

The Forgetting of Million Woman March

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Abstract: Million Woman March was one of the largest feminist movements in American history taking place in Philadelphia in October 1997. The origins of Million Woman March date back to the 1960s as its organizers tried to resolve issues that had not been addressed at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement. The Black have long lived under the harsh crackdown on crime, and were considered a threat to social security. And Black women suffered violence and even murder caused by the crack cocaine. However, the organizers did not gain enough support, the participants did not have a unified goal of struggle. The lack of a strong leadership structure and a specific goal, and the absence of follow-up efforts which bring about positive impact is the main reason why the march is almost entirely forgotten.

Keywords: Million woman march, Human rights, Leadership structure, Specific goals

1. Introduction

In the fall of 1997, hundreds of thousands of Black women marched in Philadelphia: one of the largest civil rights and feminist demonstrations in American history. While the movement is almost entirely forgotten, it is an important moment in the history of civil rights, and human rights, in the United States. What drew these women to the streets? What did they hope to accomplish? Why was the march not discussed? Based on newspaper accounts and interviews, this essay will explore these questions, and this essay will argue that the 1997 March was forgotten because it lacked a clear leadership structure and clear goals.

The Million Woman March begin with great hope. Black women from all over the USA and even around the world came to Philadelphia with their own expectations; they believed that the march would be remembered in the American history and the wanted to be a part of this history. “I’m here to make part of this history because this is a history,” said one woman at the march [1]. Today, however, the march is not typically a subject in history curriculum, and many people do not even know it took place. Few have been interested in what brought Black women there, what efforts they made, whether their expectations were realized. And there has never been a scholarly monograph, or even primary-source-based journal article, on this theme. Scholars tend to depict the 1990s as an era of relative quiet before the firestorms of Black Lives Matter. And yet this march shows that the story is not so simple, and that there is continuity between the famous marches of the 60s/70s and those of our own day. This work will set up the connection between the Million Woman March and civil right movements of the 1960s well by linking it to other secondary sources that treat race in the American 1990s, even if they don’t address the march specifically.

2. Origins

The Million Woman March took place at a time when civil rights, and the fight for Black justice, were not especially strong. The Black Lives Matter movement, for instance, looks back to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, not the marches of the 1990s. But the origins of the march can be traced back to the 1960s when the Crime Commission, which saw race as a threat to public security, was established, and instituted a series of harsh criminal investigations and enforcement programs towards Blacks. This situation never got better, for the next three decades, many Black people, especially teenagers, had been imprisoned. Blacks had to face stereotypes and injustice in society because of the high crime rate of them. Black women felt the pain deeply and tried making efforts to change. Fannie Lou Hamer, an African American civil rights activist who worked to desegregate the Mississippi Democratic Party, suffering from violence, fighting against the oppression and injustice, was denied a seat by the committee of the Democratic National Convention [2]. The American history did not recognize Hamer's and other Black women's contributions.

There were certainly some marches and attempts to draw attention to the plight of Black America in the 1990s. In 1995, for instance, there was a Million Man March in Washington, D.C. The 1995 march was a grassroots movement with widespread participation by Black men in the USA. Its primary goal was to win politicians' attention to Black issues and put them back on the national agenda. One issue with that March, though, is that women were hardly involved at all. E.Faye Williams, serving as host committee co-chair and international spokesperson in the Million Man March, and Linda Greene, serving as the National Director of Fundraising for the Million Man March in 1995, held key positions as facilitators of the march, managing the finances and monitoring the organizational structure. And yet women's issues were not considered at the march and figures like Williams and Greene were ignored. "Organizers excluded women from the march to send a two-part message" that women need to recognize their place "in the home" [3]. And Black women had specific issues of their own.

The crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s took a heavy toll on women. Murders from the crack cocaine created insecurity for Black women. According to a research by Jeane Ann Grisso, male partners who injured women were much more likely to use cocaine and had been arrested in the past. Grisso also found that rates of homicide were nearly four times as high among Black American women as they are among white American women [4]. For many, crack use became an obsession, made a persistent poverty for generations, dominated their lives, and superseded family responsibilities. Safety threats, family conflicts and economic pressures from crack cocaine using, stigmatization from politicians and media, these problems persecuted lower-class Black women every day. And they did not have a chance to transform their lives.

Because Black women had important concerns, which were not being addressed by the mainstream civil rights movement, and it was general believe that women played a similar, behind-the-screen role in human rights movement, in which men represented all the give and gain, some of these women began to think about a march of their own.

In 1997, Phile Chionesu, a human rights advocate, realized that Black women had to unite and came out from shadow to speak up for their pains and needs. And she decided to set up a platform by marching for Black women across the USA to demand human rights and to revitalize Black communities. Chionesu is a grassroots activist, without any national Black organization background, she had no experience in organizing a march before 1995 [5]. She simply hoped the march could unite Black women to express their grievances and show their power, and that problems above could be all changed by uniting. But she did not think about what kind of change the march was really seeking, and how to push the government to make some policies to change.

For all of its good intentions, the 1997 march was not really a success. As we have already seen, it is largely forgotten in America, and Black women's needs are still not addressed. The next two sections of the paper will explain the failure of the march, focusing first on its loose organizational structure and second on its lack of clear demands.

3. Organizing

It is important for a march to have a clear, strong leadership structure that can be well planned to amplify its impact and achieve its goal. To take the 1963 March on Washington as an example, its organizers, A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, purposeful focused on economic inequality, calling for more jobs and equal work rights. They prepared for more than a year, during which time they sought support from a wide range of organizations, including the Congress of Racial Equality, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the United Automobile Workers. They successfully formed the Council for United Civil Rights Leadership, which was responsible for financial coordination, information delivery, and logistics management of the 1963 march, to ensure the 1963 march and its follow-up went smoothly. In addition, the leadership group actively engaged in dialogue with the government and eventually won the support of President Kennedy. "President Kennedy spoke favorably of the March on July 17, saying that organizers planned a peaceful assembly and had cooperated with the Washington, D.C., police [6]." The 1963 march was able to change politics on civil rights because of its good leadership structure.

This model of successful organization was not followed by Chionesu and her partners in 1997. After several months of secret preparation, Chionesu asked Asia Coney, a local public housing activist, to join. They envisioned the march as helping Black communities throughout the USA achieve social and economic development and empowerment, while bring unity, hope and sisterhood to African women around the world. Together with other organizers, they set the major theme of the march was: repentance for the pain of Black women caused by one another, and the restoration and resurrection of African American family and community bonds [5]. This was an ambitious goal with a vague theme, with no feasible plan and practical value. According to interviews at the march collected by ABC news, some Black women did not understand the meaning of "repentance, restoration and resurrection", when being interviewed, a woman asked people around her, "Restoration? Who can help me? What does Restoration mean?" And they just kept repeating the importance of unity [1].

In Chionesu's assumption, one objective of the march is that solving local problems without calling on elected leaders and mainstream groups. Because she did not want others, like racists and those in power to, interfere with their plans. Second, she wanted to demonstrate that Black women could do it by organizing the march entirely independently. To achieve it, the march's message was mainly spread by Black women's own means of communication; they used the internet, the telephone, and word of mouth to exchange information with others through churches, community groups, trade unions, neighborhood associations and other informal associations [7]. While managing to bypass white people and middle-class African-Americans, they limited the march to grassroots Black women. Others who heard about the march had no ideas what the march was about, what was really going on, and what they could do for it. Remarkably, that is why the women who coordinated, spoke at or attended the event seemed to be aware that their efforts may fall on deaf ears even at the time of the original Million Woman March [8]. Horace Campbell found out another significant problem was, "the lack of sisterhood from privileged white women for the march. The silence of the white feminists and middle-class African American academics and gender technicians was deafening [7]." Their silence showed their indifference to the march and they would do nothing to help those Black women. The march lacked funds and support from the upper class; it was difficult to carry out a series of following activities, much less to affect social reality.

The leaders of the Million Woman March failed to develop realistic plans to achieve goals, and did not enlist supporters who could help with policies. This is the main reason why the march has faded into history.

4. Marching

A successful social movement also needs to ensure that everyone knows precisely what they are fighting for. In 1963, as we've seen, Martin Luther King, Jr. supplied a clear list of demands. In Philadelphia, though, there was no such thing: there were almost as many issues as there were marchers.

On October 25, 1997, millions of women and some men gathered together and marched along the Ben Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia. At the march, youngsters were yelled and the olds wept, every woman's eyes sparkled with excitement. All ages, all shades were represented. During the march itself, ABC News sent reporters into the crowd to document the jollification and to ask questions of the attendees. This allows us to capture what the march meant to attenders in their own words—or, at least, in the words that they would choose to use for a largely white audience.

By analyzing these interviews, it turns out that there are lots of reasons for women to come to the march. The most vital one was a unity. A unity brought them strength, a sense of belonging, and hope for change. "The march will result in a great unity, now there are sisters and brothers everywhere. We are strong. We are here from across the U.S. and we can see a million people," said a woman who had to sleep in her car because hotels were fully booked, "It is worth because it is a unity. It is beautiful. It is really nice [1]." Almost all women agreed that the family unity was necessary. They called for restoring a family unity. They wanted their family, their neighbors could sit together, talk together and get their real feelings out so that they could help and encourage each other. Children were another reason brought them there. "Our children need a lot of help, and I'm here for the young Americans," said a mother with her daughter. "It is the children. When we teach our children what are going to happen I want them to feel loved." A madam put children before family unity. "Communication is my restoration. I talk to my children and let them know I love them every day, but we need more." A young mother having five children argued that her children need more attention and love through communication. Mothers always hope their children can live in a peaceful and friendly society, having more chances and a better life.

Some women were longing for less violence, restrictions on drugs and higher wages in communities. "I have a lot of issues myself and hope for these issues will be addressed today, as for drugs," a woman's eyes glistened with tears, "and violence threatens each other. All violence should be stopped [1]." The toll of drugs and violence on Black women was enormous; they could not wait to change it. "We are here for unity and tommy. We want live a better live." Three women left this word for the camera. Some women came to participant in the historical gathering and to be a part of history. "If the Million Woman March comes to history, I will tell my kids and my friends about my experience and feelings," a woman said with a smile, "this is something you can only see once in a lifetime." They wanted to record the meaningful march for themselves and pass it on as a family memory to their children and grandchildren. They came because they were Blacks, they were women, and history demands for their presence. They were glad to meet lots of beautiful Black sisters and to see lots of sisters laughing and singing. "I never saw so many sisters, you know, there are a million women here. Everyone being so happy, everybody is so friendly." A girl said to the journalist. Some women talked about they could found much useful information, and could bring in back to their hometown, such as Washington, D.C. and Chicago. They were willing to spread love, faith and positive thoughts to others. An old lady from Washington, D.C. said, "It is exciting to have sisters all over the world. This matters because we are a part of the Million Woman Movement, and we set up

a love class that we can show love to sisters may come. We have information here from all groups of communities, so we can get information and take it back.”

In a word, the exploitation and injustice on underclass Blacks led one million Black women to gather in Philadelphia, hoping for a unity that could help each other, reducing violence and drugs, improving living conditions in the Black communities, and creating a better future for their children.

Throughout interviews, the march was made up of African American women’s desire to address a range of issues. Women came to Philadelphia for different reasons, and a large number were focus on their own trouble. They were seeking help and approval for themselves, rather than uniting to achieve one or several universal, beneficent goals. When the march did not make sense immediately, when the excitement of gathering faded, they got tired of their lackluster lives. Then they slowly stopped talking about the march and buried it in their memories. Besides, without a clear, unified goal meant that it was difficult for women at the march to truly unite as family; they did not know where to start to change, but only felt helpless when facing so many problems. Lacking clear goals or a main target is another essential reason that the march was gradually erased from the American history.

5. Rethink

The Million Woman March did not reach any of its goals; it did not improve the employment or economy in Black communities, and it did little to change the issues of Blacks at that time. The march’s social effect in the 1990s was limited, as well as today. That is one of the reasons that the march has not been mentioned by people and scholars.

The march would have a lasting impact only if everyone who took part in it could take the goals and relevant information back to their communities and worked hard on these goals with others’ help. Just like Leona Smith, president of the National Union of Homeless, pleaded with the crowd: “This will all be in vain if you return back to your communities and do not get involved, if you do not put petty jealousies aside, if you do not continue to organize and mobilize. This day will mean nothing [5].” And one interviewee in the march called the march the Million Woman Movement, she explained, “The Million Woman Movement means a continuum of the march, we can be in the march today but it will come to an end. We adore promoting a continued effort about all of us to deal with community, deal with society and deal with our country [1].” The interviewee made a crucial point. If the march was only one day in October 1997, it would be unlikely to change much at all. Making constant efforts is necessary for the march to be more influential, so that it could be brought into focus and remembered in history. However, in interviews, there were only few people talked about they could take information back to their hometown, helping each other to set up an advocacy group for local Black women. And, without support, they did not have enough ability to solve serious social problems.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the forgetting of the Million Woman March was caused by the lack of a clear leadership structure and a specific goal, and the absence of follow-up efforts bringing about positive impact. Progress for the society could not be achieved overnight; it takes a long time. When people are eager to change problems successfully, they need to make detailed goals and plans for every step of the way, win as much support as possible, and unite to take persistent action towards their goals. The Million Woman March was inspired by the famous marches of the 1960s that uniting to speak out women’s demands was the first step to fight for their rights. And it also told feminists today that strong leadership, clear goals, and continuous efforts make a march more meaningful. That is the most significant lesson from the Million Woman March.

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