

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

By Peter Schurman
New America Media

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 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 wellbeing in their relationships with men and boys in their lives. There has been a stated obligation to “be there” for their male coun-

terparts, even if it meant that their own futures were in jeopardy.

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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 responsibility to make sure he arrived on time to his program. She told me that no one, in the months that she accompanied him to the program, asked her why she wasn’t in school. Because there was no real intervention in her life, this girl ultimately participated in the underground economy as

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 precocious” or for being “unladylike.”

NAM: Beyond schools, what other institutions should address the needs of young women of color to put them on a pathway to success? What do you propose they could

do?

Morris: Public sector institutions (i.e., government, nonprofits, and foundations) are important to launching and sustaining critical conversations and interventions that generate new pathways to success for girls and women of color. I must say that mental and physical health institutions are critical to the successful development of girls and women.

Educational institutions could be mindful about the ways in which they unnecessarily criminalize black femininity and develop alternative interventions for girls who are vulnerable to dropping out of school and other forms of victimization. Ultimately, public service sector institutions should work to develop culturally competent and gender-responsive interventions for girls of color, and to engage them in practices that provide them with an opportunity to actively define and address their own conditions. Private sector institutions should also engage in a shared conversation about girls’ pathways to success. Their role as employers and shapers of public perception about the femininity of women of color (via media and advertising) must not be ignored.

NAM: After the Trayvon Martin shooting, parents of young black men referred to “The Talk,” conversations about how to stay safe in a society that sees you as a threat. Is there a similar “talk” parents should be having with their daughters?

Morris: Between 2005-2010, black females age 12 and older experienced sexual victimization at a rate of nearly 3 percent, higher than their white (2.2 percent) and Latina (1.4 percent) counterparts. Females and males experience nonfatal firearm violence at about the same rate (1.6 percent and 1.9 percent per 1000, respectively). While black and Latino males experience fatal firearm violence at higher rates than other segments of the population, the invisibility of female homicide victims is particularly troubling. In the aftermath of the Zimmerman trial, the question was raised whether we would even know Trayvon’s name if he were a female. Where is the movement for

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