

Q&A: Girls ‘Invisible’ in Boys and Men of Color Movement

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Since the Trayvon Martin shooting, communities across the country have begun to speak out about the many challenges that young boys and men of color face, from higher rates of violence and incarceration to poverty, racism and the widening achievement gap in schools. In August, lawmakers in California convened a hearing with the Alliance of Boys and Men of Color, a statewide alliance of youth-led advocacy organizations, to discuss bills aimed at tackling some of these issues. But for Dr. Monique Morris, author of the forthcoming book *Black Stats: African Americans by the Numbers in the Twenty-first Century*, the movement leaves out the issues facing girls and women of color.

New America Media: There is a growing emphasis in this country seeking to address the needs of Boys and Men of Color. Why hasn’t there been a similar push for girls and women of color?

Monique Morris: First, I want to say that there should absolutely be an investment in the wellbeing of males of color. However, that investment should not be to the exclusion of females of color! Some organizations, such as Girls for Gender Equity in New York, The Human Rights Project for Girls in Washington, DC, and the Center for Young Women’s Development in San Francisco are working hard to mobilize policymakers and the public toward the goal of improving the conditions of women and girls of color, but there is



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currently no nationally-coordinated movement to support the healthy development of our girls. Among the bigger obstacles to this movement is the male endangerment rhetoric, which has rendered girls of color invisible.

NAM: How are the challenges they face different from their male counterparts?

Morris: Most of my research and work has been with black and Latina females, who are overrepresented among women in prison and girls in confinement (i.e. detained in juvenile hall). In the numerous interviews and focus groups that I have conducted with these women and girls over the years, I’ve observed that young women of color do not always center their own well-being in their relationships with men and boys in their lives. There has been a stated obligation to “be there” for their male counterparts, even if it meant that their own futures were in jeopardy.

I recently spoke with a girl who admitted that she dropped out of school to spend time with her boyfriend, who had also dropped out. When he started taking advantage of the male-centered improvement initiatives in their community, she thought it was her

a survival strategy, and ended up in juvenile hall.

NAM: More attention is now being paid to issues within the classroom, looking at things like school discipline policies. How do these policies impact women of color?

Morris: There is a tendency to look at the suspension rates of males and compare them to females, which makes it seem as if there is no problem with the use of exclusionary discipline (e.g., out of school suspensions and expulsions) among females. However, when you look at the racial disparities by gender, black girls experience suspension and expulsion at the highest rates among girls. Zero tolerance policies have led to more than 1 in 10 black girls being suspended nationwide. In Oakland, California, for example, the suspension rate for black females is three times the rate for Latinas, and more than seven times the rate for white and Asian Pacific Islander girls.

Some of the most egregious applications of zero-tolerance policies in this country have criminalized black girls in elementary schools. Girls as young as 6-years-old have been arrested for throwing tantrums in their school classrooms, for fighting, or for being disruptive to the learning environment. Older girls of color also experience unnecessarily punitive responses to their behaviors in schools. Black girls have especially been disproportionately suspended from school for behaviors that are subjectively determined worthy of reprimand—for being “loud, defiant, and

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