

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Question: I point out to my classes that the labor force participation rate of black mothers has always been far higher than the labor force participation rate of white mothers. I think it's the supposed nonconformism of the black family that has always been of immense interest to policymakers. I've found a study by a demographer who examined census data and discovered that if the ideal family is the first marriage, single bread winner, woman homemaker, minor children in school, then there has never, not for one single year, been a time when the majority of American children lived in the ideal family. True, the majority of white mothers weren't in the labor force until the 1970s. The second bread winner was a kid - and we're talking about white families. The census asked for the occupation of every member of the household over the age of ten. Most kids didn't go to high school until the Depression.

Sharon Harley: That's why I like the work of Joan Williams so much. She argues that we ought to reconsider family in all of its dimensions. We could discuss the stress this middle-class ideal worker places on white middle-class families. Prof. Williams says it's written all over the bodies of white middle-class men - literally, in terms of heart attacks resulting from anxiety about fulfilling that primary bread winner role.

So what I'm trying to suggest is that we open up the entire discussion and, as Joan Scott proposed twenty years ago, eliminate the whole ideal of the non-existent middle-class norm. It's a controlling myth, which brands women who are not on the Mommy track as pathological. Right before this session my

mother and I had to go to the funeral of her friend of forty-five years. That woman had chosen to live in a drug ridden neighborhood so she could take care of her eighty-one year old aunt. Where's the space in public policies for people like that? Clearly, when we talk about family, the assumption is that we're going to talk about the middle-class nuclear norm, and there's something wrong with that.

Question: Did the fact that black women also talked about "getting my manhood" mean they were breaking down gender stereotypes?

James Horton: Both black men and black women used the term manhood, not manhood of men but manhood of the race. Even though black women who pressed for the manhood of the race weren't given the vote in the Fifteenth Amendment, their community did get a kind of representation.

Slavery and segregation tended to focus on making the man less of the stereotypical nineteenth century masculine human being and making him more like the feminine human being. By the same token, slavery was calculated to make the woman less stereotypically feminine. Slave women weren't allowed to stay home and wear the apron and do the cooking for the kids. Slave women were out there when the crop needed to be harvested, were out there plowing or harvesting or weeding or whatever needed to be done. Sojourner Truth used to hold up her arms and say, "I can do as much work as any man."¹

Sharon Harley: The whole concept of manhood and woman was contested. For example, as Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham describes in *Righteous*

Discontent, women used the male-dominated churches and their special relationship with God to redefine their roles within the church. One of my favorite quotes is from a woman who had been traveling all around for the church. Her husband asked her to curtail her missionary work. She replied, “I belong to God first, and you next; so you two must settle it.”²

Part of the reason I expanded my work on black women’s labor to perceptions about wage earning women is because the African-American community has been so silent about gender. It’s almost as if, when you talk about gender, you’re airing the dirty laundry or being a traitor to the race.

But in order to understand the black family, to understand the role of women, to understand what kind of public policies we need, we’ve got to get away from stereotypes and take a good hard look at gender and what people’s lives are really like.

¹ Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (W.W. Norton, 1999).

² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 131-132.