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# Unpacking the Social and Economic Disparities Among Disabled Black Mothers



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Black feminist scholarship contextualizes the historical degradation of Black women's bodies in the United States and its impact on contemporary understandings of Black womanhood (hooks; Adrienne Davis; Collins; Harris-Perry). Black women experience more aggressive racialized, patriarchal encounters, societal/cultural shame and economic disadvantages than white women and Black men (Brown, King, and Ransby; Harris-Perry). Nevertheless, this scholarship fails to address the taboo and oppression of disabled mothers within the Black community and greater American culture.

Deploying an intersectional framework, this essay elucidates the connections between Black Feminist Studies and Disability Studies. An intersectional approach accounts for how multiple social identities such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability intersect at the micro- and macro-levels of individual experience to reflect interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw; McCall; Bowleg). Feminist Disability Studies scholarship rejects the dominant notion that women with disabilities are unfortunate, dependent people who cannot function in day-to-day life without a caretaker (Garland-Thomson; Grue and Laerum; Walsh-Gallagher, McConkey, Sinclair and Clarke; Höglund, Lindgren and Laesson). This research emphasizes changing public policy and cultural institutions rather than viewing the problems of disabled individuals as a result of their own supposedly inferior bodies (Garland-Thomson). Feminist Disability Studies contextualizes gender and disability and creates an intersecting framework to understand the differences and relationships of these two identity categories (Wendell; Linton; Fawcett; Garland-Thomson; Hall). Through this theoretical lens, disability is seen as a system for intellectual exploration versus a medical problem or bodily flaw (Garland-Thomson).

Within this essay, I contextualize the

connections between race, socioeconomic status, disability, and motherhood and their combined effect on the experiences of Black mothers. First, I trace the historical and contemporary stereotypes of Black women in U.S. popular culture. This examination increases our understanding of the implicit and explicit role of stereotypes in shaping government policies. Second, I explore Black women's political, social, and economic disenfranchisement, which hinders their upward mobility. Finally, I discuss the impact of stereotypical assumptions concerning Black motherhood and disabilities on the lives of these women and their children. The study contributes to an ever-expanding knowledge base concerning Black families in its examination of the stigmatization and devaluation of poor Black mothers' ability to parent and their access to welfare supports

To better understand the lives of Black mothers with disabilities and their families, I draw upon survey data, existing federal and state policies, and health research. From June 2015 – July 2015, I conducted a pilot survey of the adult children of disabled Black mothers. Participants were recruited through 1) snowball sampling techniques; 2) solicitations on Facebook, including a note with the study's information on the primary investigator's Facebook page; and 3) email. Survey questions were designed to capture the lived experience of these now adult children within their families and provide real life examples of the impact of social welfare policies. I suggest that we need to challenge the status quo in public and health policy, which is "focused on finding simple solutions that are politically feasible and work within existing institutional frameworks and timeframes" (Manuel; See Hankivsky, O. and Cormier).

## **The Historical Political Devaluation of Black Motherhood**

White supremacy regulates Black women's bodies and their reproduction

for capital gain. Beginning under slavery, Black women have been at the root of cultural and political dehumanization (Hernton; Morgan; Collins; Adrienne Davis; Givens and Monahan; Rousseau). The devaluation of Black motherhood occurred through sexual violence enacted upon their bodies by white men and the separation of mothers and children (Mann). Black women were considered factories of future laborers. Thomas Jefferson captures this sentiment, writing, “I consider a woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable than the best man of the farm, what she produces is an addition to the capital, while his labors disappear in mere consumption” (Jefferson). Reflecting on how Black women were only valued for their physical and reproductive labor, Melissa Harris-Perry notes, “The mythology of Black women as promiscuous was important to maintain the profitable exploitation of slave society” (Harris- Perry). The fact that they were seen as sexually immoral reflected how they were viewed outside of the Victorian ideal of true womanhood (Smith; Hernton; Bambara; hooks; McGruder).

Assumptions concerning Black women’s sexuality resulted in the formation of the hypersexual Jezebel narrative, which began during slavery. This stereotype arose to justify the physical, mental and sexual violence and objectification of Black women and their bodies. Consequently, Black women are at risk for abuse from men regardless of race (Cash; Angela Davis). Black women that are sexually assaulted receive little to no attention in mainstream media. And, in instances when these women find themselves in the media, rape culture and stereotypes of Black women perpetuate the notion of being at fault for experiencing sexual assault and rape.

Operating in conjunction with the Jezebel stereotype is the belief that when Black women display mothering tendencies it is towards white children in their care. This role has resulted in the Mammy stereotype – the jovial, asexual

motherly Black woman. Rarely is the Mammy seen taking care of her own family (Morgan; McElya; Ferris Univ Jim Crow Museum; Harris-Perry). Examples of the mammy include Aunt Jemima, the Pine Sol cleaning woman commercial, and the character Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis) in *The Help* (2011). Caring for white children was one of the few employment opportunities for Black women who were working to support their families. This position maintained the class-privilege gap between Black and white women by keeping Black women in nursing/ domestic roles (hooks).

Furthermore, forced sterilization routinely denied Black mothers the right to parent (Roberts; Angela Davis). Compulsory sterilization was legal in 32 states from 1907 until the mid-1980s. Texas biologist and physician Gordon Lincecum proposed the first sterilization bill of undesirables in 1849 (Garcia). This invasive procedure primarily targeted women of color, lower class women, and disabled women. Black women who underwent sterilization were viewed as incapable of taking care of their children, received government assistance, or diagnosed as intellectually disabled. These women often were unaware of the procedure. For example, eighteen-year-old Nial Ramirez was sterilized after giving birth to her son in 1985 (Armstrong). In the first trimester of her pregnancy, a state- appointed social worker threatened that if she did not consent to the sterilization, her mother’s welfare benefits would be suspended. These benefits supported her mother and six siblings. Ramirez recalled the social worker saying, “I had to have this sterilization because if I didn’t, my brothers and sisters would have nothing to eat and no house to live in, and it would be all my fault” (Armstrong). Ramirez further explains that she was told that the procedure would be reversible. Similar to Ramirez, thirteen year old Lela Mae Dunston was sterilized after giving birth to her son. Their experiences are not unique. North Carolina has reported to sterilizing over 7,600 people (Armstrong).

In contemporary society, Black women continue to struggle over their reproductive freedom – the ability to choose when and if they want to have a child. The elimination of reproductive choices for Black women renders them vulnerable to social ostracization, humiliation, and political abuse. Dorothy Roberts argues that Black women’s reproductive liberation is more complex than the legal right and access to abortions. Welfare legislation negatively impacts Black women’s access to safe and affordable healthcare options (Roberts). Black women also find themselves coerced into accepting specific contraceptives such as Norplant and Depo-Provera as a means of regulating their fertility (Angela Davis). Yet Depo-Provera has been linked to dangerous side effects including sterilization and cancer (Angela Davis; Roberts).<sup>1</sup>

Policymakers rely on reified stereotypes concerning Black womanhood to construct stories of what is “reality.” Black women’s economic status is blamed on their alleged fiscally irresponsible, promiscuous ways (Jordan-Zachery). This racist understanding of Black womanhood is rooted in Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Moynihan references the Sapphire image of Black women, who are understood to be extremely loud, aggressive, threatening and argumentative (Jewell). These women emasculate Black men with frequent verbal assaults in a loud animated fashion. Moynihan also accuses Black women of failing to discipline their children, weakening their sons, and defeminizing their daughters. These inadequacies are believed to contribute to Black youth’s educational shortcomings. His myopic view not only suggested that Black women were the cause of their families’ inability to economically progress, but that they were emasculating matriarchs causing Black men to leave them and their children. These perceptions of Black women have been used throughout mainstream culture and in the policy making process.

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1. Given the constraints to their ability to exercise reproductive freedom, some Black women elect not to have children because of the mental, physical and psychological abuse that mainstream American culture and law enforcement inflict on Black bodies. Black women must conduct difficult conversations about racism with their children. This is an indirect way of policing Black bodies. Mothers are faced with the hardship of teaching their children how to operate in a society that historically viewed Black people as incompetent and inferior.

Moreover, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* relied upon a single notion of family – a married, heterosexual family with a male breadwinner and female housewife. Patricia Hill Collins notes that politicians, including Moynihan, created a hierarchy of families, whereby the white heteronormative family served as the example of comparison. Yet, many families of color historically lacked the privilege of fulfilling these traditions because many wives and children worked outside of the home. Black women also depended on other-mothering, where grandmothers, aunts, and sisters served as social supports to Black women regardless of whether the father was present.

The detrimental perceptions of Black women created in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* left an impact on how future policymakers view the state of Black women's economic, and cultural status, while simultaneously adding new dehumanizing narratives of Black womanhood. Twenty years later, President Ronald Reagan echoed the description of Black women offered by Moynihan while governor of California and in his 1980 presidential campaign. Whereas Moynihan used the narrative of the emasculating Sapphire, Reagan pathologized Black women, conflating stereotypes concerning Black women's promiscuity and low socioeconomic status to form the welfare queen archetype. Reagan repeatedly discussed this mythical woman, stating, "She has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards and is collecting veteran's benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income is over \$150,000" (Reagan). The Welfare Queen stereotype stigmatized all recipients as lazy, uneducated, and Black.

American culture created a narrative that welfare is a program designed for poor Black people who lack work ethic and are seeking a handout. At the forefront of this ideology is the Black single mother who has children by multiple men as means to continue

receiving support from taxpayers. This image of the Black woman suggests that she is the cause of her poverty because she lacks the ability to control her fertility (Harris-Perry). For example, Patricia Williams comments, "The signifying power of the black single mother.... As poor, drug addicted, and natively absent... is integral to the public articulation of fetal harm and abuse" (in Bower 1995: 144). Welfare policy is gendered and racialized to incorrectly label all Black women as welfare consumers. For example, 40.2 percent of Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) beneficiaries were white in 2013 in comparison to African Americans, who represent only 25.7 percent of SNAP recipients (Delaney and Scheller).

The welfare queen stereotype erases the history of welfare as a mechanism to support the growth of the white middle class beginning with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies in the 1930s. Linda Gordon writes, "What once meant prosperity, good health and good spirits now implies poverty, bad health and fatalism. A word that once evoked images of pastoral contentment now connotes slums, depressed single mothers and neglected children and even crime" (1). American welfare policies not only created Social Security and unemployment, but new programs also resulted in the Federal Housing Administration's (FHA) establishment of the federal, financial mortgage system. FHA loans launched an entire generation of white home ownership, which established transferrable wealth between generations of white Americans that was routinely denied to African Americans and other families of color.

The misconception concerning who are welfare recipients is paired with American taxpayer concerns about not wanting to give "lazy" people money. According to the Department of Treasury, only 18.7 percent of 2014 taxpayer monies were allocated to Job and Family Security in comparison to the 23.91 percent of taxpayer monies allocated to National Defense. Of the funds allocated to Job and Family Security, only 4.08 percent of the funds supported Food

and Nutrition Assistance, 0.67 percent supported housing assistance, and 0.63 percent supported Temporary Aid for Needy Families. The changes in the distribution of tax dollars to public assistance programs must be considered in light of welfare reforms from the last twenty years. In August 1996 President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, commonly known as welfare reform.<sup>2</sup> Program recipients must work after two years on assistance, with few exceptions. Twenty-five percent of all families in each state must be engaged in work activities or have left the rolls in a fiscal year (Department of Human Services). Single parents must work for at least 20 hours per week the first year, increasing to at least 30 hours per week by FY 2000. Two-parent families must work 35 hours per week (Department of Human Services). This Act passively targeted single mothers in its focus on strengthening family structures and educating people on good moral and purity. The law also altered the amount of time that an individual family could receive federal cash assistance to five years. After this period, individual states have the option of exempting twenty percent of entire government assistance benefits.

### **Motherhood as an Ableist, Class Privilege Construction**

As Black women, overall, experience constraints to their reproductive freedom to parent, disabled women are denied or discouraged from this reproductive role (Garland-Thomson). Disabled women's ability to mother has been challenged by society and healthcare providers (Walsh-Gallagher, Mc Conkey, Sinclair and Clarke; Höglund, Lindgren and Larsson). These mothers often do not feel as if they have autonomy of raising their children. They feel as though they have to go to great lengths to prove that they function "normally" due to a belief that if they do not live up to societal standards, their children would be taken away by states' Child Protective Services programs (Grue and Laerum). Nevertheless, Disability Studies scholarship overlooks how multiple identities (e.g., race or class)

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2. This law changed welfare's name from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

along with a disability affect mothers and children. My research shifts this conversation in its intersectional approach to better understand Black women with physical and intellectual disabilities in its examination of their ability to parent.

This project is in conversation with Jennifer James and Cynthia Wu's discussion of the policing, socialization and political exclusion of the disabled body. James and Wu critically examine how the government allocates funds to mothers with disabilities as funding regulations directly affect their families' access to healthcare, education, and childcare. The complexity of being disabled and a Black mother has often left these women living in impoverished areas with little economic mobility.

Recipients of federal and state disability funds face limitations regarding outside employment. The financial qualifications to receive disability are defined as having limited resources and income, which together cannot gross more than \$2,000 worth of monthly income. In other words, individuals cannot have access to over \$2,000 in stocks, U.S. saving bonds, land, personal property, or anything else that could be exchanged for food and shelter. Recipients also cannot exceed this financial limit from employment earnings or benefits from social security, Veterans Affairs, workers compensation, or unemployment (Supplementary Social Security Income).

Nevertheless, disability funds are oftentimes never enough for recipients. Predatory financial restrictions do not allow disabled mothers to become economically sufficient while receiving disability support. For example, a mother receives \$733 per month in Social Security Disability Income if she meets the disability eligibility regulated by the federal government. This stipend is less than the national rent average as a one-bedroom apartment is \$769 (Toscano).

More importantly, we need to consider this in conjunction with limited housing options for low-income Americans. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Policy Development and Research, twelve percent of public housing recipients include nonelderly disabled adults, while

elderly and/or disabled persons represent 52 percent of all public housing users (United States Department of Housing and Urban Development). In 2012, the National Low-Income Housing Coalition found that 84 percent of disabled persons live in designated housing for low-income disabled adults, 33 percent of Blacks were placed in public housing, and 45 percent of Blacks were voucher users. Housing vouchers are designed for very low-income people, the elderly, and the disabled to have the option to live in single-family homes, townhouses, and apartments within the private housing market (National Low Income Housing Coalition). Public housing agencies pay a portion of the rent, and the individual receiving assistance is responsible for paying the difference. Blacks and disabled individuals are overrepresented in public housing, which is historically unsafe and hazardous. Dilapidated housing conditions also are linked to various poor health outcomes. In the case of disabled, Black women, if their financial and health concerns do not miraculously improve, their fixed incomes will require them to depend on housing assistance for most of the rest of their lives (NLHC).

Similar cases across the world demonstrate how disabled women have not received access to necessary resources to guarantee sufficient housing and healthcare. For example, Canadian disabled women's rights were breached because of the inability to access equitable healthcare. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities found that human rights violations occurred because these women lacked physical, social and psychological healthcare (Gibson and Mykitiuk). Healthcare professionals consistently maintain a negative attitude towards mothers with disabilities, specifically in regards to discussions of family planning, pregnancy, and childbirth (Blackford; Thomas and Curtis; Höglund, Lindgren and Larsson). Examining Sweden and Canada, respectively, Berit Höglund, Peter Lindgren, and Margareta Larsson, and Barbara Gibson and Roxanne Mykitiuk discovered that healthcare providers did not provide their disabled patients with autonomy to choose best practices and procedures. Their combined

results also found that providers were not knowledgeable of disabled women's bodies and "capabilities" to parent a child. Women with disabilities are often viewed as a homogenous group and not as persons with individual needs.

### **Conceptualizing Disability, Blackness and Motherhood**

In order to understand the stigma, social and economic disparities experienced by Black women with disabilities and their families, I surveyed the adult children of mothers with disabilities. Twelve individuals completed the survey. To contextualize these preliminary findings, I draw from the results in Deborah J. Stokes' study *Triple Jeopardy: African American Women with Disabilities*. Stokes gives voice to African American women with developmental disabilities, making policy and community recommendations to better serve and support these women. Although not all of these women are mothers, Stokes' data offers a comparison to better understand the shared experiences of Black women with disabilities.

The preliminary results of my pilot survey indicate that 70 percent of these families went without governmental assistance such as food stamps and housing subsidies. Given that all of my respondents noted that their families' income was under \$50,000 annually, I infer that their families' income was subsidized by employment in the informal sector or formal employment with flexible hours (e.g., low paying janitorial positions and domestic work) (Stokes). According to their children, these mothers did not use government assistance although they met the financial requirements. I recognize that there may have been underreporting of government assistance because of the negative stigma associated with being a welfare recipient.

In addition, survey participants' mothers did not receive disability assistance. Rather their mothers relied on alternative support systems to help with any hardships. Fifty percent found refuge in churches, ten percent from local community or non-profit organizations, and ten percent from the community. Stokes noted similar results, which indicate a consistent trend concerning

accessibility to adequate resources and strong support systems for the women and their families. At the same time, these women experienced social exclusion from their communities, as they were perceived as not contributing to their communities. For example, forty percent of survey respondents noted that their mothers did not receive support at all from anyone outside of the immediate family. Yet this lack of support may be attributed to the fact that only one-quarter of participants noted that community members were aware of their mother's disability. Only 37.5 percent of participants disclosed that some community members were privy to the existence of a disability within the family. Non-disclosure with their communities reflects how children are left feeling defensive, embarrassment, resentment and confusion during childhood and adulthood. Cumulatively, the lack of consistent assistance marginalizes Black women with disabilities and may create mental and emotional despair, which may have long-term health complications.

Moreover, I suggest that shame and fear that Child Protective Services may remove their children stops these women from obtaining these benefits. Discussing her children, a mother notes: "I have two children and I see them on the weekend. My mother has guardianship of my children" (Stokes). Disabled women often undergo indirect screenings such as "off the record" questions by government and healthcare officials to determine if they are capable of supporting their families (Walsh-Gallagher, Mc Conkey, Sinclair and Clarke). These professional opinions are often made without prior knowledge and training that truly reflects disabled mothers, their bodies, and capabilities (Walsh-Gallagher, Sinclair and Mc Conkey; Walsh-Gallagher, Mc Conkey, Sinclair and Clarke ). To this end, there is a lack of programs within the school system to advocate for families with disabled mothers. This does not mean that their mothers were uninterested in their children's educational success. Sixty-three percent of children reported that their mothers were involved with their education, and more than half of my respondents had mothers who maintained involvement in their extra-curricular activities.

Mainstream America is in dire need of addressing the structural racism, economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement and gendered violence against Black women and girls. Popular culture has been impacted greatly by racist understandings of Black motherhood from slavery to present day. Recognizing how these images circulate in mainstream society increases our collective knowledge regarding their implicit and explicit impact on federal policies. We cannot understand the current positioning of Black mothers in the U.S. without critically engaging racist stereotypes of Black women.

Racialized, gendered, and ablest policies create social and economic exclusion for disabled Black women, their children and caretakers. My pilot survey seeks to begin telling the narrative and provide holistic understanding of these women and families. Public policy must reflect the deeply complex lives of disabled Black women and employ an equitable approach to support mothers and their children. Future research should address the effects of how disability and blackness are seen in order to transform the way blackness and disability together is viewed. Policymakers need to root their analysis within a commitment of making disability "normal" and not denigrated in public discourse. Many disabled Black women are concerned that they would experience a backlash for critiquing existing policies similar to the treatment Black feminists receive for speaking out against misogynist and patriarchal behavior (Stokes).

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