

Embracing Men: A Feminist's Transformational Journey

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Veronica stood on the corner looking around nervously. Her two-year-old son clung to her leg, seeking both comfort and warmth. It was a cold night on the street, but ordinary in all other ways. A group of adolescents who considered the street their home, many holding their babies or watching their toddlers play out of the corner of their eye, gathered around us as we distributed sandwiches and hot chocolate. I wandered like usual: speaking with the youth, inquiring about a child's cough, reminding a few to stop at the clinic to keep up on their TB treatment, inviting them to the parenting group I led.

When I spoke with Veronica, she asked if I had seen her boyfriend, Julian. She quickly told me that they had gotten into an argument earlier that led to a physical altercation. Behind the bruises, I could see the fear in her eyes at the possibility of him appearing. Suddenly, Julian rounded the corner and ran straight for Veronica, waving a screwdriver around and yelling. I quickly lifted up their son, shielding his eyes from violence to which he had undoubtedly become accustomed. Several of the male staff members grabbed Julian, calmed him down, and he left as quickly as he had arrived. I held their son and then held Veronica as she cried.

I hoped that she would finally decide that she deserved better. The following week, Veronica, Julian, and their son arrived for tutoring, as they often did. Veronica pulled me aside, clearly elated, as she informed me that they were able to work out their problems. I told her I was concerned because it seemed like they were in a pattern of violence that would likely continue. As Veronica walked away, she said softly, "Don't you see? We're a family."

For a long time, I burned with anger toward Julian. He was not the only one. I was angry at Charles for entering and exiting as he pleased, leaving Jennifer to care for their two children alone, never knowing when she could count on him, but never quite losing hope in him. I was angry at Jose for not controlling his aggression which led him to attack a storeowner, only to return to prison, leaving his girlfriend to raise their three small children alone. The list was long. From my perspective, the young girls would be better on their own. I saw a strength and power, stemming from their sense of

motherhood, that seemed absent in the fathers. Often, I wondered why the girls could manage to overcome their struggles in ways the boys seemed unable to accomplish. All of my time was invested in educating young women, hoping to empower them to live their lives free of the men that seemed to bind them to street life. I avoided the boys, disgusted at their immaturity, their lack of responsibility, and their macho attitude. I often looked at the young boys, being raised on the street, desperately hoping that they would not grow up to be like their fathers, but knowing it was likely they would.

One of the strongest and most important values I hold is a sense of equality. Even as a child, I understood how profoundly unequal the world seemed. I was deeply disturbed by a growing awareness that I was privileged. Why do I get an empowering education, a comfortable home in a safe town, a skin color that automatically affords me opportunities, a family that cares deeply, and the very real chance to be anything I want to be? My life was not free of difficulties, but they seemed trivial compared to most of the rest of the world. This desire for equality led me to social work. I believed then, and still do, that everyone deserves the opportunities that I often take for granted.

Struggling to understand equality of opportunity created a pathway to my feminist values. Much inequality is ingrained in our gender stereotypes. I always knew that I wanted to work and have a family. The model I grew up with taught me that this was possible, but that even if the mother works, she is still responsible for all of the household obligations. It never seemed just that my parents both worked well over forty hours each week, but my mom also cooked, cleaned, drove us to activities, kept everyone organized, grocery shopped, and nurtured. Where is the equality, I often wondered silently.

I began to lose faith in men and the mainstream concept of masculinity even as a child. As I observed women working to support themselves and manage their households, I began to question the role of men. I loved my father and was always grateful to have him in my life, but many of the fathers I observed seemed non-essential in their family structure. Men seemed easily disposable apart from their role as bread-winner. I longed to see families where men and women rejected gender stereotypes and

worked collaboratively toward a healthy home, both contributing economically and relationally to its success.

As I worked and lived in urban, low-income contexts, from as far away as Lima, Peru to here in Detroit, Michigan, I came to view men as the root of the problem. Not only did I consider them dispensable, as I did during my childhood, but I thought that if men were absent, then families would be better, stronger, free of discord and struggle. Any strength, success, or beating of the odds seemed to result from the hard work and perseverance of the matriarch.

This increasingly negative attitude toward men intensified while doing therapy at my field placement last year. The agency provided treatment for adolescent boys aging out of foster care. My caseload consisted of five young men with similar backgrounds: low-income communities, absent fathers, poor educational performance, histories of violence and crime. I worked with them as best I could but quickly realized that I expected them to fail. My negative attitudes about men seriously limited my ability to offer my clients unconditional positive regard, the foundation of an effective client-therapist relationship.

Faced with these unproductive attitudes toward men, I was forced to evaluate their validity. I realized that to be effective as a social worker, I needed to confront my anti-male prejudices. I challenged myself to return to my feminist values, explore the ideas of the women who have shaped the feminist movement, and strive for self-transformation that would radically change the way I interact with men both in social work practice and in my personal life. An intense, transformational journey began.

A deeper look reveals that my notion of discarding men is clearly not an adequate solution to family challenges. A growing number of women raise children without male partners, resulting in the devastating phenomenon known as the feminization of poverty. Fagan, Newash, and Scholesser (2000) studied children in Head Start programs and found that 60% of the children lived in female-headed

households, a 25% increase from a similar study thirty years prior. According to Bennet and Fraser (2000), increases in female-headed households correlate with a similar increase in juvenile crimes. In another study, Richardson (2009) found that juvenile delinquency and increased violence are associated with absent fathers. Higher rates of unemployment are associated with female-headed households as well (Bennet & Fraser, 2000). According to Brady and Kall (2008), in the United States, adult women are about 30% more likely to be poor than adult men. Logically, more female-headed households place more children in situations of poverty. The exclusion of men from families does not strengthen them as I had concluded, but instead places more children at risk and further weakens the fabric of the family.

Like many feminists during the first and second waves of feminism, I understood feminist values within my own socioeconomic context, without consideration of the diverse experiences of others. Thanks to many of the black feminists who have illumined the path, I realize that my version of feminism was in many ways irrelevant in other cultural contexts. Writer Toni Morrison (2008) stated, “I merged those two words, black and feminist, because I was surrounded by black women who were very tough and who always assumed they had to work and rear children and manage homes” (p. 142). In my cultural context, feminism meant rejecting the ideal of the stay-at-home mom, which as Toni Morrison illustrates, is a foreign concept in low-income female-headed families where women have always juggled multiple roles.

For the first time, I came across intersectionality theory, which has been a key conceptual framework for understanding cultural aspects of feminism for the past two decades. According to Mehrotra (2010), intersectionality is the concept of interlocking oppressions, most commonly referring to race, class, and gender, but it has also expanded to include sexual orientation, ability, national origin, and other identities. My feminism led me to consider males only in their singular identity as men, without regard to their other identities. Being male, when accompanied by other privileged statuses like being white, offers significant power and privilege. However, being male in combination with low

economic status and being black creates a unique and intense oppression in our society. I began to understand that my feminism reflected only a majority culture perspective, without an awareness of the intersectionality of oppressed identities.

While my original feminist values had negatively influenced my attitude toward men, I believe that listening carefully to the voices of black feminism has helped me come to a more culturally relevant, empowering resolution which coincides more closely with social work values. Clearly, discarding men from the familial structure has only led to the feminization of poverty and the unraveling of masculinity in low-income, urban communities. Men are needed more than ever in these communities. Instead of downplaying their importance, men must be embraced as equal participants. Once empowered, urban males have the potential to refortify their families and communities.

This is not an easy task. Low-income, urban, minority males face the bleakest outlook of any population group in the U.S. For minority males ages 15 to 24, homicide is the most likely cause of death (Bennet & Fraser, 2000). If they survive the violence in their communities, they face poor educational and work opportunities. Thornberry, Smith, and Howard (1997) found that boys living in low-income areas who associate with delinquent peers, live in female-headed households, and face other risk factors are more likely to become teenage fathers. Richardson (2009) states that almost one-third of African American males will go to prison at some point in their lives in comparison to only 4% of white males. Upon release from prison, finding employment can be challenging at best, impossible at worst. Aronson, Whitehead, and Baber (2003) described the shift toward increasing technology-based employment as a key problem because poor, inner-city schools are unequipped to prepare students for the current job market. If they do find employment, 20-35% of their paycheck can be required as child support payments, and if they are behind on their payments, up to 65% can be garnished (Holzer, Offner, & Sorensen, 2005). This leads some men to avoid legal employment because of the inability to cover their own expenses and fulfill their financial obligations to their

children. Both incarceration rates and child support enforcement, which disproportionately affect minority males, increased significantly over recent decades. In addition, Bennet and Fraser (2000) showed that because of significant financial instability, urban, minority males are much less likely to take on the responsibility of marriage and family, significantly affecting family and community cohesion. According to Bennet and Fraser (2000), because of living in a hostile environment, minority males tend to doubt the intentions of others, lack self-efficacy, and be skeptical of new opportunities. Colliding oppressed identities have resulted in the decimation of self-concept for these disempowered men, most often poor and of color.

Facing a host of life stressors including violence, teenage fatherhood, the criminal justice system, poor educational opportunities, few job prospects, detachment from family due to inability to fulfill perceived financial responsibilities, and poverty, this population desperately needs the attention of effective social workers. They deserve advocates, counselors, and helpers that offer them unconditional positive regard, a realistic understanding of the myriad struggles they face, and a fierce commitment to finding solutions. At times, we lose hope as social workers, or we fail to start with hope at all. The problem seems overwhelming. Social workers that lack cultural competency have contributed to the problem by categorizing an entire portion of our population as unimportant or unable to change. Social workers must instead seize the opportunity to empower individuals and communities away from crisis and toward a better future.

As I have struggled with my own values, attitudes, and prejudices, several solutions seem to jump into focus. First, as social workers, we must work to self-reflect and address any prejudices we have toward clients and their families, recognizing our own cultural contexts and how they influence our interactions with clients. I utilized supervision during my internship to begin to uncover this complex issue hindering my effectiveness as a therapist. We can use other methods such as meditation, our own therapy, journaling, or music to reflect and search within ourselves, confronting negative

thought patterns and cultural incompetencies.

Second, we must recognize ways that social work has excluded men from families and make every effort to find creative ways to incorporate men. For example, within the field of infant mental health, my experience has shown that treatment is almost exclusively provided only to the primary caregiver, the mother in the majority of cases. All new parents need skills and training, but especially new fathers who, because of restrictive gender role expectations, often have little experience with childcare. Fathers deserve an opportunity to learn how to care for their children in effective ways. Many communities are beginning to provide fatherhood initiatives to encourage men to embrace their role as father, obtain the skills and knowledge necessary, and encourage one another in a group setting.

Another aspect of this effort includes the redefining of masculinity within these communities. Programs such as the Real Men intervention found that providing fathers with education about family planning, parenting, and relationship skills failed to produce expected results unless it was paired with helping men reevaluate their traditional norms about masculinity (Daniels, Crum, Ramaswamy & Feudenberg, 2011). Daniels et al. (2011) discovered that young men have high motivation in anticipation of leaving prison to participate voluntarily in programming to better their lives. Within these same groups, they worked to foster a sense of racial and community pride based on positive (community cohesion, importance of family, cultural contributions) instead of negative factors (violence, drugs, power and control) which improved their chances of positive outcomes upon release from jail. There are many other programs that help provide an environment in which men could consider their values, gain new knowledge, and redefine their masculine identity, resulting in individual empowerment and overall community betterment.

In some situations, working to include the biological father in the nuclear family is not possible, because of death or imprisonment. In these situations, much research points to the essential and potentially life-altering role that other significant males can play in a child's life. Bennet and Fraser

(2000) showed that having other significant male relationships decreases a child's risk of many negative outcomes as it helps act as a buffer. Richardson (2009) states that “fatherhood should be defined by its function” (p. 1046), rather than biology, precisely because of the importance of non-biological father figures. While the grandmother can be seen as the first line of defense in many minority families, the uncle, older brother, grandfather or step-father can be seen as a second line of defense, argues Richardson (2009), particularly during the adolescent years, increasing pro-social behaviors, a successful transition to adulthood, and increased social capital. As social workers, we must find more meaningful ways to include non-biological fathers, recognizing their high potential for positive impact. We must empower, support, and educate these powerful change agents.

Lastly, but certainly not least, our role on the macro level is multi-faceted and complex. Many policies contribute to the crisis facing low-income, minority males. Young men in the United States, ages 15 to 24, are 10-30% more likely to be killed than in other developed countries (Bennet & Fraser, 2000). Of these deaths, recently 71% of them are attributed to firearms whereas in the 1980s only 46% of homicides were gun-related deaths (Bennet & Fraser, 2000). Youth are killing other youth disproportionately in minority communities, therefore we must advocate for gun violence policies to ensure this violence stops.

The mass incarceration of minority males is another key area of policy advocacy for social workers. The federal government's War on Drugs attempted to address the rising drug problem over the last several decades, but focused unfairly on drugs predominantly used by minority men, providing stricter sentences for crack cocaine than for other drugs more commonly used by higher socioeconomic classes (Aronson, Whitehead & Baber, 2003). The strict drug enforcement has landed many non-violent minority males in prison, incurred exorbitant cost to the federal government, and destroyed families. Advocacy is necessary to demand that we begin focusing on treatment of individuals with drug addictions, destigmatizing mental illness, and keeping families together.

Finally, policy must be enacted to transform the opportunities that are available for minority youth. Schools continue to provide drastically unequal educations for urban children. The lack of sufficient education robs minority youth of the chance to succeed in higher education, which is increasingly essential in today's workforce. According to Bennet and Fraser (2000), violent youth tend to stop violent behavior by the end of adolescence if they obtain employment. This requires adequate education in addition to job opportunities. While many claim that racism is mostly an issue of the past, the unemployment rates are still disproportionately elevated for black men compared to white men, largely due to how poorly their education prepares them for their futures.

Each of these policies is interwoven. The War on Drugs impacts the incarceration rate, which reduces the prospect of getting employment, which increases the likelihood of turning to drugs or violence. Low expectations in schools lead to youth who lack self-esteem and skills for the working world, which contributes to involvement in gangs and violence leading in many cases to incarceration or death. Social workers must strive to see the larger psychosocial context while advocating for policy changes. Working only with individuals will continue to feel futile at times if larger policies are not addressed.

I never anticipated that my feminist values would create division, but instead, I hope that my current understanding of feminism within an equality framework helps me to see the good that each person or group possesses. In seeking family equality, I have often commended stay-at-home fathers for breaking out of the societal structure that defines men by their earning potential. Families that have found ways to see that each member is fulfilled in their unique ways inspire me. Sadly, along the way, under the guise of feminism, I began to create divisions in my mind that negatively impacted my relationships with clients and my effectiveness as a social worker. I excluded and unfairly judged men who were facing extraordinarily difficult intrapersonal, interpersonal, community, and structural challenges, which were beyond my experience. My struggle for women's rights ignored the complexity

of intersectional oppressed identities, particularly those of minority males. With a new perspective, I am seeking ways to advocate for, include, and empower *all* individuals and *entire* families. In a study by Teti et al. (2011), they outlined five key strengths that minority males exhibited and valued: 1) perseverance, 2) an ability to reflect and refocus 3) efforts to create positive environments and garner support, 4) a commitment to learning from hardship, and 5) an importance of spirituality. When I consider these strengths, I realize that these men would make great feminists and that we have more values in common than I once realized. If, in fact, many of the men I had judged value these things, the problems they face partially lie in the structural inequalities and injustice that this uniquely oppressed group faces, not in the individual men.

Social work is not a profession that allows for stagnation, but instead demands continued self-exploration. Our clients and communities depend on it. As I finish my degree, this journey leads me to reconsider my next steps. I have a renewed energy to struggle against injustice and work for family cohesion in new and different ways. I once thought my values would draw me toward women and children, but now I cannot help but wonder what impact I will be able to make working with men and boys, fathers and uncles, families as whole units instead of divided parts.

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