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USA

Moynihan's Anti-Feminism

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The Moynihan Report naturalized patriarchy and rationalized inequality. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 government report, "The Negro Family," argued that the "unstable" family structure of many African Americans "as reflected in high rates of female-headed families and out-of-wedlock births" was the primary barrier to attaining racial equality.

For half a century, the Moynihan Report [has been](#) used to justify racial and class inequality.

Today, on the report's fiftieth anniversary, Moynihan's conclusions have [bipartisan support](#). Conservative think tanks celebrate their supposed prescience. Conservative pundits and politicians use the report's logic to argue that the blatant injustices recently highlighted in [Ferguson](#), [Baltimore](#) and elsewhere result from family structure, not exploitation and oppression.

Liberals claim Moynihan for their camp, as well, correctly pointing out that he was a liberal who advocated expanded jobs measures. But in doing so, they avoid challenging his flawed understanding of racial inequality as rooted in family structure rather than in political economy and institutional racism. Contemporary liberals, concerned with fixing a "culture of poverty," also forget that Moynihan's assumptions were deeply embedded in mid-twentieth-century liberalism, which advocated a ["family wage"](#) for men that made women economically dependent on their husbands.

In the 1960s, many feminists recognized the flaws in Moynihan's analysis. To African-American feminists in particular, Moynihan propagated a pernicious myth of black "matriarchy" that combined racism with sexism. They noted that many male Black Power radicals shared Moynihan's idea that achieving racial equality required black men [to be patriarchs](#). For instance, African-American activist [Pauli Murray](#) was outraged when she first read in Newsweek about the Moynihan Report and how it endorsed increasing economic opportunities for African-American men at the expense of jobs available to African-American women.

Born in 1910, Murray spent her career combating both the racial discrimination of Jim Crow and the gender discrimination she termed "Jane Crow." A single African-American woman frustrated by the male monopoly of her chosen profession of law, Murray identified with "the class of unattached, self-supporting women for whom employment opportunities were necessary to survival . . . the ones most victimized by a still prevalent stereotype that men are the chief breadwinners."

Writing to Newsweek's editor, Murray questioned Moynihan's assumption that black women claimed a "disproportionate share" of white-collar and professional jobs versus black men. Moynihan's talk of African-American "matriarchy," she complained, did "a grave disservice to the thousands of Negro women in the United States who have struggled to prepare themselves for employment in a limited job market which . . . has severely restricted economic opportunities for all women as well as for Negroes."

Unlike Moynihan, Murray applauded African Americans' relatively gender-equal educational attainment, particularly since so many African-American women served as heads of family. Black women's economic achievements, Murray insisted, did not cause black men's low economic position. "It is bitterly ironic," she protested, "that Negro women should be . . . censured for their efforts to overcome a handicap not of their making and for trying to meet the standards of the country as a whole."

Newsweek refused to publish Murray's letter, and Murray's critique of Jane Crow was largely suppressed or ignored during early public debate about the Moynihan Report. Nevertheless, Murray foreshadowed important feminist challenges to the male-breadwinner ideal stimulated by the report.

In the mid-1960s, feminists organized to demand equal access to employment, challenging systematic gender discrimination that reserved the best jobs for men on the grounds that they were the primary supporters of their families. Murray and others argued that the 1964 Civil Rights Act would only benefit African-American women if it prohibited both racism and sexism. While the act did prohibit gender discrimination in employment, feminists had to pressure the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to fully enforce it, as administrators initially focused solely on racial discrimination.

In 1966, Murray, Betty Friedan, and others [founded](#) the National Organization for Women (NOW) to push employment rights for women. Today, the mainstream feminism NOW represented in the Sixties is often regarded as elitist, solely concerned with securing rights for affluent white women, but in reality, the campaign for equal employment opportunities benefited all women workers, especially those who could not rely upon the family wage system.

[Mary Dublin Keyserling](#), head of the Women's Bureau in the Department of Labor from 1964 to 1969, shared NOW's critique of the Moynihan Report and resented Moynihan's dismissal of equal employment for women. Keyserling was part of a small network of white feminist opponents of the Moynihan Report who served in the Johnson administration. Keyserling's roots were in a different liberal tradition from Moynihan's — she had been integral to a circle of left-liberal feminists in the 1930s and 1940s who worked within government to combat gender inequality along with class and race inequality.

Like other feminists, Keyserling offered a different vision from Moynihan of how to help lower-class women. Instead of creating male-headed nuclear families, she believed public policy should improve women's wages so they could better support families on their own. Though Keyserling worried about "family breakdown" among African Americans, she thought it absurd to cite the wage labor of African-American women as its cause. She believed that African-American women's economic contributions were a "stabilizing and enriching factor" for families.

Keyserling was particularly alarmed by the "assurances" of a Washington, DC job training center: "We are not encouraging women. We're trying to reestablish the male as the head of the house." To this she objected that it was crucial to provide job opportunities to African-American women since so many of them supported their families on low-wage jobs. She pleaded, "let us not fall into the error of believing that we solve an unemployment problem by trying to take one group of people out of jobs they are now in and which they need desperately, in order to open employment opportunities for others."

The Moynihan Report also angered Martha Griffiths, Democratic representative from Michigan and key proponent of the feminist Equal Rights Amendment. In a letter to Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz publicized in the press, Griffiths protested, "It is high time to disperse the syrupy miasma flowing from the Moynihan report that 'Negro women have it good,' when the facts are just the opposite and produce detrimental effects on their economic progress." Griffiths slammed the Department of Labor for focusing exclusively on African-American male unemployment, ignoring similarly high rates of joblessness among African-American women.

When Moynihan learned of Griffiths's letter, he requested a copy. Misreading her opposition as misunderstanding, Moynihan tried to convince her that "part of the outburst against that report of mine came from a kind of fire-breathing feminist type who is fighting against attitudes that simply no longer exist." Moynihan was so steeped in family wage ideology that he could not comprehend why feminists objected to targeting job opportunities solely at African-American men.

Merrilee A. Dolan's 1971 position paper (commissioned by NOW) castigated Moynihan's myopic focus on the male-breadwinner family: "His entire report is a strong statement on the desirability of patriarchy. It is a plea for the government's poverty policies to strengthen the patriarchal system and leave women to the mercy of a man's economic support." That no one yet had publicly criticized the report as a "pure slander of women" proved "just how

patriarchal our society is.”

Dolan's judgment of the Moynihan Report was unequivocal: “nearly everything imaginable is wrong with it.” Her paper reflected the influence of African-American feminists (including Murray, whom she cited) and was particularly inspired by the welfare rights movement, which called attention to the economic exploitation of poor women, especially women of color.

Dolan reiterated the movement's focus on poverty's structural causes: “People are poor for one reason — the economic system in the United States is not structured to eliminate poverty, and it is not intended to be. It depends upon a cheap reserve of labor — extracted primarily from women and minorities and especially minority women.”

Unlike earlier feminists such as Murray, Dolan saw women's unequal economic opportunities as part of a broader system of male domination, and the Moynihan Report as an attempt to impose the patriarchal family model upon poor African-American women.

“Government meddling in women's lives to try to force them to hook male — breadwinners,” she declared, “is certainly totalitarian, even if it is done through economic coercion measures.” Unlike Moynihan, Dolan advocated policies to enable female financial self-sufficiency so that a woman could make her “own decisions about how and with whom she shall live (and sleep).”

On Moynihan's failure to support child care centers, Dolan remarked, “Moynihan would prefer to avoid this expensive proposition and force women to compete for mates — no matter their personal preference.” Again taking her cue from African-American feminists, Dolan challenged Moynihan's language of “illegitimate” births, claiming the term should be abandoned as it “degrades both women and children who are not the property of a man” and prized “legal status on a piece of paper” above the love and care for children.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, radical African-American feminists battled the Moynihan Report in a proxy war against the patriarchal ideals of African-American men. By criticizing the Moynihan Report, black feminists such as [Frances Beale](#) challenged the black male radical who “when it comes to women . . . seems to take his guidelines from the pages of the Ladies' Home Journal.”

The report provided an indirect target for black feminists wary of alienating black male radicals, whom they saw as crucial allies in the fight against racism. Highlighting black male radicals' commonalities with Moynihan would force them to reexamine their gender ideology. Far from being part of a distinctively African-American culture, black feminists argued, patriarchy was simply the white middle-class ideal.

Black feminists pointed out that African Americans who complained about “emasculatation” and “matriarchy” agreed with Moynihan. Joanna Clark compared “the brother nattering away about how we've been lopping off balls long enough, it's time to stand aside” with “people like Moynihan carrying on about our matriarchy and [urging black women to] confine ourselves to standing behind the man of the family.” For black feminists, the Moynihan Report illustrated the interconnected oppression of African Americans, women, and the poor. They found its racism, sexism, and defense of capitalism inextricable.

In the late 1960s, feminists were not the only vocal critics of the nuclear family norm. They were joined by a growing number of men who rejected the Moynihan Report's equation of masculinity and breadwinning.

In 1968, black sanitation workers [on strike in Memphis](#) carried posters reading “I Am a Man,” powerfully conveying

their demand to be treated with dignity, and signaling their association of masculinity with breadwinning and men's inability to support their families as an indictment of economic inequality. Yet, around the same time, critics began challenging the conception of masculinity "illustrated by the Moynihan Report" that valorized financially supporting a dependent wife and children.

African-American writer [Albert Murray](#) questioned whether middle-class masculinity was worth emulating. Moynihan, he claimed, "implies without so much as a blush that all the repressions, frustrations, and neuroses of the white Organization Man add up to an enviable patriarchal father image rather than the frightened insomniac, boot-licking conformist."

Male homosexuality was an important subtext in discussions of black masculinity prompted by the Moynihan Report. Moynihan relied on the postwar social science tradition that viewed black men as prone to homosexuality because of their inability to play conventional patriarchal roles.

Though the report did not explicitly mention homosexuality, it linked masculinity to supporting a woman financially, and in a 1966 report to the Carnegie Foundation, Moynihan argued that black male homosexuality endangered his goal of increasing the number of black male breadwinners. Moynihan specifically worried about the large number of incarcerated African-American men because he feared prison might turn them gay.

For some critics, the Moynihan Report's plan to use the military to bolster African-American masculinity was the report's most disturbing aspect. The [escalation](#) of the Vietnam War after 1965 dramatically altered the context of Moynihan's suggestion, and although he never enthusiastically supported the war and had turned against it by 1967, Moynihan continued to push for the army to recruit more African-American men because soldiering was historically "a path of upward mobility for those born rude and poor." Moynihan believed military service would pave the way for African-American success as it had for him and other white ethnics who served during World War II.

The report and Moynihan's earlier arguments in a 1963 government report, "One-Third of a Nation," shaped government policy. In 1966, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara announced [Project 100,000](#) to enable those who failed the selective service exam to enter the armed forces.

To publicize the program, the Department of Defense claimed that military service would aid disadvantaged Americans, though they mainly needed more men to fight in Vietnam. The program failed as an antipoverty measure but succeeded in ensuring that working-class and black Americans bore the brunt of fighting in Vietnam "Project 100,000 recruits suffered twice the death rate of American troops as a whole.

Feminist critiques synthesized various challenges to the Moynihan Report, pointing out its dehumanizing pathologism, support for patriarchy, and rationalization of race-based economic inequality. In the face of these criticisms, Moynihan moved rightward. By the late 1960s, he became increasingly skeptical of the federal government's ability to enact social reform.

By the 1970s Moynihan had developed into one of the most prominent members of a powerful group of [neoconservative intellectuals](#) "onetime liberals who rushed to protect the social order against the growth of left-wing social movements such as Black Power and feminism. For neoconservatives, radical criticism of the Moynihan Report indicated the need to defend bedrock American values such as the nuclear-family norm.

But for feminists and their allies, the cocktail of destructive assumptions underlying the Moynihan Report highlighted the importance of challenging gender and racial oppressions simultaneously. As their criticisms of the Moynihan Report suggest, those who challenge inequality today should not limit their ambitions to the faulty aspirations of

postwar liberalism.

[Jacobin](#)

Adapted from [Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and Its Legacy \(University of Pennsylvania Press\)](#).