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Feminism is only Sustainable with Black Women Leading

The exclusion of the Black woman from Progressive era feministic reform was not by mistake – it was intentional. First-wave feminism was riddled in overt racism that subscribed to ideologies such as the Eugenics Movement that sought to stunt the economic growth and equitability of the Black female. By analyzing Progressive Era literature, insight can be gained into the experience of the Black woman in the domestic sphere, allowing for the revision and rebranding of an all-inclusive feminism.

The Eugenics Movement of the Progressive Era promoted the false belief that immigrant and black people of the lower class were genetically inferior. Victims of intersectionality, Black women had to experience and combat the oppressive natures of being a woman, Black, and economically disadvantaged. Historically, the Black woman has maintained no sense of bodily autonomy nor been able to sculpt a realistic identity for the media or general population. Generalized into categorical caricatures such as the hyper-sexualized “Jezzebelle” figure or the simplistic “Mammy,” black women maintained these negative stereotypes well into contemporary times even as the “welfare queens” of the 1980’s. This attempt by white America to reduce the complexity and necessity of the Black woman in society created counter-movements which sought to rebrand the black woman as virtuous and up to the domestic standards of white women. Known as “racial uplift,” reforms that promoted this white assimilation programming ultimately did more harm than good, according to historian Kevin Gaines, as they masked the realities of the black female experience in the domestic form, producing little change and further eradicating the Black female identity.

We can refer back to Progressive Era literature such as Anzia Yezierska’s “The Arrogant Beggar,” where the experience of the lower-class immigrant/black woman in the domestic sphere is shown to have had little inclusion in early feministic reforms. Even more so, the women who worked in the domestic sphere were often seen as a “danger” to the white nuclear family as they were thought to be a contaminant to America’s “pure” nation. This narrative again refers to the Eugenics Movement and the population control that came with it, displaying how the beginning of feminism was cultivated on a platform of superiority.

As a society that claims life, liberty, and equality for all, it is important to reflect upon history and apply those insights to the modern era. It begins with understanding the unique perspective and experiences of the Black woman which have shaped an equally as unique identity. It begins with listening and continues with appointing Black women into roles of leadership. After centuries of the Black female’s voice being stifled by racism and sexism, leadership positions are a necessity for the amplification of the Black woman’s experience and required future actions. The movement of feminism, based in the pursuit of equality, cannot therefor achieve its goal by excluding the Black woman from its reforms , thus the movement itself is unsustainable and holds no real momentum until it is without doubt an all-inclusive mindset that eradicates any sense of superiority.