

## Equality does not mean attacking male self worth

Written by RaShya M. Cunningham  
Friday, 02 September 2011 09:50

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*After reading a piece in Insight News (MN Metro Vol. 37 No. 28, pg 10) last month that discussed global stress levels of women and requested additional help from men, I thought it was an appropriate time to elaborate on what that help might look like. I have written a piece that elaborates on some of the ways shifts in behavior and thinking can contribute to a reduction of stress levels amongst women, Black women in particular.*

Many writers have devoted their talents to the pressures facing Black women today. They explain the various duties she's expected to fulfill and how those duties often compete with one another, necessitating an internal conflict. Many scholars believe that the internal conflict often manifests itself externally within the quality of her romantic relationships. From prioritizing her identity so that race takes precedence over gender to being a mom, wife, daughter, professional, soror, & church mother, Black women face mounting pressure in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, many men dismiss these writings as baseless "male bashing" or "encouraging women to emasculate men" instead of as informative about the current state of Black women. In the wake of these writings, including last month's piece by Cheryl Pearson-McNeil, "*Ladies, it's not just you! Globally, we're all stressed!*" (where she accurately noted "And yes, we want just a tad bit of help from the fellas' time to time") I thought it would be appropriate to explore the fellas' role a little more and comment on what their help may look like.

Much to-do has been made about the role that Black men play in the (un-) balancing act of Black women. Black women everywhere, from all walks of life, are calling on Black men to abandon traditional gender roles in hopes of a more balanced family life that leaves her less stressed. The follow-up question of Black men is then often "well what do you want us to do exactly to help fix your problem?" and while this is highly circumstance specific, there are a few general shifts in behavior and thinking that Black men must take regarding this matter if we are to progress as a community. Below I list some of the most pressing things in an effort to provide some clarity.

**1) Break the gender role mold, it's hard but necessary.** Increases in the educational levels and earning potential of women have caused the dynamics of relationships to democratize. This democratization has helped to encourage a shift away from traditional gender roles. Men must begin to alter their approach to the relationship so that it is more heavily dependent on who

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each person is as an individual and not on what has been historically associated with gender. Is she better with the money? Then perhaps she should make the financial decisions for the home. Is he better with child rearing? Then perhaps he should play a more prominent role in parental affairs. Instead of women being limited to the domestic arena (which has never really been the case for Black women who have historically always had to work) and leaving the “business” of the home to the husband, women are more capable and more expecting of an equal role in all aspects of the home. This includes a man who is willing to be more active in the domestic responsibilities. The more amenable men are to these societal changes, the easier transitioning will be for our entire community.

**2) Women’s issues are not her problem they are the family’s problem.** As a family unit, no one person is more important than any other. The strength of the entire unit depends on the strength of each member. If the entirety of any one member’s problems is put on them alone to deal with, it weakens the whole family unit. Accordingly, women struggles are easier to bear when spread across the family instead of being shouldered completely by her. It is essentially impossible to share in a burden that men cannot recognize or do not believe is real. She cannot come home and express her frustration about her boss that makes inappropriate sexual advances if he does not believe in sexual harassment in the work place. She cannot tell him that colleagues talk over her in board meetings and she believes it is because she is the only woman (of color) if he believes that her job is “men’s work” or that “a woman is to be seen and not heard.” She cannot collapse on her bed after working twelve hours on a death penalty case if her mate has defined her worth as his wife by her ability to be domestic and her willingness to obey. She cannot make him better by challenging him when he is wrong if he views any opposition from her as an attempt at emasculation. Lastly, she cannot strive to reach her full professional potential if he has expressed an issue with her earning more or being more successful professionally. These things are essential to personal fulfillment. Feeling secure, having friendship, and being respected are all generally accepted by psychologists as fundamental human needs and where are they more critical than in the home?

**3) Learn about feminism, particularly how it’s been nuanced by race.** Many of these root issues and their consequences have been discussed at length by some of the most brilliant feminist scholars in the world. Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill, and bell hooks (all lower case on purpose) have been part of the forefront of Black feminist thought for quite some time now. Catherine Mackinnon, Judith Butler, & Carole Pateman have all helped shape public debate in America regarding feminism. Ideas surrounding the matrix of domination, sexual harassment in the workplace, and the assumption that Black women’s liberation from sexual and racial marginalization is implicit in the efforts pushed by Black men and white women give this debate context and will assist in a genuine understanding to facilitate healthy and productive discussion between husband and wife.

**4) This isn’t a zero-sums gain.** Understand that her quest for equality is not an effort attack her mate’s worth or position in the home. Black men have frequently dismissed any notion of male privilege in an effort to emphasize racial disparities. The racial struggle for equality, however, was largely characterized by masculinity. Black women, in turn, have been expected to prioritize the components of their identity where race takes precedence over gender. This causes a suppression of the femininity of Black women or Black feminist urges and that’s

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frustrating. This frustration affects our mental health, interaction with our male counterparts, and our ability to maximize effectiveness in and outside the home. Male privilege in the Black community is exacerbated by refusal to acknowledge its existence and refusal to assist in the fight against sexism.

**5) Be a partner not a dictator.** The relationship is a team and (despite tales to the opposite) women do not want to be dominated. Strength is attractive but that's something different than living with a tyrant. Jean Jacques Rousseau, a great political philosopher, once said that taking away someone's liberty is anti-human. Many believe that bondage, in any form, is the anti-thesis of being human. Seeking to conquer a woman, on any level including her thoughts, actions, or speech, is a form of restraint that many men would be unwilling to submit to. This kind of approach likely worsens the internal conflict and frustration she's already experiencing. It is extremely difficult to feel like a partner if she's being treated as a subordinate, especially when it's for his ego purposes.

**6) Read the whole Bible verse.** Many men justify authority in the home by using some distortion of divine order. The Bible verse that calls for women to submit to men also requires a husband to submit to his wife.

**7) Ask her about her professional goals, or goals outside of the home, then support her in those endeavors the way you expect to be supported.** If he sees that she's really active in Church then he can express his interest (in her not necessarily in church) by volunteering to go to church. If she's working extensively with a non-profit on a benefit, then he can offer to work security to show that he supports her. If she's writing an article then his willingness to proof read it for her re-enforces the idea that they're a unit. Conversely, involve her in "male stuff" to the degree both people feel comfortable. This can help deconstruct the meme that women have a "place" that they must stay in. If he is a basketball fan (and she can sit through a game without falling asleep or asking a million questions) then taking her to a game and enjoying her as a friend instead of treating her attendance as an obligation because she's his partner can help create a more equal environment.

**8) Be who you are, not what you think women want.** It's so important that we pause to consider the influence cultural and societal messages have on the beliefs that we hold dearest. It is naive to believe that in a society where what you're worth is defined by what you have, promiscuity has become a testament to masculinity, and power is valued above humility that those things have not affected how we all perceive the value of our relationships with one another. Men taking the time to analyze this critically can provide insight about what he truly considers important and those things that he's more willing to relinquish because they are superficial or artificial. Popular culture has weighed in heavily about what (Black) men are supposed to be. This is often perpetuated by our own circles that are also heavily influenced by the societal messages. Reaching a point of balance and tranquility in romantic relationships, however, involves reconciling who we actually are, with who we believe we are, and with whom we'd like to be.

**9) Lastly, don't let your quest to balance the roles and authority in your home be an invitation to go to the extreme and reject all social norms.** As I stated at the outset, this is

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HIGHLY circumstance specific. If some things work for you and your wife and happen to fall into traditional gender roles-don't go fixing something that isn't broken. Make a sincere effort, however, to ascertain whether she's really happy. Women have spent decades masking our frustration and internal conflict for the sake of the family. This has often been at the expense of the family though because when we suffer, the family suffers. Social norms have influenced us all on some level. I consider myself a feminist but still look forward to cooking, cleaning, and having a husband & kids. I don't see anything wrong with being a domestic wife or with my (future) husband bringing me flowers just because. More important than ideologies, however, will be his willingness to compromise, relinquish control, and support my goals as if they were his own.

*"RaShya Cunningham is a second-year law student at The University of Minnesota. She is a native of Toledo, OH and received her B.A. in Political Science and MBA in Finance from the University of Toledo. She is an NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Earl Warren Scholar and the 2011 Fredrikson & Byron, P.A. Minority Scholar. She believes that civil rights are human rights, anything is possible with the right shoes, finance rules the world, and the law can change anything."*