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The great alliance

BY CINNAMON LEWIS

I recently had a conversation with a female Columbia sorority member, who expressed frustration with the criticism her sorority had received. This criticism focused on her sorority's alliance with a fraternity, which was seen as contradictory to the notion of women's empowerment. The problem with this criticism is that it suggests women's empowerment is invalid if it has ties with male organizations—that women are only empowered when they are independent of men, not in partnership with them. And so I wonder: Does a union of sororities and fraternities perpetuate a general stereotype that claims women are dependent on men, and therefore invalidate the notion of women's empowerment?

I recently attended an HIV/AIDS awareness event on campus hosted by the committee of Latino Heritage Month (LHM). One thing I noticed upon arrival was that almost all of the individuals present were female, which worried me. Considering the nature of the event, I started to think that maybe this would be a repetition of what I often encountered in high school—the tendency of guys to hesitate to acknowledge and address the significance of crucial sexual health issues, as if they had no stake in the matter.

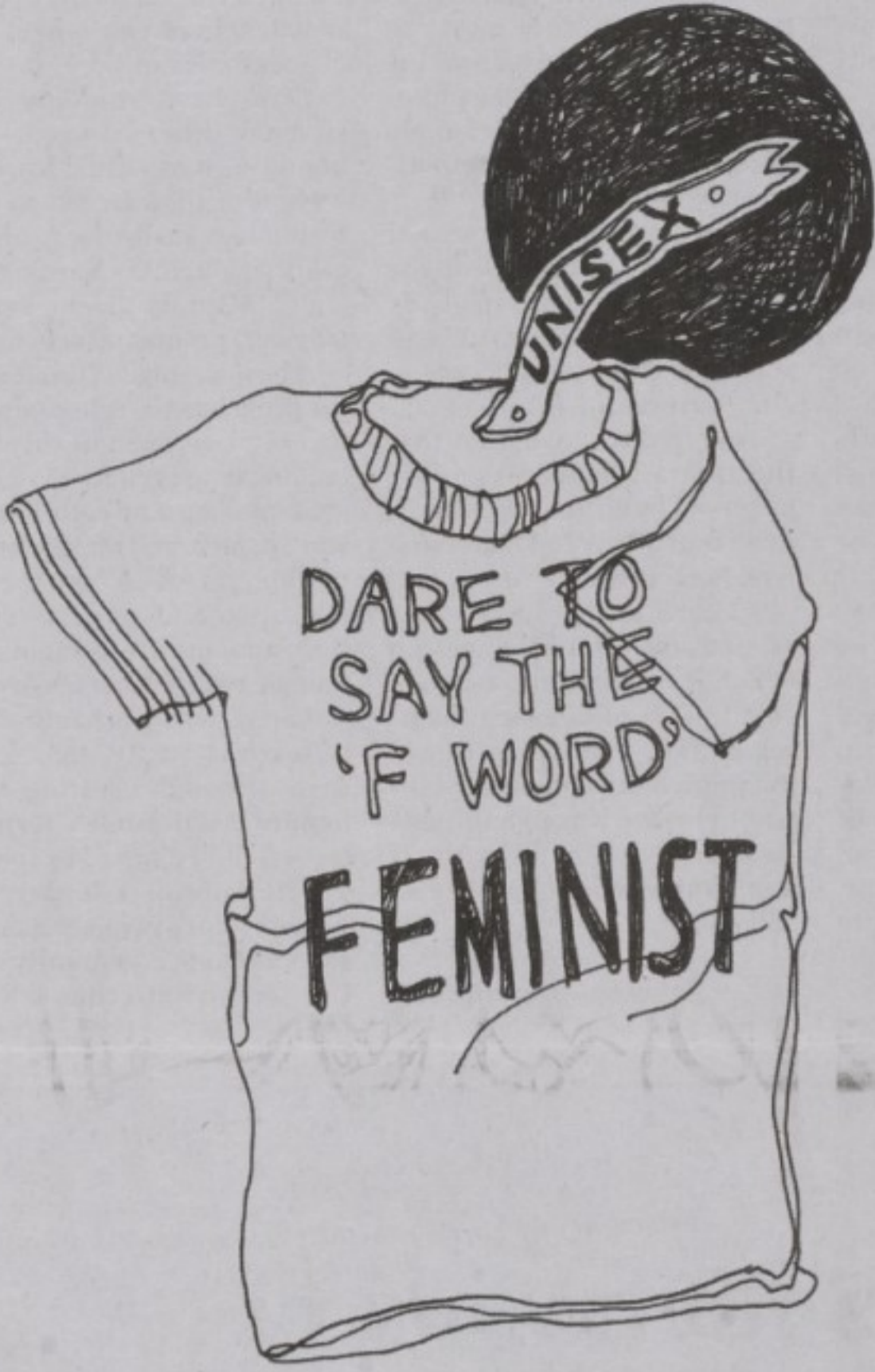
To my relief, just before the presentation began, a group of male students appeared, thus proving my assumption wrong. It also proved a general awareness on Columbia campus: HIV/AIDS is not in any sense solely a women's issue, and the participation of both genders is necessary to combat and eradicate the epidemic. I was proud to be a student at Columbia. While it would have been possible to continue the event with little to no male participation, having both sexes represented made the event better.

It is a well-known fact that Columbia did not admit women until 1983. After this milestone, it became necessary to construct a female presence on campus. An attempt to do so was highly successful, to the point where I cannot imagine there having once been a Columbia without women. Yet when dealing with discrimination of any kind, it is often a struggle for affected groups to seem unaffected by recent prejudices. There is always the urge to prove people wrong through assertion and the pursuit of power. When it comes to the case of women, there is a reluctance to appear extreme in an attempt to achieve equality. One possible extreme is the fostering of reverse discrimination against men. The SlutWalk that took place on Columbia's campus comes to mind: Women walked in protest against the popular opinion that the way that a woman dresses indicates her desire to be seduced or taken advantage of by men. I heard the opinion that this walk was overly feminist, yet one must take note that men were present and took part in the protest. What this means is that women's empowerment can exist and flourish with the support of men.

Thus, the alliance of sororities and fraternities can serve to represent women's empowerment. It is often misconstrued as seeking to isolate women as a group separate from men, and to encourage a distrust of male existence. But one must not forget that feminism is a pursuit of power, respect, and equality in social, political, and economic spheres. Therefore, women's empowerment necessarily calls for the inclusion of men.

Progress seldom goes unquestioned. Yet it is this fear and skepticism that hinders women's empowerment, that calls sororities into question who make a substantial attempt to reach out to their fraternities. Women's empowerment should begin from within the framework of womanhood and a mutual confidence. This positive reinforcement is the formula for progress—on campus and worldwide.

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