

THE Nation.

Nightline asks why black women can't get a man

Melissa Harris-Perry

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The never-ending story "[Why Can't a Successful Black Woman Find a Man?](#)" received another public forum on Wednesday night. This time it was neither BET nor TV One spewing the oft repeated statistic that 43% of black women have never been married. This time it was the more surprising venue of ABC News' *Nightline* insisting that a crisis exists because 70% of professional black women are without husbands. The conversation itself was far more dismal than these figures. The serious, interesting and sensitive social and personal issues embedded in these statistics were hijacked by superficial, cartoonish dialogue that relied heavily on personal anecdotes and baseless personal impressions while perpetuating damaging sexism.

Wednesday night's program was co-hosted by comedian Steve Harvey and ABC News *Nightline* Correspondent Vicki Mabrey and welcomed guests Sherri Shepherd ("The View"), Jacqui Reid (journalist), Jimi Izrael (blogger) and Hill Harper (actor/author). Like other discussions in the genre, the *Nightline* special began with the Disney-inspired assumption that marriage is an appropriate and universal goal for women. Any failure to achieve marriage must therefore be pathological. With this starting assumption panelists were encouraged to offer solutions without needing to fully articulate why low marriage rates are troubling.

Perhaps marriage is shorthand for describing loving partnerships. In this case the problem is that some African American women have a pressing and unfulfilled desire for emotional attachment, companionship, and love in the context of committed heterosexual relationships. This is reasonable human expectation. It is one that many men and women of all racial and ethnic backgrounds share. In a nation where we assert that citizens have an inalienable right to pursue happiness we might even argue (although it is a stretch) that this desire is essentially newsworthy.

However, given the distortions or absence of black women in most mainstream media outlets we are skeptical that *Nightline* was primarily motivated by a desire to address the human needs of African American women. Instead, we suspect marriage is a trope for other anxieties about respectability, economic stability, and the maintenance of patriarchy. Which social issue appears on the public agenda is never accidental. In this moment of economic crisis, social change and racial transformation it is meaningful that black women are being encouraged to exclusively embrace traditional models of family

and to view themselves as deficient if their lives do not fit neatly into these prescribed roles.

In the 1960s, the Moynihan Report blamed black women heads of household for social deterioration in black communities. In the 1980s single black mothers were vilified as welfare cheats responsible for the nation's economic decline. In the 1990s black women were blamed for birthing a generation of "crack babies" that were predicted to burden the nation's health and educational systems. The *Nightline* conversation was suspiciously reminiscent of this prior reasoning. As the nation copes with its anxieties about a black president, a shifting economy and a new global position, black women suddenly reemerge as a problem to be solved.

But even if we accepted the simplistic framing of an extant marriage crisis offered by the program, *Nightline* was stunningly simplistic (even for mainstream media) in its response to the issue. The solution offered most frequently in Wednesday's conversation was familiar: professional black women need to scale back expectations. Black female success is an impediment to finding and cultivating black love. Hinging heavily on humor and black female desperation, like so many other conversations, articles, and news programs before it, this conversation missed the opportunity to offer a thoughtful analysis of structural, sociological, historical and political realities that serve as an impediment to fruitful partnerships between black men and women.

For example, the panel failed to address the reality that black boy infants are significantly more likely to die in the first year of life than are black girl infants, creating an immediate gender imbalance. The panel did not address the devastating effects of urban violence or mass incarceration on African American communities. The panel did not mention the systematic nature of inadequate educational opportunities for black boys or the continuing realities of employment discrimination effecting black men and women. These structural realities have an enormous impact on the shape and function of families.

Despite its role as a news program, *Nightline* failed to call on any sociologists, psychologists, historians or therapists who could have contributed context, statistics or analysis about the "marriage crisis" among African Americans. Instead, these delicate and compelling issues were addressed by comedians, actors, bloggers and journalists. If *Nightline* deemed this story to be worthy of coverage then it had an obligation to cover the story with as much integrity as another social issue. It is hard to imagine *Nightline* assembling a panel of actors and comedians to discuss the economy, the war in Iraq, the Catholic Church or any other relevant issue.

Without structural analysis or evidence-based reasoning the panel relied on personal experience. Steve Harvey, Hill Harper and Jimi Izrael have all written books on the black marriage/partnership crisis. To varying levels, all of these texts frame the issue as a black female problem rather than a community issue, offering advice that encourages women to mold themselves into a more sanitized definition of femininity that doesn't compete with socially sanctioned definitions of masculinity.

Each of these male participants was allowed to pontificate about the ways that black women should behave without being challenged as to their own relationship history and status. None of these men can boast a lifetime marriage to one black woman. Such personal information is relevant only because personal narrative was the sole basis of the conversation. Thus, the women participating in the panel were subjected to public scrutiny of their supposed shortcomings, while the men's biographies were shrouded in an assumption that their maleness alone made them worthy.

At a crescendo of irrelevance one panelist suggested that Michelle Robinson had secured Barack Obama as a future mate by lowering her expectations and seeing his potential rather than insisting that he be President before she would accept a date. It is nothing less than bizarre to characterize the Obamas in this way. As Shepherd pointed out, Barack Obama was a Harvard law student when he met Michelle, which can hardly be considered lowered expectations. Further when the Obamas tell their own story they always emphasize how a young Barack wooed and courted Michelle, seeing in her the possibilities of egalitarian partnership rooted in mutual respect, shared values and collective ambition. Theirs was a love story made possible by the structural realities of relative privilege, good education and bright economic futures. It is also a story rooted in a black man's enthusiastic embrace of an ambitious black woman.

Ultimately this panel did little more than shame, blame and stereotype black women. It offered few original insights and called into question that continued relevance of *Nightline* as a source of meaningful social and political information.

This piece is coauthored with [Courtney Young](#), author and critic.

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