

Don't Make This Bridge Our Back

By Malika Sada Saar, founder and executive director of the Rebecca Project for Human Rights

For those of us who come from low- and medium-income communities of color, women working as the only or primary breadwinner in the family is not a new phenomenon. In many of our families, there is rarely an economic choice between staying home and raising our children. Indeed, for decades, black, Latina and Asian women have been leaving their own families to cook, clean, and do the child-rearing in the homes of other families.

This role as primary breadwinner is not necessarily a place of power. I am reminded of the image evoked by Cherrie Moraga in the title of her groundbreaking collection of essays “This Bridge Called My Back,” which told the tale of mothers of color journeying into the job market to bridge the worlds of their families with the majority culture’s need for low-wage workers. So often that bridging between home—the barrio, the hood, and other places in America where the poor reside—and the workplace in order to feed one’s family has been a brutal burden.

Sometimes that burden includes violence, derision, and marginalization. There is the undeniable physical and sexual victimization women of color suffer by men to remind them of their place—men who are either their spouses or their employers, or perhaps their ex-husbands or boyfriends. Or sometimes the imperative of work denies mothers of color full engagement with their children. They are absent in the evenings, unable to make PTA meetings, too busy to go over homework assignments, and too tired to simply enjoy their children’s laughter.

Many mothers who are primary or sole breadwinners for their families, especially African Americans, also are derided for emasculating their men, and hence held responsible for the overall pathologies of black America. Rarely are low-income, African American mothers honored for the endless sacrifices they make for their families' health and economic well-being.

The question, then, at this transformative moment in American history, when most women—regardless of race, class, or ethnicity—are poised to become the primary breadwinners in their families, is how we ensure our economic ascent as a place of power, not injury, for all of us? On a policy level, it means passing legislation on health care reform, affordable child care, and comprehensive Early Start and Head Start programs. And it means paid maternity and paternity leave, expanded access to higher education for low-income women, and flexible work hours for low-wage workers.

But we cannot surrender the process of transforming the lives of women and families to government alone. There are the organic networks that ought to be nurtured. It is about the emergence of co-madre—"the mothering with," or "co-mothering"—that we as women across race and income must commit ourselves to. The creation of co-madre communities can be places where mothers help each other out and raise up the sacredness of our mothering.

Claiming our place of power requires that we demand public policies that protect and support all mothers in our capacity as primary breadwinners, and that we turn to each other as women, across the divides of race, ethnicity, and income, to be co-madres. If we can do that, then we will truly transform the United States into a woman's nation—a pro-family nation.

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