



“Sisters Are Doin’ It for Themselves,” But Could Use Some Help

Fatherhood Policy and the Well-Being of Low-Income Mothers
and Children

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Introduction and summary

One of the challenges in thinking about the relationship between women and the fatherhood movement is two seemingly contradictory notions held by women who consider themselves to be modern and progressive. Put in easily digestible terms, the first notion is embodied in the 1985 hit song “Sisters Are Doin’ It for Themselves” by the Eurythmics and Aretha Franklin. The tune reflects feminist notions about women standing on their own two feet.

This spirit of strength and independence may seem at odds with the second notion of “It Takes a Village to Raise a Child,” a purported African proverb that inspired the title of a 1996 book authored by then-First Lady Hillary Clinton. Although resulting in its own controversy about the relative importance of family versus community, at a minimum the proverb and the book seem to suggest that successfully raising a child is not a mother’s only proposition.

Yet these two progressive views can coexist—that women, including mothers, can make it on their own, and that mothers need a community, including fathers, to raise their kids—because the realities of child rearing suggest that one person (whether female or male) would find it extremely difficult to do it alone. Many mothers rely on the help of their parents, other relatives, and friends. And, as this paper argues, co-parenting relationships can figure significantly into that equation without limiting women’s choices about career and family.

The tension between progressive notions about strong independent women and the benefits they get from help with child rearing is just one philosophical question underlying the debate about the relationship between women and fatherhood policy. Others include:

- Do policies that promote responsible fatherhood fail to recognize that women also face significant financial hardships and structural barriers on the road to self-sufficiency?

- Do all women and families have the same stake in fatherhood responsibility policy without regard to differences associated with socio-economic status and race?
- Do discussions about fatherhood amount to attacks on single mothers?

Although the authors understand the underlying concerns giving rise to these questions, we would answer all of them with a “No.” First, we contend that it’s not necessary to pit fatherhood responsibility policies against the interests of women, especially low-income single mothers who rely on federal social services programs. Rather, fatherhood policy is family policy that benefits all family members, including mothers. Suggesting the need for social services programs that encourage and facilitate fathers’ economic and emotional support for their families need not equate to a lack of recognition of the challenges faced by these women or an indictment against single mothers.

Second, we argue that concerns about male-female family dynamics must become more nuanced, taking into consideration differences based on the socio-economic status, race and ethnic background, and faith traditions. Specifically, the Center for Family Policy and Practice’s work with low-income African American women suggests that they are concerned about the men in their lives. Because many of these fathers are unable (as opposed to unwilling) to support their children or even themselves, these women thought it essential that more low-income men benefit from social services related to employment, housing, and health.

Undoubtedly, the history of this issue is complex, at times including dialogue and legislative proposals that were rightfully of concern to those focused on women’s rights and gender equality. For instance, some conservatives are singularly focused on men assuming traditional roles and responsibilities within families, limiting women’s autonomy and choices about their relationships. These individuals sometimes overlap with other conservatives who use debates about marriage and fatherhood as an excuse to minimize funding for other social services programs that benefit mothers and families, suggesting that all women need is a wedding ring instead of key social programs.

The authors of this paper, and many others who are supportive of fatherhood programs, do not align ourselves with such groups. Rather, we believe in the importance of serving low-income men not only because it helps men and children to achieve better outcomes but also due to the benefits that can be attained by

women. We do not believe that these services should, or necessarily must, equate to limiting choices and life decisions. Nor should they be used as means to limit the funding attached to programs serving women and families more generally.

Finally, we do not believe discussing responsible fatherhood programs amounts to an attack on single mothers—notwithstanding concerted conservative efforts to do just that by associating these women with negative stereotypes such as that of the “welfare queen,” which are not rooted in the realities of poverty or family life. Progressives understand the complexities of the challenges faced by low-income mothers and fathers and are not afraid to promote genuine solutions that address the underlying causes of family disruptions rather than simply finger-pointing, which is why we seek solutions aimed at fathers that will actually help all of these family members.

In our paper, we argue that supporting responsible fatherhood and related programs and services helps low-income mothers (single, married, or cohabitating alike) with the following:

- **Economic stability.** Fathers with more access to effective employment assistance have an increased ability to help mothers with the costs of child rearing. Those fathers involved in the lives of their children are more likely to directly contribute to household income, pay child support, and provide noncash support, minimizing financial burdens on families.
- **Child care.** Low-income mothers struggle to ensure safe and stable child care arrangements for their children. Fathers can help in providing care.
- **Work-life balance.** As mothers struggle to balance the demands of work and family, the contributions of fathers can determine the degree to which family obligations result in some available “me time” for mothers to rest and also to get ahead.
- **Domestic violence.** Programs can help identify and serve mothers and fathers involved in violent situations.
- **Reproductive health.** It is unfair for all the responsibilities associated with family planning and preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases to fall on the shoulders of women. Fatherhood programs can work with men on doing their part.

- **Providing more relationship and family choices.** Poverty often limits women's and men's choices about forming and maintaining relationships and families. Properly designed government family support programs can provide women with more choices regarding the future of their families.
- **Positive childhood outcomes.** Research suggests that fathers can have a positive impact on the academic achievement and behavior of children. Mothers who want to do what they can to ensure positive outcomes for their children may be supportive of fatherhood programs, even participating in some of the services.

Many important federal policies that authorize and fund fatherhood programs are now under debate. President Obama is actively engaged in advancing his proposals around fatherhood and marriage policy, and Congress is pursuing its efforts to reauthorize the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, anti-poverty legislation that also includes the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Child Support Enforcement programs.

We support the reauthorization of these programs and their continued funding, but we also argue in this report that sufficient emphasis must be placed on responsible fatherhood programs that benefit entire families, including mothers. The great potential of many of these services suggests Congress should expand available funding while making important reforms.

Continued vigilance in protecting low-income mothers from domestic violence is clearly necessary, but we must do more to support fathering and provide fatherhood service providers with more training and education related to domestic violence.

The bottom line is this: Increased federal support for fatherhood responsibility programs that help men help their families would alleviate some of the stress and feelings of hopelessness that low-income men of color experience, and by reducing this pressure, social services for men would benefit women and even possibly increase women's safety.

In the interest of listening to, supporting, and advocating on behalf of low-income women, this paper directly investigates the following question: Can expanding social services through fatherhood responsibility policies benefit women?

In pursuit of an answer, this paper first reviews the history of incorporating fathers into social services policy. We then step back to examine the policy debates

about how to best fashion responsible fatherhood programs to meet the needs of today's low-income mothers. We conclude by examining ways in which including men in social services could benefit low-income women, with specific policy recommendations.

This paper focuses on services for men, but we stress throughout that the needs of women must remain vitally important, such that fatherhood programs shouldn't work to the disadvantage of women. Rather, these policies must strive to increase their economic stability, their physical security, and real-life options for families. Our aim is to identify policies and practices that will achieve greater economic and social justice for all members of low-income communities.

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