

COLONIZED WOMEN: THE CHICANA

An Introduction

Elizabeth Sutherland

For many militants in the Women's Liberation Movement of this country today, the following comments of Enriqueta Vasquez may come as a shock and perhaps even seem like a cop-out—or "Tommish." But most of these women are white, middle-class in background, and in the majority of the population. They have little gut understanding of the position of women from a colonized—not merely oppressed—group.

For the woman of a colonized group, even the most political, her oppression as a woman is usually overshadowed by the common oppression of both male and female. Black and brown people in this country are fighting for sheer survival against the physical genocide of wars (including a high draft-rate), police brutality, hunger, deprivation—and against the cultural genocide of white Anglo institutions and values. The overused word "minority" becomes signifi-

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cant here; any colonized woman will feel an impulse toward unity with her brothers rather than challenge against them, but when the colonized group is the minority, as in the United States, this becomes even truer. The very growth of the white radical movement in this country during recent years is one reason why white women have begun to reject their roles in that movement. There is room for it, time for it, in a way that did not seem to exist before.

The sensitive woman from a colonized people also recognizes that many times it has been easier for her economically than for the men of her group. Often she can get a job where a man cannot. She can see the damage done to the men as a result, and feels reluctant to risk threatening their self-respect even further. This may be a short-range viewpoint involving false definitions of manhood, but it is created by immediate realities whose force cannot merely be wished away. It is also a fact that in many Chicano families, the woman makes many of the important decisions—not just consumer decisions—though the importance of her role will be recognized only privately. This may seem hypocritical or like a double-standard, but the knowledge of having real influence affects how the Chicana feels.

There is something else, and larger. It has been eloquently described by Maria Varela, now working in the Chicano movement of the Southwest:

When your race is fighting for survival—to eat, to be clothed, to be housed, to be left in peace—as a woman, you know who you are. You are the principle of life, of survival and endurance. No matter how your husband is—strong but needing you to keep on, or weak and needing you for strength, or brutal and using you to keep his manhood intact—no matter what *he* is, your children survive and survive only through your will, your day-to-day battle against inimical forces. You know who you are. This is even more true when, as a woman, you are involved in battling the forces of oppression against your race. For the Chicano woman battling for her people, the family—the big family—is a fortress against the genocidal forces in the outside world. It is the source of strength for a people whose identity

is constantly being whittled away. The mother is the center of that fortress.

For the young, alienated Anglos, on the other hand, the family as it has functioned in the past often reflects a bundle of false values in a lying society of which she is part. Her position is almost the opposite of the Chicana's. And the family is but one example of how the culture or life-style of a colonized people becomes a weapon of self-defense in a hostile world—hostile to any signs of unity among them, hostile to their very existence. It is a weapon against the oppressor's tactic of "divide and conquer," with which he has sustained his rule these many centuries.

That life-style may have other roots as well, but to challenge it today means to risk being seen as the oppressor. "We don't want to become like the dominating Anglo women," you can hear Chicanas say. The comment shows a great lack of understanding of the Anglo woman's struggle, but it also reveals how deeply cultural integrity is interwoven with survival for a colonized people. The middle-class Anglo woman must therefore beware of telling her black or brown sisters to throw off their chains—without at least first understanding the origins and reasons for those "chains." And also without first asking themselves: are there perhaps some aspects of these other life-styles from which we, with our advanced ideas, might still learn?

At the same time, we can hope that women from colonized groups will listen with open minds to their Anglo sisters' ideas about women's liberation and then take another look at their own values. There is, for example, nothing worth preserving about the young Chicano male habit of fighting at a dance over some girl whom both hardly know—to prove their manhood. There is, on the other hand, much to be gained by examining the "Anglo-style" idea that authoritarianism—always male—does not merely oppress women but also the masses; that the struggle for "Power to the People" is intimately linked to the women's

liberation struggle. In the present age of nationalism combined with the intensified repression of colonized peoples, such an open-minded exchange of ideas must be difficult. But for those who have moved on to revolutionary values, no other real choice exists.

Enriqueta Vasquez is a revolutionary, with her own tone of voice. Let Anglo women listen for her voice, not merely for echoes of their own.

THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN

Enriqueta Longauex y Vasquez

While attending a Mexican-American conference in Colorado this year, I went to one of the workshops that were held to discuss the role of the Chicana—the Mexican-American woman, the woman of La Raza.¹ When the time came for the women to report to the full conference, the only thing that the workshop representative had to say was this: "It was the consensus of the group that the Chicana woman does not want to be liberated."

As a woman who has been faced with living as a member of the Mexican-American minority group, as a breadwinner and a mother raising children, living in housing projects, and having much concern for other humans plus much community involvement, I felt this as quite a blow. I could have cried. Surely we could at least have come up with something to add to that statement. I sat back and thought, Why? Why? Then I understood why the statement had been made and I realized that going along with the feelings of the men at the convention was perhaps the best thing to do at the time.

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1. Literally, "The Race," a term referring to people in the United States who are descended from the American Indians and the Spanish colonialists; also carries the meaning, "a new breed."—Ed.