

A KindOf Memo

November 18, 1965

From: Casey Hayden and Mary King

To: Jeannie Breaker, Alma Bosley, Connie Brown, Margaret Burnham, Theresa del Pozzo, Elaine de Lott, Doris Derby, Roberta Galler, Betty Garman, Prathia Hall, Ruth Howard, Janet Jamot, Sharon Jeffrey, Jeanette King, Dorie Ladner, Margaret Lloren, Carol McEldowney, Kay Moller, Gwen Gillon, Penny Patch, Karen Pate, Dona Richards, Judy Richardson, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, Emmie Schrader, Liz Shirah, Harriet Stulman, Mariel Tillinghast, Mary Varela, Judy Walborn, Joyce Ware, Cynthia Washington

We've talked a lot, to each other and to some of you, about our own and other women's problems in trying to live in our personal lives and in our work as independent and creative people. In these conversations we've found what seem to be recurrent ideas or themes. Maybe we can look at these things many of us seem to perceive, often as a result of ways we've learned to see from the movement:

----Sex and caste: There seem to be many parallels that can be drawn between treatment of Negroes and treatment of women. Women we've talked with often find themselves within a kind of common-law caste system that operates, sometimes subtly, placing them in a position of inequality to men in work and personal situations. This is complicated by several facts, among them: 1) The caste system is not institutionalized by law (women have the right to vote, to sue for divorce, etc.); 2) women can't withdraw from the situation (a la nationalism) or overthrow it; 3) there are biological differences (even though most biology is written without taking present and future technology into account so we probably can't be sure what these differences mean). Many people who are very hip to the implications of the racial caste system, even people in the movement, don't seem to see the sexual caste system, and if it's raised they respond with: "That's the way it's supposed to be. There are biological differences." Or with other statements that sound like a white segregationist confronted with integration.

----Women and problems of work: The caste system perspective dictates the roles assigned to women in the movement, and certainly even more to women outside the movement. Within the movement, questions arise in situations ranging from relationships of women organizers to men in the community, to who cleans the freedom house, to who holds leadership positions and acts as spokesman for groups.

Other problems arise between women with varying degrees of awareness of themselves as lower caste or who see themselves as needing less control of their work than other women, and there are problems with relationships between white women and black women.

---- Women and personal relationships with men: Having learned from the movement to think radically about the personal worth and abilities of people whose roles in society had gone unchallenged before, a lot of women in the movement have begun trying to apply those lessons to their own relations with men. Each of us probably has her own story of the various results, and of the internal struggle occasioned by trying to break out of very deeply learned fears, needs, and self-perceptions, and of what happens when we try to replace them with concepts of people and freedom learned from the movement and organizing.

----Institutions: Nearly everyone has real questions about those institutions which shape perspectives on men and women: marriage, child rearing patterns, women's (and men's) magazines, etc. People are beginning to think about and even to experiment with new forms in these areas.

----Men's reactions to the questions raised here: Some men seem to feel, when they hear conversations involving these problems, that they have a right to be present and participate in them, since they are so deeply involved. At the same time, very few men can respond non-defensively, since the whole idea is either beyond their comprehension or threatens and exposes them. The usual response is laughter. That inability to see the whole question as serious and as sociologically explainable often shapes our own response so that we learn to think in their terms about ourselves and to feel silly rather than trust our inner feelings. The problems we're listing here, and what others have said about them, are therefore largely drawn from conversations among women only, and that difficulty in establishing dialog with men is a recurring theme among people we've talked to.

----Lack of community for discussion: Nobody is writing, or organizing or talking

publicly about women, in any way that reflects the problems that various women in the movement come across and which we've tried to list above. Consider this quote from an article in the centennial issue of The Nation:

However equally we consider men and women, the work plans for husbands and wives cannot be given equal weight. A woman should not aim for "a second-level career" because she is a woman; from girlhood on she should recognize that, if she is also going to be a wife and mother, she will not be able to give as much to her work as she would if single. That is, she should not feel that she cannot aspire to directing the laboratory simply because she is a woman, but rather because she is also a wife and mother; as such, her work as lab technician (or the equivalent in another field) should bring both satisfaction and the knowledge that, through it, she is fulfilling an additional role, making an additional contribution.

And that's about as deep as the analysis goes publicly, which is not nearly so deep as we've heard some of you go in chance conversations.

The reason we want to try to open up dialog on all this is mostly subjective. Working in the movement often intensifies personal problems, especially if we start trying to apply things we're learning there to our personal lives. Perhaps we can start to talk with each other more openly than in the past and create a community of support for each other so we can deal with ourselves with integrity and can therefore keep working.

Objectively, the chances seem slim that we could start a movement based on anything as distant to general American thought as a sex-caste system. Therefore, most of us will probably want to work full time on problems such as war, poverty, race. But it seems to us that the very fact that the country can't face, much less deal with, the questions we're raising justifies real efforts at dialog within the movement and with whatever liberal groups, community women, or students might listen. That is, all the problems surrounding people's sexual identities and all the problems between men and women and all the problems of women functioning in society as equal human beings are among the most basic that people face. We've talked in the movement about trying to build a society which would see basic human problems, (which are now seen as private troubles), as public problems and would try to shape institutions to meet human needs rather than

shaping people to meet the needs of those with power. To raise questions like those above illustrates very directly that society can't deal with real human problems and opens discussion of why that is so. (In one sense, it is a radicalizing question that can take people beyond the legalistic solutions into areas of personal and institutional change.)

The second kind of objective reason we'd like to see discussion begin is that we've learned a great deal in the movement and perhaps this is one area where a determined attempt to apply ideas we've learned can produce some new alternatives.

The reason we're writing you is that we've either talked to you about this and know you're interested or we know you in other ways and respect you and want to know what you think. We thought that if enough people responded we might end up with something publishable, either as a pamphlet or an article for a magazine. Or if you think you've got enough thoughts about anything to make an article, we'd try to help you get it published separately. We believe there are several publications open to the kind of discussion we might make. Another possibility is a newsletter. But mainly, we'd just like you to correspond some with us; we can worry later about whether you'd feel like any of what you say is something you'd want made public in any way. So write a letter and tell us whether you think anything about any of the points people have been raising or what you think about all of them or if you think we're just crazy.

The final idea we had was that it might be possible to get Mademoiselle or one of those career-college women-y magazines to pay for a group of us to get together and discuss women and women in the movement. It could be taped, edited, and printed for a big circulation audience. Even if that fell through maybe we could plan to get together and talk at some meeting in the spring where many of us would be anyway or we could just plan to meet on our own if enough people thought it would be worthwhile. What do you think?

If you know anyone else who'd be interested in all this, please pass this thing along and let us know who else we should know about. And if you have any further ideas for raising the question, let us know.

Mary will be going to California with Dennis, who's going to be in Stafford, and Casey doesn't know where she'll be, but you can write us both at Casey's home address: 1303 E. Virginia, Victoria, Texas, and it will be forwarded.

FREEDOM,

Casey and Mary