reader independently identified themes that emerged from the questions above. There was overall agreement on the basic categories which were then applied back to the white women and women of color. Specifically, a triadic coding procedure—open, axial, and selective—was utilized (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The second author of this paper, a woman of color, also added her

interpretations to the basic findings. Based on this procedure, “complexity of identity” (elaborated in the Findings and Discussion sections) was found to be a salient category around which other categories came together to form an explanatory whole (LaRossa, 2005). A draft of the manuscript generated from this process was then sent to all the women who participated in the study for “member checking” (Padgett, 1998). Ten women approved or provided alternative interpretations of the data; seven provided substantive feedback.

There are limitations to this study. The population used for this research was drawn from an event that purposefully reflected differences relating to class, color, age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Therefore, caution should be exercised in generalizing results to a population of women organizers. Additionally, by not having a specific question about sexual orientation, we were not able to probe for the implications of its continued invisibility among otherwise activist and politically conscious feminists. Names and other identifying characteristics of the women are omitted. The codes at the end of each direct quote are provided so the reader will know the relevant traits of the subjects: W = White woman; H = Heterosexual; WOC = Woman Of Color; L = Lesbian; R = Retired.

FINDINGS

The findings are based on the responses to the interview questions and organized by themes beginning with the women’s views on feminism, followed by the contrasting views of the “isms” from white women and women of color. This is followed by data on differences in how issues of multiculturalism and diversity are addressed by both groups. We highlight the invisibility of sexual orientation, and finally, present the women’s diverse visions for the future.

The Women’s Perspectives on Feminism and Feminist Models of Organizing

Feminism was central to these 27 women’s lives. For many of them, including the women of color, it was an all encompassing way of knowing and being. A majority of the women discussed it as an almost exclusive style and framework. However, among these women were a few who acknowledged that younger women and some women of color rejected the concept. Several women noted the difficulty in even using

the word feminism today: “There are lots of women who are feminist who don’t call themselves it” (WOCL).

I use the feminist orientation in teaching courses on diversity and empowering oppressed people. The problem is women don’t call themselves feminists. They want the game, but not the name! It’s threatening to them. (WWH)

Our women organizers’ project focuses on feminism, but not everyone identifies as a feminist, although we are on a feminist track. We wanted diversity in our organization, but more white women were interested . . . in that concept. (WWH)

In response to the impact of feminism on their work, most of the women immediately responded: that “every issue is a women’s issue”—even those working on specific issues such as housing, domestic violence, poverty, and aging. Almost all held to the perspective, identified 13 years earlier, namely, that there is a feminist model of organizing (ECCO, 1990). And most saw themselves as feminists, or adhering to that framework, including all the women of color.

- The struggle for justice for women is part of all the other struggles (democracy, equality) and issues (health care, child welfare). Feminism has shaped me personally—with a commitment to women’s concerns, my organizing method which is collaborative and driving, and my increased sensitivity to insuring that women are usually well over 50% in staff and leadership (WWH).
- (Feminism) means being committed to a process that is very inclusive; it means sharing power—talking things through; with issues like homophobia or racism you need to slow down a process; but talking endlessly without “doing” is not feminism. It means a life-long commitment to looking at our own internal sexism (WOCL).

Contrasting Views of the “isms”

Perspectives of White Women. Many of the white women were cognizant of the differences, if not divisions, within feminism. Several of the white women linked feminism to other “isms,” either qualifying it or re-conceptualizing it in a way that recognized the complexities and tensions mediated by race, sexual orientation, and class:

. . . I often felt at odds with the organized feminist movement—like on domestic violence issues. Women could be violent in same sex

relationships. Yet I do have a feminist orientation; it's less hierarchical, uses more consensus decision making, and a more cooperative working style. (WWL)

I want to create organizations where women don't have to separate themselves from their families or communities to empower themselves and improve their situations . . . It's about consciousness-raising and leadership, linking ethnic, racial and class diversity, and builds in community. (WWH)

A white veteran organizer notes her successes and struggles around the issue of diversity within her own organization:

[I've built] . . . a really diverse organization, but issues of racism and class come up (with survivors of domestic violence) . . . It is much more likely that poor women of color had their children removed because of being battered . . . We've really tried to talk about it . . . It just makes it that much harder if you are poor, or a woman of color, or if you are disabled to access services, or get decent treatment . . . For white middle-class women it is a shock to be treated like shit when they go to court; they are angrier . . . Women of color don't expect to get a whole lot. (WWH)

Perspectives of Women of Color. The women of color articulated strains and struggles within the women's movement much more often than did the white women. They were overtly critical of mainstream/majority feminists and the women's movement. Following is a critique by one woman of color ignored or made the problems worse for poor women of color, and lesbians:

- Most of my work is with women of color. I'm not working as much with the mainstream anti-violence movement. My priority is not building coalitions . . . I define feminism as the struggle against patriarchy and how that affects all social relations in society. And yes, I am a feminist, but we can't forget the race aspect. There is white privilege; there is male privilege. And the other "ism" is heterosexism. It's not just homophobia and the gay and lesbian bashing. (WOCL)

Other women of color and a few white women also used domestic violence as the issue to demonstrate the contradictions and complexities for women of color, ethnic, and/or poor women. This Puerto Rican activist gives an example of "white privilege" without naming it.

Here is an example of what I mean by “ethnic” versus “women’s” differences. In a discussion of the domestic violence laws with a white woman attorney, I said that when violence is committed against the woman of color, the police take her child away. A lot of us argue that [white women] are disrupting our families . . . I remember the anger of the Latina women when they [white professionals] wrote the law. They didn’t understand the negative impact—the double bind on us. There was no discussion with the women of color. (WOCH)

Overall, the experiences of women of color reflected the complexities of the overlay of race and ethnicity, as well as other identities.

I don’t know if I can separate my self as a woman, because I am a woman of color, I am a Black Woman, I am a Native American Woman, and as I grow older I am an elder woman. So my organizing has always reflected those challenges, around racism, sexism, ageism, class. Society always gives women a harder time. (WOCH)

As a result of these complexities and tensions, several women of color have changed their styles, type, and goals of organizing since 1989. Some have gone back to their racial or ethnic communities as a way to build grassroots power. As one said: “We all have to create our own organizations because that gives us strength” (WOCH). Another organizer of color notes:

. . . I’m not consciously (feminist), it’s just a part of me; . . . I am no longer per se an active feminist working with women’s groups, I am just doing what I’ve got to do. The issues I’m working on impact on women and children of our community; it’s not coming from the feminist perspective. (WOCH)

She also documents the complexity of color and ethnicity, and argues for addressing racism:

In the Puerto Rican community . . . if you took a family, they might have three shades of color in it, and three textures of hair . . . Some of us look European, some of us look African-American . . . But look at Puerto Rican star power . . . You have a Jennifer Lopez or a Marc Anthony [who look white]. The problem is that the whole society tends to be an instrument for screening in and out by color. The larger society will tend to . . . “whiten it up.” I think it also happens in the Black Community. That’s why Vanessa Williams and Halle Berry become stars. (WOCH)

Another Latina woman activist tries to explain the difference in the way she looks at women's issues. She provides two poignant examples of how different presumptions result in different priorities for white women and women of color:

I distinguish 'feminist' issues from 'ethnic' issues . . . Feminist orientation means we believe in equal rights . . . It implies a different orientation than "ethnic." If, I'm fighting for pay equity because the undocumented women are in sweat shops—it's not . . . because they are women, but because they are undocumented. (WOCH)

Sometimes you have to ask: Who will benefit from the struggle, the white women's movement or the women of a different class and ethnicity? I have been struggling for 40 years now with women's groups like N.O.W. . . . For example, I say that bi-lingual education is a woman's issue, but they don't see it that way. They see abortion as the issue that ALL women should be involved in. There are other women's struggles, but not for the white women's movement. (WOCH)

For some older women of color, there was still an acceptance of the role of white middle-class feminists in raising important issues and gaining valuable rights:

Yes, I'm a true feminist . . . (There are) good and negative things associated with feminism. But, younger women of color have heard that it is a white woman's movement; in fact, the "mainstream" women's movement wasn't very inclusive, but it doesn't mean that lesbians and women of color were not a part of it. (WOCL)

Contrasting Views on Multiculturalism and Diversity

Promoting the issue of diversity or multiculturalism was clearly more acceptable to the white women. Many white women did not seem to comprehend the complexity of issue, or responded to the question about the "isms" in terms of their personal beliefs and positive actions over time, such as, "I'm comfortable in communities of color" (WWH).

There is lots of respect among my networks and tolerance for difference. While some professionals are not showing enough respect

for people not as educated as them, that's not as true in my own work. (WWH)

My personal history is one of tolerance and openness. I'm working class and now disabled . . . I see the system dividing us because of our race, religion . . ., rich, poor. I see myself as "colorblind" all my life. I have never thought about color. (WWH)

Some people would interpret the above comments as reflecting "white privilege" (Rothenberg, 2001). Because they personally were working to improve conditions for those who have been excluded or oppressed, these women may not have been as sensitive to structural racism. Even among those white women who seemed to understand historic race and class inequality, the complexities and conflicts in trying to build a diverse organization or movement becomes magnified closer to the ground.

The issue (race/racism) is too big, yet it requires a deep discussion. I try not to continue white domination, but I don't see a lot of organizations promoting diversity . . . It's a constant struggle. (WWH)

Almost all the women of color wanted some acknowledgment of "racism" and "white privilege," from white women's organizations, but no longer saw themselves as doing that work. From their perspective, "diversity" hadn't worked for their constituencies. An experienced organizer who describes herself as a "black Puerto Rican," laments:

. . . The people that I work with were usually the ones who were 'diversifying' something. The women's movement was a white middle-class movement that we tried to participate in from the Latina's perspective. Now my group is Puerto Rican and Latina women. It is not diverse though we may believe in diversity. (WOCH)

As an exception rather than the rule, a few white women recognized and articulated the importance of directly dealing with racism and developing an anti-racist agenda and practice, which would require more than just bringing people of color into an issue or organization.

Race is one of the most crucial divides in the United States. You must consider its impact on organizing, advocacy and community

work . . . You can't address welfare issues without (understanding) its impact. (WWH)

. . . I learned to be less racist . . . but it's always an issue. There's always a tension; how we are privileged and how that affects our behavior. (WWH)

The white women who were directly organizing or had attempted to organize women around a common agenda across race and/or class lines saw the pitfalls and potential.

I think that the issue of diversity—if you mean race and class—is being talked about more than it used to. It's now easier to create environments where those issues are out in the open, as opposed to the times when these were papered over . . . Yet, the pervasiveness of the system makes it so difficult to overcome. (WWH)

A few white women who organized in the 1960s and 70s also voiced feelings of betrayal after working across race and class lines, and being subsequently evicted from communities of color where they were engaged in organizing for community betterment.

We were heartbroken . . . Many of us had broken with our families to do civil rights work, and now we were being thrown out of the place we had gone to because we believed in a better world. (WWH)

Some women felt that the issue of class was even more difficult to tackle than race. One reason mentioned by at least a few women was the denial of being a member of the working class, or as one woman said: "Everyone is in the middle-class . . ." She noted that the US society works against poor people. Other women spontaneously added ageism to the other "isms," a term that wasn't in their vocabulary 13 years earlier. These women linked age to race and class, seeing it as exacerbating the other exclusionary or discriminatory factors.

The aging community is largely women and it's invisible. Ageism is real given the youth-oriented culture and the stereotypes of the elderly. No one cares about poor older people. They are isolated and have no knowledge of entitlements, but even if they do, pride makes them refuse. This could lead to suicide and death. (WWH)

The Intransigence of Sexual Orientation

To include “sexual orientation” with struggles of race, class, and gender adds another layer of complexity and contradictions—especially when trying to bridge race and class divisions with sensitivity. After the 1989 *Advance*, the lesbian women caucused and provided an extensive critique of the event in spite of attempts by the all heterosexual group of planners to invite large numbers of lesbian women (ECCO, 1990). According to the lesbian women present, the planners were unaware of the problems that emerged for the lesbian women based on the group’s heterosexual assumptions about topics, processes, and people. The leadership had not included or reached out to the lesbian community before the event.

Yet, 13 years later, this cluster of women organizers still kept issues of homophobia and heterosexism on the back burner. People are still free (or at least there are fewer repercussions) to exhibit prejudice and even discriminate against people who are other than heterosexual.

Our organization always holds the fact that people should not be discriminated against because of their choices. Issues of sexual preference come up, but it is not a dominant one. It comes up if somebody is gay. But I haven’t seen any grassroots group anywhere . . . in my 30 years, where people have actually organized around issues of sexual preference in their community. (WWH)

And since sexual orientation is not usually visible, those in the dominant/majority position have to be especially sensitive to issues of safety and self-disclosure among gays. When that is not the case, the burden falls onto lesbian, bisexual, or transgender women to raise consciousness with respect to adverse attitudes and behavior—and that becomes especially difficult to raise when the group consists of, all or in part, women of color.

Race and class issues come up in our welfare organization . . . It’s difficult to recruit Latinas and Blacks when there are more middle-class whites . . . and given the homophobia in the group with both black and white members. (WWH)

Diverse Visions for the Future

There were some differences between white women and women of color with respect to their visions for a woman organizer’s agenda for

the future. While many of the white women with a few exceptions focused on “the big picture,” even if they were not organizing in that wider arena, the women of color were focused more locally and practically. At first glance, this appears to be the traditional “cosmopolitan-local” dichotomy. The latter group was either working on survival issues that affected their own communities—Latina, African American, immigrant—or articulated the need to be present in everyday struggles of poor or minority constituencies. Those women went “back to their communities” in mind and spirit, if not actually in them. They were not interested in, or able to give priority to “bridging” issues while the constituencies with whom they identified or organized were under attack or being ignored. This was specifically raised with respect to how issues like domestic violence, immigration, civil rights, civil liberties, and poverty affected communities of color. Overall, there appears to be a schism between the two world views.

Most of the women of color felt they did not have the luxury of pursuing a grand vision so it was put “on hold,” given what was characterized as “tough times.” They are working on smaller, deliberate specific projects or campaigns to make a difference in (or save) the lives of ordinary women and/or communities of color. While many understand the connections between the “local and the global,” their energies and intellect have gone “back to the basics.” And their sentiment implies that many white women organizers are disconnected from, if not indifferent to, the struggles of women of color.

Nevertheless, a few white women saw themselves as “bridge builders.” They persisted in the face of adversity because of their grand vision and optimism: “I’m always operating on visions” (WWH). Discussing what one white woman organizer called “the big picture—going beyond gender, race, class, and national identification”—these women were able to keep their optimism up in spite of what that same woman noted was “a complicated terrain . . .”

. . . As an activist organizing middle-class people to take issues of poverty seriously, and men to take women’s issues seriously, my vision is that we have to maintain this sensitivity and training. (WWRH)

My vision is carrying on organizing . . . getting women’s NGO’s (non-governmental organizations) to add older women to their agenda . . . Women have made a lot of progress, but we still have a long way to go. (WWH)

Bridging the Divisions

In spite of the frustrations and anger of women activists of color, several were still wishing and sometimes working to go beyond the barriers of race and other “isms” to build a humanistic respectful society. This activist educator of color tries to provide theory of causation and a more self-conscious humanistic practice:

Our challenge is raising consciousness, not just around women, but around all oppressed groups. We have to organize with the ideological stance that all these “isms” are links in the chain of oppression . . . The challenge is to keep a level of consciousness and commitment for the long range, and ideologically try to live by a value system that says that there is never a place where you are free until all the people are free . . . to constantly practice in ways that unify people. (WOCH)

One sees the seeds of optimism breaking through the deep divisions. Women of color are “pulling back,” not “pulling out.” This need for alliances and coalitions to connect issues was still important to many—black and white.

I’m fascinated by the question of community building . . . loose networks—connecting people . . . but not so intense that you do everything together. Given technology, the linkages between people become enormous. (WWH)

[My vision] is to view all issues as connected. The goal is helping people see all the relationships . . . and to tackle them with some new understanding. Without real peace movement now . . . we need to find creative ways to project a humane vision of what the world should look like. (WOCH)

All of the women—whether optimistic or pessimistic about the outcome, recognize the commitment and competency it takes to bring groups together against so many odds, for example, competing priorities based on complex intersecting identities. Here these women discuss some deliberate strategies that must be employed:

Diversity means negotiation and compromise. People want diversity because it gives legitimacy and the possibilities of a different

vision. However, diversity slows the process down, when you are attempting to mix races and class. People prefer their own kind, so they need a reason for coming together. It must be carefully crafted. The leadership at the top makes a difference. (WWH)

I have learned over time that if you are going to bring diverse people together, people have to agree that they want to be with a diverse group; otherwise, people will be waiting for mistakes. There is no way you can have diverse people in any room and not have people make mistakes. (WWH)

They acknowledge the complexities of trying to address all the “isms” at the same time and caution about its difficulty:

It’s extraordinarily difficult. The work I’m doing in the context of women and violence project . . . allows people to bridge to a degree that we couldn’t if everyone didn’t share that experience . . . There needs to be some other cross-cutting status to mediate the effects of race. There is enormous room for misunderstanding. Even in the best of intentions, you can screw up. (WWH)

DISCUSSION

Overall, findings from this study indicate the complexity of the women organizer’s identity—gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. Findings also reveal the conflicts and tensions both within and between white and people of color-led organizations. Hence, it is admirable that so many of the women in this study were still trying to negotiate their different identities and build more inclusive networks, if not movements. Yet even with all their sophistication, experience, and skills, they still struggle with opposition from within and without the women’s feminist movement. This study also suggests that while gender is the common front—the thread that binds women together—it may not be enough to unite. Factors, such as race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and other “isms,” may override the unique experience and interests of women. A similar observation was made by Gittell, Ortega-Bustamante, and Steffy (2000), in their study of 150 women from diverse community development organizations. They noted that gender was often superseded by class, racial, ethnic, and religious concerns. Findings from our study also suggest that the focus on gender is not always

beneficial to women; it tends to obscure the privileged status of certain groups of women, for example, white, affluent, younger women, etc.

Moreover, because women organizers reflect competing priorities, as a result of their complex and multiple identities, it may no longer be possible to build a unified movement based on a singular category, gender. Women organizers may need to take the old social work adage: "Begin where the client is" and apply it to their own work. They need to recognize that not everybody is on the same page, and that the circumstances of people's lives may guide their actions, more than roles or ideology.

If women organizers want to bring diverse groups of women (and men) together around a common cause, it may not be enough to open up their homes and invite in people who are different by making it enticing (e.g., culturally appropriate), as noted by Dr. Beth Richie at the *Women on the Advance*. Rather, she exhorts: "Everyone has to leave to leave home" (ECCO, 1990). This may entail more than just openness to diversity; it may require an understanding of how the different identities of women organizers and their publics interact and influence both their perception of reality and issues central to them in terms of definitions, identification of responses, and ally selection (Davis, 2001; Tsang & George, 1998). It may also demand an appreciation of the fact that circumstances may arise where gender may not be adequate to unite; such incidences may require alliance formation and similar strategies.

White women, or any dominant group, who want to create inclusive structures, should recognize that they need to include a critical mass of "other" women who are willing to identify with a particular course. In the case of the lesbian women at the *The Advance* in 1989, without the critical mass of lesbian women present, it is doubtful that they would have had a collective impact, or even whether they would have met to articulate a commonly developed criticism. Having "enough" women prevents both tokenism and placing an undue burden on the persons from that group to become its universal spokesperson. This often happens with members of minority or marginalized groups who are expected to "represent" or epitomize their group. Those lesbian women chose neither to protest the event, nor "vote with their feet" by walking away frustrated. Basically, this empowered group of lesbians decided to address subtle issues and the "taken for granted" heterosexual assumptions that were made.

Another theme emerging from this study was of "local versus cosmopolitan." Specifically, women of color generally identified with the former concept. They did not emphasize global issues as part of their vision

and so appeared to be parochial in their orientation toward the future. Some of the women of color and a few white women in the “member checking” phase of the analysis provided alternative interpretations to the authors as to why women of color collectively did not emphasize global issues as part of their vision. It was less about parochialism than it was about necessities based on the social conditions in those communities.

Indeed, women of color may want and need to concentrate on building their own base and bringing their constituencies together first, before they can coalesce with others. White women need to respect that position even if they do not agree with it. But they must be conscious of the consequences of becoming isolated or marginalized; they may be ignored as Gittell et al. (2000) and Howe (1998) found in their studies. Moreover, women of color have a lot to lose by working in isolation; they are, after all, in “double jeopardy” (Figueria-McDonough & Sarri, 2002). Having said this, white women may need to step-up by acknowledging their unique position and create space for alliance formation across racial, class, sexual orientation, and other identities that women bring to the table. They need to do this with transparency and humility. As several women in the study said, this still is a difficult and risky road to negotiate given sensitivities on all sides. Results of this study present a number of challenges for practice and scholarship. One is that, women, especially white women, operating from traditional approaches such as “colorblind,” or “multiculturalism” may not be effective—gender may not be enough to unite—given the multiple and intersecting identities that women bring to the table (Gardella & Haynes, 2004). Indeed, as Davis (2001) and Lal (1999) have observed, it may be too soon to deconstruct gender as a unifying variable.

Our results also point to the desirability of innovative practices in working with diverse groups. This may require a shift in the paradigm through which identity has been conceptualized (Lal, 1999). Intersectionality may be a useful lens through which the complexity of identity and its effects on both construction and perception of reality may be understood.

Social work scholarship has a lot to offer to this discussion. Our profession is committed to focusing on issues of multiculturalism and cultural competence in education and practice (Logan, 2003; Mizrahi & Baskind, 2003; NASW, 2001). And, there are beginning attempts to develop a more post-modernist curriculum that appears to include what we have labeled intersectionality (George & Tsang, 1999). This observation points to the need to explore this perspective and experiment with the various programmatic ways in which it may inform

practice with a diverse clientele (Anner, 2004). As observed, intersectionality and other perspectives reviewed in this study have little or no connection to any established theoretical base. It is our hope that this study will inspire more research that incorporates variables used in the study to investigate this subject further. In particular, there is need to inform theory and practice with additional empirical studies of larger scale and more intervention research and evaluation.

Results of this study, though exploratory, provide a wake-up call to women organizers and their publics and call attention to effects of race, class, and sexual orientation in the organizing process. We need to further explore how the intersectionality of identity can provide the social work profession with a cutting-edge approach to building a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

CONCLUSION

This paper highlights perspectives from women organizers in relation to their differences and changing views of the impact of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation on women's organizing and feminism. While feminism was central to their work in that it defined both their identity and style of organizing, it was not enough to unite all women. They recognized, to varying degrees, the complexity of identity—for example, race, class, age, and sexual orientation—and how each of these are positioned and interact to influence both the women's perception of reality, and salience of issues. Nevertheless, despite their differences, many of the women were still trying to bridge divisions and build more inclusive networks. The challenge, therefore, is for the women organizers and their stakeholders to acknowledge that because of the complexity of the multi-layered entities that define a woman's identity, it may no longer be possible to organize around a singular category. Our results suggest the need to identify a common thread to rally around. At times, this may require collaboration and alliance formation. In this regard, women organizers and their constituencies may need an appreciation of the fact that collaborative work and alliance formation, though beneficial at certain levels, may be costly and time consuming in that it often requires repeated interactions, and trust building. Yet for some, it is worth the trouble. For others, there is simply no choice; their work cannot be effective unless they have the legitimacy of a broad group of women.

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Submitted: 04/07/06

Revised: 09/06/06

Accepted: 09/11/06

doi:10.1300/J125v14n03_06

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