

THE STATE OF  
**BLACKAMERICA**  
2003

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## “Feminism is a Black Thing”?: Feminist Contributions to Black Family Life

By Carolyn M. West

Black feminist scholar, bell hooks (1995) passionately declares that “feminism is a Black thing.” Yet, some members of the African-American community express suspicion and contempt for feminist beliefs. This essay is a review of feminist contributions to black family life. More specifically, I will define feminism, review black feminist history, and discuss the research on feminist attitudes among African Americans. The concluding section will explore how a feminist perspective can help us to understand diversity among black families, gender and family roles enacted by men and women, childhood gender socialization, and intimate partner violence.

### Definitions of Feminism

“Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression”(hooks, 2000, p. 1). Although this definition seems fairly innocuous, there are many myths about sexism and feminism (Smith, 1983, p. xxvi-xxxj). Some common misconceptions include:

- Feminism primarily addresses the concerns of middle-class white American women;
- Feminists are mostly lesbians;
- Feminists are angry and man-hating, attitudes that will undermine black male-female relationships;
- Racism is the primary form of oppression experienced by black women; therefore, feminism is less relevant to their lives;
- Black women don't need feminism because they are already “liberated.”

Despite these stereotypes, African-American scholars have articulated a feminist worldview that addresses the diversity and complexity of the black experience (Collins, 2000). For example, Alice Walker (1983) defined a "womanist" as "...committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (p. xi). The Combahee River Collective, a 1970s grassroots black feminist organization, offered a political definition:

...We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking... As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppression that all women of color face. (Smith, 1983, p. 272-282)

Which term is correct: Womanism, Black Feminism, Afrocentric Feminism? Scholars will continue this debate for years. Regardless of terminology, the feminist perspective would not privilege gender oppression over race or class oppression. Instead, this standpoint challenges us to consider how living at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, including racism, classism, sexism, and discrimination based on sexual orientation influence the life experiences of African Americans (Collins, 2000).

### **Our Black Feminist History**

Rudolph Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (2001) unearthed an extensive history of black male feminist thought. In his address, delivered in 1888 to a convention of the New England Woman Suffrage Association, Frederick Douglass stood before the crowd and unapologetically declared: "I am a radical woman suffrage man." In addition to being a "race man," W.E.B. Du Bois was also invested in the economic uplifting of black women. In his essay, "The Damnation of Women," which was actually a tribute to black

women, he acknowledged black women's contributions to the struggle for racial equality: "...Despite the noisier and more spectacular advance of my brothers, I instinctively feel and know that it is the five million women of my race who really count." This anti-sexist tradition has continued in the work of contemporary scholars and activists, such as Michael Eric Dyson (2003) in his celebratory book *Why I Love Black Women*. Even young men in the hip-hop community challenge their counterparts to reject sexist behavior and violence against women (Powell 1997).

African-American women have also played a prominent role in the feminist movement. During the suffrage movement, which was considered the first feminist wave in the U.S., Maria Stewart, Francis E. W. Harper, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett spoke passionately about black women's rights. "Ain't I A Woman," an often quoted 1851 speech given by Sojourner Truth, a former slave and women's rights activist, illustrated how gender oppression had unique repercussions for enslaved black women. Frustrated with the male-dominated Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements and dissatisfied with the racial insensitivity of the White Feminist Movement, black women began their second feminist wave. In 1977 the Combahee River Collective issued a position paper, which included the previously discussed political definition of black feminism. During the 1990s, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and other scholars produced, and brought into the mainstream, a growing body of black women's studies. As we move into the third wave of black feminism, Joan Morgan, a self-professed hip-hop feminist, is challenging her contemporaries to explore important topics, such as degrading images of black women in rap music (Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Springer, 2002).

According to Lemons (1998):

Remembering our feminist past enables the potential for liberatory thinking that supports coalition struggle across race and gender, advocates resistance to black male sexist and misogynist behavior, and embraces notions of sexual differences where heterosexism and homophobia are actively contested. (p. 281-282)

Thus, in order to create a feminism belief system that liberates all oppressed people, African Americans must remember our rich feminist history.

### **Feminist Attitudes Among African Americans**

Have African Americans embraced feminist concepts? Andrea Hunter and Sherrill Sellers (1998) used the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) to examine the feminist attitudes of men and women. This survey, which was conducted in 1979-1980, involved face-to-face home interviews with 2,107 black adults who ranged in age from 18 to 101. It was the first large-scale, culturally sensitive survey developed to explore black Americans' thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and experiences with a variety of topics, including work, family life, racial identity, and health. The researchers examined three issues central to feminism: (1) recognition and critique of gender inequality in the public and private spheres; (2) the acceptance of egalitarian gender roles; and (3) participation in political activism for the rights of women. Generally, both men and women endorsed positive attitudes; however, there were differences based on the economic and educational level of participants.

There were important differences based on demographics, such as economic and educational level. These findings will be discussed below.

#### *Recognition of Gender Inequality*

There were no gender differences in African Americans' view of sex discrimination. Approximately 50 percent of men and women agreed that sex discrimination was a problem for both black and white women. However, women who had a higher educational level and higher household income, and who were politically active, were more likely to view sex discrimination as a problem. It is likely that their experiences in the work force raised their awareness of gender inequality. Among men, those who were married and had higher levels of education were more likely to find sex discrimination problematic. The lower income and limited economic opportunities for their wives may have raised these men's awareness of sex discrimination.

#### *Egalitarian Gender Roles*

Egalitarian work and family gender role beliefs were measured by such items as "Both men and women should share equally in child care and housework." Although women were significantly more supportive, African Americans generally believed that housework and paid employment should be shared equally. "Baby boomers," defined as women born after 1947, and employed women were more likely to endorse egalitarian gender role attitudes. This finding is not surprising. Working outside the home and coming home to a "second shift" of housework and child care can be challenging. An equal division of work would certainly ease their burden.

Men with high black group affinity, defined as feelings of closeness to other African Americans, and men who had contact with unemployment agencies were more likely to endorse egalitarian gender roles. Researchers speculated that group affinity makes these black men more aware that African Americans share a common fate, and that unemployment makes them more aware of their own economic marginalization. Consequently, embracing egalitarian gender roles may reflect their belief that survival of the group requires men and women to work together.

#### *Political Activism*

The majority (more than 80 percent) of men and women believed that political organization was necessary for African-American women to combat race and gender discrimination. Women who had contact with welfare agencies and men who had contact with the police and unemployment agencies were even more likely to endorse women's political activism. Although this study did not investigate the nature of these interactions, blacks have had a long history of adversarial contacts with these public service agencies. As a result of these indignities, they may understand the importance of political activism.

Despite the positive attitudes toward feminism expressed by many African Americans in this study, others endorsed less favorable attitudes. For example, women were less accepting of interracial, gender-based, political organizing for women's rights if they believed that whites had

racist intentions, defined as wanting to "keep Blacks down," and recent experiences with racial discrimination. Why, does this pattern exist? Perhaps distrust, particularly of a political movement that is associated with privileged white women, makes them reject this form of activism. Furthermore, an experience with racism, whether actual or perceived, may lead black women to believe that racial discrimination is more detrimental than gender-based discrimination. Thus, organizing to combat sexism may seem less significant. These beliefs are consistent with common misconceptions of feminism that were discussed earlier in this essay.

In contrast, men who were active church members were less likely to support egalitarian gender roles. In addition, as their level of black affinity increased, men were less likely to support political organizing for women's rights. Why does this pattern exist? Church attendance may be associated with more traditional gender roles, which emphasize male dominance and female submission. In addition, these patterns may reflect a form of Black Nationalism, which emphasizes political organizing for the interest of blacks to the exclusion of gender. Feminism may be perceived as divisive and therefore rejected because it promotes conflict between black men and women.

Taken together, what do these findings tell us about feminist attitudes among African Americans? First, both men and women generally recognize sex discrimination, believe in the importance of equal gender roles, and endorse political activism to address gender discrimination. Second, African Americans' support for feminism can be influenced by a variety of factors, including gender, age, income, education, marital status, experience with racism, and contact with public service agencies. Thus, a person's demographic background and life experiences can provide a catalyst or be a barrier to the development of a feminist ideology. Third, some members of the black community have less favorable attitudes toward feminism. Their views should be acknowledged and respected. However, feminism should not be summarily rejected based on misinformation. It would be helpful to provide feminist education for all members of the black community.

### Feminist Contributions to Black Family Life

Feminists have been stereotyped as anti-family, male-bashing emasculators who seek to undermine the black family and male-female relationships. This is an unfortunate myth. Rather than being destructive, some black organizations argue that feminism is necessary to address the contemporary challenges faced by African Americans. According to their 2000 "Statement of Purpose" the Black Feminist Caucus of the Black Radical Congress:

We believe that the Black liberation movement will only be successful and principled when it consciously, consistently, and aggressively fights against *patriarchy* (the assumption that men should naturally dominate the family and by extension organizations, institutions, and society); *misogyny* (the hateful and violent treatment and depiction of women); *sexism* (the institutional subordination of women); and rigid and narrow definitions of masculinity, femininity, and family that compromise the humanity of women, children and men.

Other scholars have also documented the benefits of feminism in black family life (Collins 1998; hooks 1995). In this section, I will explore how a feminist perspective can help us to understand diversity among black families, gender and family roles enacted by men and women, childhood gender socialization, and exposure to violence.

### Black Family Diversity

There is a great deal of diversity among African-American families. For example, despite societal disapproval, more openly lesbian and gay couples are successfully parenting children. An increasing number of black families are headed by grandparents and single fathers (see R. B. Hill and Battle et al. in this volume). Yet, much of the research on black families continues to focus on single female-headed households. Although the number of black female-headed families remains high, their percentage of the number of black families as a whole has declined since 1996 to 43 percent, from 47 percent. Nonetheless, the high concentration of female-headed households among African Americans remains a source of concern because the poverty rate for black single mothers is 35 percent, com-

pared to 8 percent for black married couples (McKinnon 2003). Given these statistics, there is a political and cultural climate that promotes and sustains patriarchal families as a means of addressing poverty. For instance, on February 13, 2003 the House passed H.R. 4 (The Personal Responsibility, Work, and Family Promotion Act of 2003) reauthorizing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) through 2008. While reducing the educational opportunities for training, it promotes abstinence education, allocates \$300 million in federal funding annually for marriage promotion, and creates a fatherhood program funded at \$20 million a year "to promote and support involved, committed, and responsible fatherhood, and to encourage and support healthy marriages."

It is a mistake to equate family configuration with family functioning and well-being. Consequently, feminists challenge us to value our diverse family structures. Feminists also remind us that patriarchy will not solve the collective crisis that black Americans face in their public and private lives (hooks 1995). Coercing poor women into marriage will not solve poverty and its associated problems, such as community violence, incarceration, HIV, and drug addiction. These problems result from the social and economic oppression experienced by African Americans not "immorality" or lack of "family values." Rather than stigmatizing single black mothers and stereotyping black men as irresponsible fathers, we need to work toward humane social policies that lift all families, regardless of their configuration, out of poverty.

#### *Gender and Family Roles*

The Census Bureau's most detailed report on the nation's 8.8 million black families since the 2000 Census shows a slow, but steady increase in the number of black families headed by married couples, 47.9 percent in 2002, up from 46.1 percent in 1996. The six-year increase equals about 520,000 families (McKinnon 2003). According to researchers, many of these families are egalitarian, with both partners working and sharing equal responsibility for childcare and household duties. Historical factors helped create this family structure. Slavery, followed by hundreds of years of economic discrimination, deprived black men of their roles as

breadwinners, protectors, and heads of households; consequently, black women had to balance family responsibilities and employment (Willie and Reddick 2003). This pattern has continued in contemporary families. In fact, these families have been lauded as "pioneers." According to Landry (2000), "Long before the 1970s and the feminist revolution that shattered traditional notions of the family, black women in America had already accomplished their own revolution." Although Landry's observations are seemingly positive, feminists would caution us to avoid the stereotype that black women are already "liberated." Working long hours, frequently in low paying jobs, and coming home to a "second shift" of housework and childcare should not be equated with true freedom.

Are black families truly egalitarian in their daily lives? Certainly, some families equally divide work and family responsibilities. However, in other families there is a contradiction between the expectations of equality and the actual activities performed in the home. Using in-depth, open-ended interviews with middle-class African Americans, Haynes (2000) discovered that both husbands and wives found it acceptable for women to work outside the home while maintaining their role as family nurturers and performing household chores. In contrast, both wives and husbands expected black men to conform to societal expectations of the competent male provider role. As previously discussed, economic inequities make this role unattainable for some black men. In response to this reality, some wives created family myths as "versions of reality that obscure a core truth in order to manage a family tension" (Haynes 2000, p. 835). For example, if the wife earns more money she may minimize her financial contributions to the family in order to make her husband believe that he is the primary breadwinner. Family myths, when coupled with control and insecurity, can contribute to conflict. Michael Eric Dyson (2003) articulates this well:

Since black men struggle with a society that sets up expectations for appropriate masculine behavior—take care of one's family, be gainfully employed, be a financial success—and then undermines their attain-

ment, black women are often the psychological scapegoat of our anger. The rise in black male domestic violence is poignant testimony to such tensions in the black home. (pp. 208-209).

Thus, some black families are egalitarian, while other families create myths, which give the illusion of equality and help maintain the peace. However, when family myths are taken to the extreme, intimate partner violence may erupt, a serious problem that will be discussed below.

Haynes (2000) characterized this family pattern as neo-patriarchy and concluded that it could contribute to provider role strain for black men. Given the economic inequality that continues to exist, feminists challenge us to change the patriarchal definition of "manhood," which is primarily based on a man's earning ability. In addition to money, black men also offer compassion and love to family members, contributions which should not be minimized (hooks 1995). Neo-patriarchy can create a "second shift" for black women who are expected to balance full-time employment with housework and childcare. Feminists caution us to avoid the "superwoman image." It may leave women reluctant to ask for assistance and community members less supportive of social services, such as adequate daycare, because they believe that black women can effortlessly perform multiple roles without support (Harris-Lacewell 2001).

#### *Childhood Gender Role Socialization*

Gender role socialization assumes that children observe, imitate, and eventually internalize attitudes and behaviors that the culture defines as gender appropriate (e.g., girls are quiet and clean, and boys are physically active). They receive these messages from their parents and other adult role models. Interviews with black parents revealed wide-spread verbal support for gender equality in child socialization (Hill 2002). However, there were important differences based on social class. Securely middle-class parents were most supportive of gender equality. In contrast, first-generation middle-class parents, defined as educated parents who were raised in working-class families, were more ambivalent. As a result, they

offered their daughters a contradictory racialized gender socialization message. For instance, one woman wanted her 11-year old daughter to be a "warrior" and carry on the "struggle for racial justice" while behaving in a "ladylike" fashion in order to "find a man to take care of you." A challenging task, indeed! The socialization for boys was more consistent. Concerned that their failure to teach masculine behavior might result in homosexuality, parents strongly encouraged their boys to avoid "feminine" behavior, such as playing with dolls. Less educated parents endorsed the most rigid gender roles by socializing their children, both boys and girls, to perform traditional gender roles.

Certainly, the mixed gender role messages that some African-American girls receive can be confusing. Equally disturbing, according to feminists, are the messages that black boys receive about appropriate gender roles. Homophobia, the irrational fear and hatred of gays and lesbians, forces boys to avoid culturally-defined feminine behavior. Consequently, many boys are discouraged from crying or expressing gentleness. In an effort to appear masculine, boys may develop a "cool pose" or tough-guy image that is characterized by fearlessness, emotional detachment, and dominance. The inability to express emotions can have negative implications for the mental and physical health of black boys, and men, and limit their ability to establish intimate relationships (Carbado 1999; Majors and Mancini 1993).

#### *Exposure to Violence*

Violence can occur in any family or community, regardless of ethnic background. However, a disproportionate number of African-American families experience domestic abuse. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), black women experienced intimate partner victimization at a rate 35 percent higher than that of white women. A significant number of black husbands also were abused, with rates approximately 62 percent higher than that of white husbands (Rennison and Welchans 2000). In addition, an alarming number of African-American children and adults are exposed to community violence. According to a literature review, between 26 percent and 70 percent of inner-city children



have been exposed to severe violence in their neighborhoods and schools, such as witnessing a shooting (Jenkins 2002). Undoubtedly, being a victim/survivor of violence, witnessing violent acts, losing family members and friends to violence, and living in dangerous environments profoundly undermines the stability of black families. For example, exposure to violence has been linked to psychological distress, including Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, anxiety, substance use/abuse, and feelings of despair. Along with its mental health implications, violence exposure creates stress and injuries that comprised the physical health of victims (West 2002).

Black feminist researchers encourage us to consider how the combination of race, class, and gender inequalities place African Americans at an increased risk for all forms of violence. In addition, feminist scholars argue that African Americans have experienced a history of racial/sexual violence, for example lynching and slave breeding, as well as contemporary violence in the home (incest, child abuse), in intimate relationships (dating abuse, marital rape), in the workplace (racial and sexual harassment), and community violence. In order to address the unacceptably high rates of black family violence, feminists contend that we must address this web of trauma (West 2002). A growing number of anti-rape activists, both women and men, have devoted their time to this cause. Not surprisingly, their awareness of race and gender oppression inspired them to participate in protest activities (White 2001).

### Conclusion

Despite stereotypes about feminism and the reluctance of some community members to accept feminist beliefs, African Americans have a long history of black feminist activism and relatively positive attitudes toward feminism. In this essay, I explored how a feminist perspective can help us to understand diversity among black families, gender and family roles enacted by men and women, childhood gender socialization, and exposure to violence. In order to heal the dissention in black male-female relationships and strengthen the foundations of our families, there is an

urgent need for "gender talk," which is a critical discussion of gender and sexism in the black community (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003). By beginning a respectful and loving dialogue, feminism can truly become a Black thing.

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