

## **Responses to Barbara Smith's Call to Awareness**

by **Ulester Douglas, M.S.W., Co-Executive Director**

Barbara Smith's letter to her friend encouraged and challenged me to critically examine and write about my experiences with Black gay men, specifically those experiences that relate to my work to end sexist oppression. I was challenged because my "natural" inclination is to protect my Black gay brothers from any further scrutiny by "outsiders". I have learned that it is OK for me to talk and write about my brothers to other Black gay brothers and perhaps to my Black lesbian sisters, but that's it. I have internalized that it is dangerous to expose our challenges and vulnerabilities to others because they will use this information against us. They will use it to shift the focus from themselves and to justify and minimize their oppressive behaviors.

I believe this concern illustrates a critical challenge when addressing the issues of intersectionality. It is true that the oppressors will exploit the vulnerabilities of the oppressed to further solidify their power base. It is true, also, that the oppressed will sometimes use their vulnerable status to deny, minimize and justify their own oppressive behavior. If we are to effectively address the issue of intersectionality, it is imperative that our discussions, theories and practice reflect this reality – the reality that sometimes we are the oppressor; sometimes we are the oppressed; and sometimes we are both. I am referring to our individual and collective behaviors in the contexts of institutional and cultural oppression – sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, etc.

Of the hundreds of Black, gay brothers I have interacted with, few appear to have a healthy awareness of sexism and how they reinforce it. I identified with Ms. Smith when she challenged her friend that "at this point in history there is really no excuse for you as a conscious Black gay man not to be fully aware of the actual texture and challenge of women's day-to-day lives." But I am painfully aware of how easy it is even for "conscious" Black gay men to not have this awareness.

It is easy because for these Black gay men, their consciousness is often geared toward surviving the daily attacks on their own humanity. Their survival has been dependent on a heightened awareness of how they are oppressed not how they oppress others. They tend to subscribe to a dualistic cognitive process, consciously and unconsciously, in which they convince themselves that if they were to honestly explore their sexism, this would invalidate the racism and heterosexism they experience. They do not know or believe that becoming aware of and working towards ending sexism is in their interest. Or, as Ms. Smith wondered, perhaps they have avoided these realities in order to hold on to male privilege.

Although I have focused on Black gay men, most of what I have said is applicable to other oppressed groups. As Ami Mattison described in the first article of this series on *intersectionality*, there is enormous pressure on us to compartmentalize and rank oppressions. What we sometimes forget or fail to realize is that this pressure is externally applied by those in power, with the intent to divide and conquer.

Some of the effects of this divide-and-conquer tactic are evident: We are fighting each other for "our piece" of the elusive pie – a pie that was never baked with us in mind; we are unable to reasonably expect that our shared experience of being oppressed will necessarily translate into empathy for each other; and we are struggling to see and accept that we share a common denominator – the need to be liberated from the shackles of oppression. But if there is any hope of experience true liberation, we much accept and internalize that *because the institutional and social structures that sustain sexism also sustain racism, classism, and heterosexism, it is not possible to eradicate any one oppression while the others remain in place.* That's intersectionality.