

Sam Sedaai's report on radical feminism and alienation of moderate feminists at Kalamazoo College.

P.O.W.E.R.:
AN EXCLUSIVE CLUB PROMOTING EQUALITY

On the bulletin board in the lobby of Hicks Center at Kalamazoo College, a flyer stands out because of its unusually large bold-lettered title that reads "Pornography Hurts Women." Below the title, information is printed about the discrepancies in the distribution of revenues between men and women in the pornography industry. On the bottom of the flyer in very small font, there are three more words: "Sponsored by POWER."

POWER (Progressive Organization of Women Engaged in Revolt) is a women's organization that claims to strive to promote "equality" with men in a society they characterize as fundamentally patriarchal and male-centered. Their activities include bringing feminist speakers to campus to promote feminist ideas, but it goes beyond that. They regularly put informational flyers around the campus indicating inequalities in different areas of everyday life. They also arrange large-scale events such as the week full of activities which occurred in mid-May this year all with the theme of fighting male violence against women. But as the organization went through that week with their high level of activities, there also appeared to be more criticisms of POWER's activities and the entire organization as a whole. These criticisms appeared to be much more deeply felt when a man on campus casually pointed out to his friend that it was again time for the annual "let's-hate-men week."

One of the main criticisms about POWER is its exclusivity. The organization claims to have been established to promote, among other things, equality between men and women. They point out that they are outraged to see how women are oppressed in so many ways in the society based on their sex or gender. Members of the organization believe that we should fight until people are no longer judged based on their sex, but their personal attributes. Yet, what some seem to find in contrast to that goal is the fact that no men are allowed to join this organization. Colin Myer, a male student at K College, described the exclusivity of the organization as "outright hypocritical."

Yet surprisingly, most of the criticisms about the organization come from feminist women who indeed feel very strongly about the ideas of equality. Melissa May is one of those individuals. Ms. May is a freshman who is also a lesbian and identifies herself as a feminist. She is also going to be a member of the Women's Resource Center (WRC) next year, a student house on campus that is dedicated to women's issues. On the issue of exclusivity, she explains that "[Members of POWER] do not even allow the thought of a man joining the organization." But May believes that the organization should be open to men as well. May refused to participate in the march of "Take Back the Night" which was organized to demonstrate against male violence against women because men were not allowed to join the demonstration. "If men want to participate, let them participate," she says. Catherine Herzog, another freshman and feminist, also described POWER as "exclusive," which she explained as the main reason why she did not join the organization. As a member of the WRC, May claimed that her views represent those of the other WRC members as well.

In a written statement, POWER responded to some of the allegations. Sarah Goldstein, POWER's contact person, explained that "sex equality is not necessarily the goal of [POWER]." Goldstein characterized separatism as a "viable political strategy," explaining that "women are granted voice and agency within a group setting when men are eliminated." On men who express

frustration in being accepted in POWER, Goldstein explained that “men who claim that they need to be included to enact societal change are overestimating their importance.”

Goldstein also took issue with a male individual doing a report on the inaccessibility of POWER to women. She warned that “by speaking for women, you as an individual are contributing to the silencing of women, which is clearly one of the ways in which women are oppressed.” While she admitted that the discussion on the accessibility of POWER to men is “an important conversation,” she explained her belief that such discussion is “not one you have the right to initiate or to which you ought [to] contribute” because “you are a man and an outsider to this organization by default.”

The criticism that Herzog and May made about POWER seems to be rooted in the clash between various movements within feminism. Having studied these movements, May explains the nature of this clash. “There are many movements within feminism. The most radical one involves tearing down the main traditional pillars in the society and rebuilding them with complete social equality.” Describing POWER as an organization that is open to individuals from this specific camp, May explains another movement. “The second movement believes that society could change without completely tearing down every institution.” Herzog and May both identify themselves as those from the latter movement. Dr. Elman and Dr. Boatwright who are both professors of women’s studies and experts in feminism on campus refused to comment on the alleged clash. In her statement, Goldstein confirmed May’s characterization of different camps within feminism.

One of the women on campus criticized POWER for becoming an organization that seems to fight men more than inequality and traditional practices that hurt women. Clearly sympathetic toward the organization’s members, she explains that “with such a talented group of women, I think they could accomplish much more than rabid destruction of the reputation of men on campus.” Goldstein responded by describing POWER’s attitude toward women as “indifference” rather than hatred. Adding to that criticism and referring to some of POWER’s reactions to various events or students’ actions, the interviewed student pointed out that “they blow things out of proportion.” She asked to remain anonymous in this interview, explaining her belief that “POWER would take affront to something that is not true.” Catherine also highlighted this criticism; “they polarize the issues to make them about men against women. Everything is about women v. men.” All of POWER’s critics who were interviewed for this report agreed that they did not feel like POWER was accessible to them.

POWER is an organization the values of which most students on this campus sympathize with. Yet given some of the organization’s practices, such as its exclusivity and reputation for blowing issues out of proportion, some feminists including May worry that the organization “gives a bad image of feminism” as “most people think of [POWER] as ‘the’ feminist organization, while there are many feminists that do not agree with them.” The general consensus among the feminists interviewed for this report is that POWER promotes a radical sub-camp in the feminism movement rather than the entire feminist movement.