

DEBUNKING MYTHS
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"When you believe in things you don't understand, you suffer!"
-Stevie Wonder

Myths are traditional beliefs which are uncritically accepted. Although many people believe that all myths are inherently false, a myth may or may not be true, may or may not have a sound historical basis, may or may not be relevant to those who believe the myth. However, the main characteristic of a myth is that it is generally accepted as true without any questions asked.

An underlying reason why myths are accepted at face value is that they either apparently conform to our perceptions of day to day reality, or else they reinforce emotions and ideas we individually and/or collectively feel or believe. The trick of the myth, in the American context, is that it encourages us to conform to social illusions. In many cases where or when there is no basis for the existence of the myth, we will either assume that there is a basis for believing in the myth or, worse yet, we will create that basis and thus, become self-fulfilling prophets of mythology.

Acting out myths used to be called "playing like:" "I'll play like I love him or her, just to get what I want, " "I'll play like I'm dumb, or cold blooded, or turn-off." But notice that in the name of "getting what I want out of him or her or them," the myth-player has conformed to the status quo. For those who make millions of dollars in profits and who use their wealth to influence presidents and other heads of various and sundry states, myths are a very important element. The perpetuation of myths serves to propagate, prop up and protect the ruling class.

Myths serve a social value: they stabilize the status quo by causing and/or encouraging us to conform to status quo reality and/or values rather than challenge that reality and/or challenge those values. In America today, the myths about American Women are nothing more than psychological carrots (pacifications) and sticks (punishments) designed to keep us - both as a people in general, and as individual women and men - resigned to rather than resistant to exploitation and oppression.

Our task today is to suggest a methodology for examining and debunking myths about American Women. Although, within this context, we have as a specific concern the realities and struggles of American Women, this methodology is designed to work in other areas equally as well.

BIG MAMA DON'T FEEL NO PAIN, DON'T NOTHING TOUCH HER

The general myth is that our Women have been unaffected by the sexism of this society at large. Usually this myth is presented in one of the following forms: Historically, the only free people in America were white men and Black Women; Black Women are not concerned with women's liberation (because they have no need as they are not affected by the same things which affect white women); Black Women can take anything.

But, historically speaking, how can the woman who was a slave, who was bought and sold on the auction block, and who suffered all of the indignities -such as flagrant sexual exploitation -that racist masters heap on female slaves, how can such a woman be thought of as a free woman? Historically, the freedom of American Women is obviously a fraud.

However, contemporarily, this myth is resurfacing in the language of our People. Today we hear men, and even some women, say that Black Women have it good because they are getting the best jobs and best educational opportunities because they fall into two categories: minority (Black) and female. What is the reality?

The reality is that, income-wise, American Women earn on average less than white men, Black Men and white women, in that order.¹ Additionally, our Women earn less not because of a difference in qualifications--their educational attainments up through four years of college--are either equal or minutely higher than that of our Men. In other words, although they have comparable educational qualifications, our Women still make less.² So then what accounts for this difference? It is basically sexism synergistically working with capitalism and racism. This income/education difference between women and men is but one of many manifestations of sexism.

Another, and more sinister, manifestation of sexism is the rate of rape. Percentage wise, our Women are the leading victims of rape. In cities which have large American populations, such as New Orleans, American Women are, percentage wise, the leading victims of rape. In New Orleans, seventy percent of all victims of reported rapes are Afrikan-American women.³

Those who argue that our Women are so-called "free," are people who are either totally ignorant of the truth or else they are intentionally falsifying reality. Earning less pay on average than a white man who only finished elementary school when you have at least a high school diploma⁴ is not free. Being the number one target of rapists and having little or no recourse through the judicial system is not free.

A THEORETICAL BASIS FOR REFUTING MYTHS

There are of course numerous other myths, such as "Black Women are super sexy," "Black Women generally don't support the struggle, all they want is material things," and so on. But our central task is to grasp a method for dealing with myths in general rather than attempting to debunk every myth that comes immediately to mind.

The fact of the matter is that it is easy to intellectually refute myths. It is easy to research statistics and site counter examples. But while it is easy to refute a myth in the abstract, in reality it is hard to destroy the belief that people have in myths.

In order to successfully debunk myths, it is necessary to face them head on, point out how they serve an exploitative and oppressive status quo, and develop a liberation theory and liberation practice which eradicates the myth by supplanting it with a valid and progressive belief and practice. The most important aspect is the last, instituting a liberation theory and practice.

What is liberation theory and practice? In a nutshell, it is guidelines (theory) and behavior (practice) whose sole purpose is to gain, maintain and use power. Power is the will and ability to self-determine, self-defend, and self-respect our lives. It is not enough to be against the enemy, we must also be for our People. In the absence of such an outlook, we will define ourselves vis-a-vis the status quo and continue to believe the myths of the status quo even as we think that we are rejecting those myths.

For example, we have all heard that Afrikan-american Women are overly aggressive and "bitchy" or "sapphire-like." Assuming that we believe this is a myth, unless we have a liberation theory and practice, we will not understand how to deal with the myth except by proposing that our Women invert the sapphire coin and become totally submissive. In the sixties, the submissive strategy was widely held to be the answer. It did not work.

Those women who attempted to reject being submissive and who stood straight and strong were beaten down or, at the very least battered with various verbal clubs such as being termed a "bitch" or a "dyke" or lesbian. Our strong sisters also faced social ostracism such as being shunned and avoided by men and even by some women, or else they were accused of being overly emotional and disruptive.

In cases such as these, regardless of the strength of an individual, in the face of violent rejection and opposition and without a theory to explain what is happening and why, and without organized social support in the form of socially interrelated people who reinforce the correctness of women being strong, the assertive women will be either worn down by attrition or else become embittered and disgusted. In either case, they

will not have escaped the myth but rather, in effect, will have reinforced the myth. The social stigmas and outcast status accorded to assertive women becomes an example to others, and sometimes even to themselves, of what happens when a woman is not what she is supposed to be, i.e., submissive or at least "nonassertive."

It is important to understand that liberation theory and practice is not reactive but rather is proactive. In this context, that means that instead of trying to eradicate the myth by simply reversing it, e.g., being loud to contradict the myth that women are supposed to be soft spoken, we instead eradicate the myth by analyzing it and devising an action strategy which advances our own views and interests.

So then, given the case in question, a liberation theory will first of all (1) attack the subjection of women to the process of being defined by a sexist social system and will offer a definition of what it means to be woman (and this, women must do if it is to be done correctly}. Liberation theory will also (2) outline how to act, how to oppose the negative and how to put forward the positive. Finally, liberation practice will (3) make the theory real, and based on evaluation of efforts, will refine, discard, or adopt different strategies in order to achieve the objective.

For example, legitimizing Afrikan-american Women speaking for themselves and about themselves is a key tactic in fighting the myth that it is necessary for Afrikan-american Women to be "submissive/quiet" because, heretofore, they are alleged to have been loud, domineering sapphires. Which means instead of grinning and bearing it and smiling when somebody misuses and abuses you in word or deed, you instead begin to say, "No more! Naw, I will not be your maid, your plaything, your sex object. I will be me, as defined by me, and I am willing to share myself with you, but I will no longer act like I am your property."

Property control is the crux of the problem in a bourgeois society. Bourgeois means those who own the means of production. A bourgeois society is a society whose power base is determined by what and how much you own as opposed to what work you do and how well you do it. By being submissive to we Men, who are acting out of a sexism which was laid on us, Afrikan-american Women thereby participate in pacifying a potentially explosive situation. Understand, that the belief that many of us have in the American way can only be validated for our People by our Men having control over our Women because that is the only significant property/labor that the masses of our Men will ever be able to own.

Owning/controlling women is simply a substitute for owning money in the American scheme of social relationships. If we Men didn't have women to beat on, to pimp off, to massage our egos, to treat us like the kings we desire to be but aren't, to

stand behind us when no one else in the world would even think about us. if we didn't have submissive women, what would we do, what would we have to do? The Afrikan-american male's preoccupation with sex is simply a substitute for a frustrated preoccupation with power or actually the lack of power. So then, do you see that the sapphire myth, and its inverse, the submissive myth, actually serve to keep us from confronting the white, male-dominant, ruling class?

It is vitally important to be able to explain these myths to each other, to be able to point out who actually benefits from the maintenance of those myths. Once we begin the hard, painful, and excruciatingly slow process of debunking myths, of creating a new reality as we challenge and change the status quo, we will better understand what is happening and why. We will be willing to suffer and sacrifice today so that we may have peace and power tomorrow. We will understand that the distance and arguments that we Women and Men sometimes engage in is not a personal attack but rather a real attempt at working through some myths which have been laid on us for centuries.

Key in this process and necessary to its success is the acceptance of the fact that there is no such thing as individual liberation from collective myths. No matter how positive any one woman is, every woman will still be stigmatized until women in general smash the myths which restrict and crush them.

No person stands alone, we are all social creatures in need of positive reinforcement from society and the people around us in order for us to develop positive self-concepts and to act as socially responsible and progressive human beings. By both necessity and nature, we need each other. Liberation struggle is a social movement, and not simply an individual action. We will be successful only when we as individuals' band together in mutually reinforcing social relationships and organizations.

In summing up, in order to debunk myths, it will be necessary to face them head on. We can do this by drawing on our own experiences, studying our own history, and by studying the history and experiences of others.

We will have to identify whom the myths serve and whom the myths harm. We can do this by discussing the results of our study with an eye toward understanding what strata of society benefits from a given myth and what strata suffers from that same myth.

We must then analyze what we have learned in order to develop a vision which will tell us where we want to go and how to get there. This will necessarily include outlining programs which are designed to rectify the inequities of the past, overturn the present weaknesses, and build toward future goals.

Finally, we must develop ways to put our plans into action. We must gather the necessary human and material resources and expend the necessary time and energy to accomplish our self-selected tasks.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR REFUTING MYTHS

As a practical example, we would encourage women to get together and begin discussing problems they face and potentials they wish to develop. We would encourage women to also meet with men who are supportive and win them over as active allies and soldiers in this struggle. Points of discussion could include childcare, or treatment on the job, or female/male interpersonal relationships.

After listening to each other's experiences, books such as those listed in the enclosed bibliographies could and should be studied. Efforts should be made to attend relevant public lectures and meetings which offer strategically important or relevant information (even when they are not featuring Afrikan-americans). Letters can be written to local, national and international women's organization's requesting ongoing correspondence, contact names, and other forms of information such as pamphlets and position papers.

Next, available statistics should be secured, and the individual and collective experiences gleaned from study should be compared to the statistics. At this point it is important to investigate who benefits and who suffers, and how the benefits and sufferings are manifested in reality. We should ask, is there wealth generated as a result of what happens to women in the question under consideration, and if so, who gets that wealth? We should ask, does the question being considered strengthen or weaken the unity of our People and how it strengthens or weakens us? We should question, does this issue/condition we are investigating contribute to the exploitation/oppression of women as women over and beyond how it affects one who is poor and/or Black. This is in fact how political theory is developed.

After identifying problems, we should move to identify solutions. For example, childcare can be addressed not only by lobbying for better public (government) and job (private) related programs but, also and more importantly, through the initiative of conscious women and men, we can help each other with the care and education of our children. Small group formations, such as small preschools in the home and collective babysitting, can make it possible for three or four people (Women and Men) to help each other.

Finally, understanding alone changes nothing. We must bake the batter in order to make the bread. What many women do not realize is that in the process of debunking myths, just like in baking bread, there are many little "tricks" or aspects to learn which are not spelled out in any cookbook. Also, there will be many mess ups. Some of the bread will fall flat, some of it will come out gooey in the middle or burnt. But regardless, this does not mean that we will never learn to bake bread. Some people will catch on very easily and for others it will be exceedingly difficult. But regardless, the point to keep in mind is that we all can bake bread! There is nothing mystical about it.

At this stage there will be fewer participants than at the initial stages. But this is usually the case simply because while we can all, to one degree or another, talk about what we have personally experienced, often we are all not able to study the experiences of others, and additionally, many of us are not equipped to analyze these questions, and fewer still are committed to acting on proposed solutions.

But hard as it is to overcome negative socialization such as poor education, nearly all of us have the potential to be able to move from perception to action. It is important that we not blame ourselves for the ways in which we were socialized. We did not ask to be born into the circumstances and conditions within which we live, struggle, and die. It is crucial, however, that once we realize that we were denied important steps in our growth and development, then we must figure out a way to move on up by acquiring the knowledge and skills we need. Although, it is not our fault that we have been poorly prepared to gain, maintain and use power, it is our responsibility to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to defend and develop our lives and significantly improve our living conditions.

The main method of victimizing women in this society is to force them into positions of dependency and deny them the skills, knowledge, and social support necessary to becoming independent. This is why it is important for women to acquire a strong political education and a strong productive (skill oriented) education. Those who are ignorant are always dependent on those who are educated.

Furthermore, many of the myths which surround women, actually attempt to legitimize, and substantiate this dependency in the name of "natural laws." Thusly, the forced dependency which our Women face becomes an extension of "mother nature" or the "hand of god," rather than what it is: the result of an intentionally exploitative and oppressive, male dominant society.

Most women feel inadequate to one degree or another. Even, or should we say especially, those women who are "formally educated" but still adversely affected by the myths and realities of sexism. Too often, our Sisters who have been formally educated,

find it extremely hard to cope with thinking through social problems which affect women, to cope with devising effective plans of self-defense and self-development, and to cope with putting their plans into action.

In such cases it is imperative that women realize that even when they have acquired a formal education, most of their educators treated them "like women" and therefore did not help prepare them to understand how to be social activists, how to cope with the material and social realities of society. Such inadequacy can only be overcome by acquiring and using skills and knowledge within a context of effective social support.

In summing up, we understand that myths help keep us confused. Myths are also a means of subtly forcing us to conform to an exploitative and oppressive status quo. In specific reference to Afrikan-american women, myths serve to cover the crass exploitation which she suffers. Also, myths project the status of our Sisters as the "natural" order of society rather than what it really is: White, male-dominant, ruling class manipulation. Furthermore, myths justify and nurture both the feelings of inadequacy as well as poor female education and misleading information.

A collective and proactive response is necessary to debunk myths. Women must move forward, seize power, and assert themselves. Men must do likewise themselves. Additionally, men should not only support women in women's-struggles, but also should, as conscious men, be in the forefront of the fight to eradicate sexism and develop women.

Additionally, we presented a suggested methodology for debunking myths. This three part methodology calls for (1) facing myths head on through formal and informal discussions, (2) analyzing, by means of serious study, the relationship of the myth to the status quo, and (3) developing and using a liberation theory and practice.

It is time for us to refute the many myths which our Women face. Hopefully, this has been a contribution toward preparing us to successfully undertake this task.

FOOTNOTES

1Herman, Alexis M. "Black Women In The Labor Force," THE BLACK COLLEGIAN Magazine, Vol. 9, No. 5, May/June 1979, p. 30.

2Herman, p. 32.

3Minyard, Dr. Frank and Niklaus, Karen C. RAPE In New Orleans, 1978, p. 6.

4Herman, p. 31.