Issue Brief: Women/Gender Issues and Bi/Multiracial Identity

Key Words:
Mixed identity, sexuality, oppression, racism, dominance, feminism, sexism

Summary:
Women are often considered to share a similar experience in their struggle against institutionalized and de facto sexism. However, it is often overlooked that “women”, just as much as men, form an enormously diverse bloc of society—and that fraught with such racial and ethnic diversity, comes equally diverse experiences. Within this context, when analyzing women/gender issues in the United States it is paramount that one take into account the multiple layers of identity—specifically racial and ethnic—that comprise a woman and the formulation of her political and social views. Furthermore, it is equally important to analyze the experiences of women of various ethnic and racial identities—especially considering the rise in multi-racial individuals in the United States and the complications fraught with classifying them in broad categories.

Key Points:
- Feminist perspectives often differ according to ethno-racial identification.
- In the United States, feminist perspectives differ the most between whites and non-whites.
- Mixed-race women—that is, women who claim multiple ethno-racial identities—are exceptionally hard to classify considering they face the challenge of choosing a feminist perspective based on the ethno-racial identity they identify with most.
- Within this context, women and gender issues not only differ among ethno-racial identities, but also are almost defined by them.
- Considering gender issues are basically defined by the “oppressor vs. oppressed” dichotomy, the addition of race and/or ethnicity either amplifies or lessens the oppressed sentiment.
Information regarding women and gender issues among multi/bi-racial women remains sparse even though the growth in the multi-racial population has spiked since the 1970s. However, with the information that has been collected, it is possible to conjecture that multi and bi-racial women have come to face with an identity crisis, in that they must come to terms with their womanhood as well as their ethno-racial identity. In a society that, despite its ever-increasing diversity, still unofficially makes the distinction between “white and non-white”, a multi-racial individual is faced with choosing one identity over another. In some cases, a mixed-race individual may seemingly have no choice (i.e. a half-white, half-black person would be seen as “black” before being considered “white.”) In any case, a woman—in being a woman—confronts an additional dichotomy: the gender dichotomy, as defined by man vs. woman. Much like the Color Dichotomy, the Gender Dichotomy lends itself to other characterizations and re-wordings; for example, man vs. woman can be re-defined into an oppressed vs. oppressor, or dominant vs. inferior dichotomy. Thus, a multi-racial woman (with part “white” ancestry, for example) must confront two dichotomies: the Color and the Gender—with the Color Dichotomy either lessening or strengthening her position as “oppressed”. In order to understand this concept more clearly, it is crucial to examine the feminist movement from the black and white perspectives, especially considering the fact that the two were not the same. While the white woman saw the “man”—and just men in general—as the perpetrator of sexism and the oppressor of the female gender, the black woman saw her “oppressor” in a much different light. The black woman’s oppressor, in this case, was the “white population” first and then “males” second. A black woman’s “liberation”, within this context, is defined by her ability to assert herself as equal to any white person before she can make the claim that she is equal to a man specifically.
It is also important to highlight the different perspectives among feminists that divide among racial lines. The most prominent example is that of abortion, with a 2007 poll showing that 41% of African Americans and 51% of Hispanics oppose abortion, as opposed to only 40% of whites. A more statistically significant survey found that 48.4 percent of white Americans back embryonic stem cell research while just 40.9 percent of Hispanics and only 37.3 percent of black Americans do. Here we see that women of color tend to oppose abortion and medical practices that could harm the fetus more so than white women. In this case, one can argue that the feminist movement is not singular. Considering the ethnic diversity of the United States, and the tendency for race and ethnicity to play a significant role in the creation of one’s political and social viewpoints, it is simply ingenuous to assert that the feminist movement speaks for all women. Although the verdict in *Roe v. Wade* was considered a major win for feminism in America, recent polls, such as those on abortion and embryonic stem cell research, indicate that there isn’t an ethno-racial consensus on what a “woman” in general wants.

Now, when you have a woman who can claim to be both black and white, the identity situation becomes a bit convoluted; the question remains, who is the bi-racial (assuming the woman is part white) woman’s oppressor? Man or whites? Considering the racial divide tends to cut deeper than the gender gap, one could assume that ethno-racial identification supersedes gender identification, thereby defining what a bi or multi-racial woman considers more important in her struggles against society-established limits to her expression. As previously mentioned, this is an extremely complicated formulation of identity; and a multi-racial woman must confront whether to associate with a “double-oppressed” identity or simply a “single-oppressed”.

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