

Choices Men Need to make in the Future

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**Rethinking Choice for Men and Polarization Among Women:
Transcending Polarized Thinking About Men and Women and Women
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PRESENTATIONS

Walter L Williams: I want to introduce four different topics relating to choices men should make in the future, The first topic I want to address concerns choices facing men in our society. I would specifically like to provide some cross-cultural and historical context.

The first choice I want to talk about is men's labor and employment roles as a gendered subject. When we think about choices for men, we know that traditionally men have had more choices in the kinds of work they do than women have had, even in today's society. Men can work in many more different professions and careers than women. Their choices are more widely distributed. In one sense, men have had many more choices, but in another sense, men's choices have often been restricted within certain parameters, especially the parameter of what is considered a successful man, the idea that a man is only considered successful within the context of a certain kind of job.

While the women's movement has certainly been justifiably reacting against being stereotyped as a "sex object", a number of men are starting to react against being stereotyped as a "success object." Part of the men's movement has been to question some of this overriding emphasis on a masculine identity being tied up with success in one's career. The men's movement has been questioning the world of pressure put on a lot of men in this traditional role in which he is supposed to be the sole provider within the family. Historically, and cross-culturally, when we say this is the men's role, I think we have to be aware that the reality is [that] this role where the man is the breadwinner of the family is actually a relatively recent creation in human history. In most cultures,

women have been as active as men or more so, in providing subsistence for the family.

The general division of labor in American Indian cultures, oversimplifying it, is that men do the hunting, women do the farming or the gathering of wild plants. [Women often] are gathering more than half of the food sources for the family. Even in our own Western historical background, the economic role of women on subsistence farms was much more economically important to the economic success of the family, specifically women's role in preserving food; that is, making food last from one harvest to the next was just as important as the harvest itself.

I certainly saw this in my work in Indonesia, In the rural areas, they still live in an agrarian society where women are out on a daily basis, working in the rice paddies. In addition to selling foods in the market, women handle the income of the family, and there is a much more balanced situation than what we have seen in roles where the idea of the man is that of the one who brings in all the bread. Instead of the breadwinner, it is the family as a whole unit working together to be bread growers.

Today our society is returning to this kind of pattern, of a wider distribution of subsistence from different members of the family. As women take on more jobs outside the home, I think it is important for us to see this as more of an anthropological and historical return to the norm of the entire range of history rather than as two-career families [being unprecedentedly new].

The second area I want to touch on is now that women are out in the job world, the question of who is going to do the work at home becomes central. We have seen a lot more questions and choices come up for families concerning domestic division of labor. Of course, we all know about the idea of women's "second shift" (Hochschild, 1989) and how, as women have moved into traditional areas of men's work, we are only beginning to address the need for men to take on more of the responsibilities that have been traditionally defined as "women's work." In this context, I think that the question of the domestic division of labor follows the changes in career patterns. This issue has prompted a questioning of the ideals of what is considered masculine as far as work is concerned. It is economically inevitable with the nature of work changing so rapidly.

The area of choices for men has expanded far beyond the economic issues of work, whether it is career or domestic. More and more men have begun to change on an economic level, and they are also starting to change and face new choices on an emotional level as well. This leads to the third area I want to

address in terms of new choices for men, and that is the idea that men are now more emotionally open in dealing with their inner lives.

In many ways, the recent changes in the society and the culture have pointed out that the traditional notion of what a real man is places him in a straitjacket. A "real man" is not supposed to cry, feel weakness, vulnerability, and all of these things men were socialized into. We all know now that a lot of these suppressions of one's human emotions, especially when combined with unrelieved stresses on the job, can lead to very serious health consequences. So I think that a lot of men are starting to question these issues. I think the majority of men who are addressing these emotional issues are probably doing it as a response to the critiques of their life style by their wives or their lovers.

I would submit that the men's movement has learned the most on this issue from the gay community, which has had a long standing critique of the entire masculine stereotype. It is not just a question of men being able to be more emotionally open to women, but also being more emotionally open to men. I would say that, as a gay man myself, I must confess my amazement at the difficulties I have seen a lot of heterosexual men going through in learning how to be emotionally open to another man. I remember at one of the men's movement meetings, where research was presented on how men's lives are structured in societies where women and men interact on a much more equal basis than in this society, the researchers were looking at societies where women do as much work outside the home as men, where men's friendships are not crippled by homophobia, where non-homophobic societies allow men and women more socially acceptable choices in their gender roles, in their sexual and affectional feelings, than in our society. I think that whenever we discuss a lot of these issues we need to put them in these larger contexts of looking at cultural variability and changes through historical times. I think we can learn a great deal from this approach.¹

Williams: In terms of the comment that was made a moment ago about looking at forces, it really is important for us to think about the ways in which our particular culture restricts our choices. For example, in the discussion about choices in balancing child care and career, we tend only to think about the nuclear family. In many cultures, perhaps most, child care is not something that is limited to the nuclear family. In the case of many societies, and matrilineal societies, it is the mother's brother who is the crucial relative. Child care is handled by grandparents in the vast majority of societies. This is typical in many American Indian cultures, where once an infant gets past the nursing

stage, it goes to live with its grandparents and they are much more important than the mother and father who go out during their working years and return to care for their grandchildren. The elderly are considered better at taking care of children because they are wiser, have more life experience, and do not experience all the emotional traumas that younger working adults have.

One thing that we do in this society is completely miss the great potential of the elderly in terms of child care. There is a very small program in Los Angeles called Foster Grandparents. This is an example of opening up alternatives.

1. [Publisher's note: The following did not appear in the transcripts from the taped sessions but is included by Walter L. Williams as an essential addition.]

The fourth topic I wish to address in choices for men is the responsibility of adult men to mentor and assist adolescent males in their psychosocial development. Cross-culturally, in almost all societies around the world, adult males are heavily involved in the education, training, apprenticeship, mentorship, and close emotional bonding with boys, especially from ages 10 to 20. When this does not occur, inadequate socialization of the next generation of males results, and tragedy ensues. As an anthropologist, it seems to me that one of the most unique things about contemporary North American culture is the extreme separation between the generations. Because boys do not have much close bonding with adult males, they turn to their peer groups and the mass media for emotional support and modeling. The violence in the media, especially emphasizing its connections between "being a real man" and being tough and violent, drives home a distorted message to youth about what a man should be. Unfortunately, the few institutions in this society for intergenerational bonding are often of a military character.

What we need much more in the future is for feminist men to take a more active role in establishing intergenerational connections with adolescent boys, to teach them that manhood does not necessitate being dominant over women and violent to each other. There has been a lot of attention to fatherhood in the men's movement, but practically no attention to other roles for men interacting with boys. Yet, fathers alone cannot provide the total socialization process that is necessary. In other cultures, parents are not the only adults involved in child rearing. A whole slew of people—extended family relatives, adult leaders of age-grade and initiation societies, spiritual leaders are heavily involved with adolescents. There cannot be adequate socialization of boys without this active

involvement beyond the level of the nuclear family. Our focus on nuclear family alone is a great weakness.

Of course, the great fear that has inhibited the development of intergenerational ties between unrelated men and boys in contemporary America is homophobia. This is particularly true in the gay community, where gay men are so wary of being accused of being child molesters that they shy away from any active involvement with youth. The extreme resistance of the Boy Scouts and Big Brothers organizations to gay men as leaders is indicative of this homophobia. As a result, many gay who could make significant contributions to the improvement of the next generation are underused. Especially for homeless children and those without fathers, an important potential resource is lost. While unwanted sexual imposition and the rape of children are serious problems that need to be addressed, an unfortunate side effect of the child abuse focus is to inhibit many men from involvement with youth. An anthropological perspective suggests that any society that does not promote wide involvement of many adults in nurturing the young will surely promote inadequate socialization, violence, and tragedy. These are choices that men—especially feminist men who are committed to building a better future—must think about and confront.

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