

## **bell hooks, "Revolutionary parenting"**

### **July 27, 2010**

excerpt from *Feminist theory: from margin to center*. [1984]

During the early stages of contemporary women's liberation movement, feminist analyses of motherhood reflected the race and class biases of participants. Some white middle class, college-educated women argued that motherhood was a serious obstacle to women's liberation, a trap confining women to the home, keeping them tied to cleaning, cooking, and child care. Others simply identified motherhood and childrearing as the locus of women's oppression. Had black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Racism, availability of jobs, lack of skills or education and a number of other issues would have been at the top of the list – but not motherhood. Black women would not have said motherhood prevented us from entering the world of paid work because we have always worked. From slavery to the present day black women have worked outside the home, in the fields, in the factories, in the laundries, in the homes of others. That work gave meager financial compensation and often interfered with or prevented effective parenting. Historically, black women have identified work in the context of family as humanizing labor, work that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care, the very gestures of humanity white supremacist ideology claimed black people were incapable of expressing. In contrast to labor done in a caring environment inside the home, labor outside the home was most often seen as stressful, degrading, and dehumanizing.

These views on motherhood and work outside the home contrasted sharply with those expressed by white women's liberationists. Many black women were saying "we want to have more time to share with family, we want to leave the world of alienated work." Many white women's liberationists were saying "we are tired of the isolation of the home, tired of relating only to children and husband, tired of being emotionally and economically dependent; we want to be liberated to enter the world of work." (These voices were not those of working class white women who were, like black women workers, tired of alienated labor.) The women's liberationists who wanted to enter the work force did not see this world as a world of alienated work. They do now. In the last twenty years of feminist movement many middle class white women have entered the wage earning work force and have found that working within a social context where sexism is still the norm, where there is unnecessary competition promoting envy, distrust, antagonism and malice between individuals, makes work stressful, frustrating and often totally unsatisfying. Concurrently, many women who like and enjoy the wage work they do feel that it takes too much of their time, leaving little space for other satisfying pursuits. While work may help women gain a degree of financial independence or even financial self-sufficiency, for most women it has not adequately fulfilled human needs. As a consequence women's search for fulfilling labor done in an environment of care has led to re-emphasizing the importance of family and the positive aspects of motherhood. Additionally, the fact that many active feminists are in their mid to late 30s, facing the biological clock, has focused collective attention on motherhood. This renewed attention has led many women active in the feminist movement who were interested in childrearing to choose to bear children.

Although early feminists demanded respect and acknowledgment for housework and childcare, they did not attribute enough significance and value to female parenting, to motherhood. It is a gesture that should have been made at the onset of the feminist movement. Early feminist attacks on motherhood alienated masses of women from the movement, especially poor and/or non-white women, who find parenting one of the few interpersonal relationships where they are affirmed and appreciated.

...

Feminist theorists point to the problems that arise when parenting is done exclusively by an individual or solely by women: female parenting gives children few role models of male parenting; perpetuates the idea that parenting is a women's vocation; and reinforces male domination and fear of women. Society, however, is not concerned. This information has little impact at a time when men, more than ever before, avoid responsibility for childrearing and when women are parenting less because they work more but are parenting more often alone. These facts raise two issues that must be of central concern for future feminist movement: the right of children to effective child care by parents and other childrearingers; the restructuring of society so that women do not exclusively provide that care.

Eliminating sexism is the solution to the problem of men participating unequally or not at all in child care. Therefore more women and men must recognize the need to support and participate in feminist movement. Masses of women continue to believe that they should be primarily responsible for child care – this point cannot be overemphasized. Feminist efforts to help women unlearn this socialization could lead to greater demands on their part for men to participate equally in parenting. Making and distributing brochures in women's health centers and in other public places that would emphasize the importance of males and females sharing equally in parenting is one way to make more people aware of this need.

...

Women need to know that it is important to discuss child care with men before children are conceived or born. There are women and men who have made either legal contracts or simply written agreements that spell out each individual's responsibility. Some women have found that men verbally support the idea of shared parenting before a child is conceived or born and then do not follow through.

[...]

Despite the importance of men sharing equally in parenting, large numbers of women have no relationship to the man with whom they have conceived a child. In some cases, this is a reflection of the man's lack of concern about parenting or the woman's choice. Some women do not feel it is important for their children to experience caring, nurturing parenting from males. In black communities, it is not unusual for a single female parent to rely on male relatives and friends to help with childrearing. As more heterosexual and lesbian women choose to bear children with no firm ties to male parents, there will exist a greater need for community-based child care that would bring children into contact with male childrearingers so they will not grow into maturity thinking women are the only group who do or should do parenting. The childrearinger does not have to be a parent. Childrearingers in our culture are teachers, librarians, etc and even though these are occupations which have been dominated by women, this is changing. In these contexts, a child could experience male childrearing. Some female parents who raise their children without the mutual care of fathers feel their own positions are undermined when they meet occasionally with male parents who may provide a good time but be totally unengaged in day-to-day parenting. They sometimes have to cope with children valuing

the male parent more because he is male (and sexist ideology teaches them that his attentions are more valuable than female care). These women need to know that teaching their children non-sexist values could help them appreciate female parenting and could eradicate favoritism based solely on sexist standards.

Because women are doing most of the parenting, the need for tax-funded public child care centers with equal numbers of non-sexist male and female workers continues to be a pressing feminist issue. Such centers would relieve individual women of the sole responsibility for childrearing as well as help promote awareness of the necessity for male participation in child raising. Yet this is an issue that has yet to be pushed by masses of people. Future feminist organizing (especially in the interests of building mass-based feminist movement) could use this issue as a platform. Feminist activists have always seen public child care as one solution to the problem of women being the primary childrearingers. Commenting on the need for child care centers in her article "Bringing Up Baby," Mary Ellen Schoonmaker writes

As for child care outside the home, the seemingly simple concept envisioned by the women's movement of accessible, reliable, quality day care has proven largely elusive. While private, often overpriced sources of day care have risen to meet middle class needs, the inadequacy of public day care remains an outrage. The Children's Defense Fund, a child advocacy and lobbying group in Washington, D.C., reports that perhaps six to seven million children, including pre-schoolers, may be left at home alone while their parents work because they can't afford day care.

Most child care centers, catering either to the needs of the working classes or the bourgeoisie, are not non-sexist. Yet until children begin to learn at a very early age that it is not important to make role distinctions based on sex, they will continue to grow to maturity thinking that women should be the primary childrearingers.

Many people oppose the idea of tax-funded public child care because they see it as an attempt by women to avoid parenting. They need to know that the extent to which the isolated parenting that women do in this society is not the best way to raise children or treat women who mother. Elizabeth Janeway makes this point in her most recent book *Cross Sections*, emphasizing that the idea of an individual having sole responsibility for childrearing is the most unusual pattern of parenting in the world, one that has proved to be unsuccessful because it isolates children and parents from society.

[quotes Janeway]

Ideally, small, community-based, public child care centers would be the best way to overcome this isolation. When parents must drive long distances to take children to day care, dependency on parents is increased and not lessened. Community-based public child care centers would give small children great control over their lives.

Child care is a responsibility that can be shared with other childrearingers, with people who do not live with children. This form of parenting is revolutionary in this society because it takes place in opposition to the idea that parents, especially mothers, should be the only childrearingers. Many people raised in black communities experienced this type of community-based child care. Black women who had to leave the home and work to help provide for families could not afford to send children to day care centers and such centers did not always exist. They relied on people in their communities to help. Even in families where the mother stayed at home, she could also rely on people in the community to help. She did not need to go with her children every time they walked to the playground to watch them because they would be watched by a number of people living near the playground.

...

This kind of shared responsibility for child care can happen in small community settings where people know and trust one another. It cannot happen in those settings if parents regard their children as "property," their "possession." Many parents do not want their children to develop caring relationships with others, not even relatives. If there were community-based day care centers, there would be a much greater likelihood that children would develop ongoing friendships and caring relationships with adult people rather than their parents. These types of relationships are not formed in day care centers where one teacher takes care of a large number of students, where one never sees teachers in any context other than school. Any individual who has been raised in an environment of communal child care knows that this happens only if the parents can accept other adults assuming parental-type care for their children.

...

Before there can be shared responsibility for childrearing that relieves women of the sole responsibility for primary child care, women and men must revolutionize their consciousness. They must be willing to accept that parenting in isolation (irrespective of the sex of the parent) is not the most effective way to raise children or be happy as parents. Since women do most of the parenting in this society and it does not appear that this situation will alter in the coming years, there has to be renewed feminist organizing around the issue of child care. The point is not to stigmatize single parents, but to emphasize the need for collective parenting. Women all over the United States must rally together to demand that tax money spent on the arms race and other militaristic goals be spent on improving the quality of parenting and child care in this society. Feminist theorists who emphasize the hazards of single parenting, who outline the need for men to share equally in parenting, often live in families where the male parent is present. This leads them to ignore the fact that this type of parenting is not an option for many women (even though it may be the best social framework in which to raise children). That social framework could be made available in community-based public day care centers with men and women sharing equal responsibility for child care. More than ever before, there is a great need for women and men to organize around the issue of child care to ensure that all children will be raised in the best possible social frameworks; to ensure that women will not be the sole, or primary, childrearsers.