Black Women as Scapegoats: The Mass Incarceration of Black Men and the Social Stigma of the Welfare Queen

Keiondra Grace, M.A., Western Michigan University
Olivia Marie McLaughlin, M.A., Western Michigan University

Statement of Problem:
In popular and academic discourse, African American women are regarded as the source of all social ills within the inner-city. This has become increasingly true in the era of mass incarceration, resultant of the War on Drugs. While Black men are portrayed as violent criminals, Black women are portrayed as the drug addicted, welfare queens they left behind. This trend can be explained, in part, by the actions of politicians and researchers who appear to remain ignorant to the importance of recognizing social structures such as gender, race, and class. We argue that Black single mothers, some of the most marginalized in our society, have become scapegoats, blamed for everything from the War on Drugs to inner-city poverty. Further, we posit that any attempt to understand inequality within the inner-city must take into account how policy, the culture of poverty, and colorblind racism intersect to ensure the simultaneous oppression of not only Black men but Black women as well.

Policy: Welfare Reform
1935: Social Security Act to Aid Dependent Children
1939: Aid to Families with Dependent Children
1996: Personal Responsibility & Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act
1996: Temporary Aid to Needy Families

Policy: Criminal Justice Reform
1971: Nixon declares drugs “Public Enemy Number One”
1982: Ronald Reagon declares War on Drugs
1986: Anti-Drug Abuse Act creates mandatory minimums
1995: U.S. Sentencing Commission

Colorblind Racism: Law & Order Rhetoric
“The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people…We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night in the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did..”- John Ehrlichman, Domestic Policy Chief for President Nixon

Culture of Poverty: Individual versus Structural
Deurbanization in the 1970’s causes high unemployment rate in inner cities
• People turn to the drug trade as a means to provide for their families and themselves
• Social scientists and popular media depict criminal behavior and poverty as pathological, ignoring structural forces
• Black men are assumed to be apt to criminality by virtue of being black

Culture of Poverty: The Undeserving Poor
• Domesticity as the sole maternal value; not bestowed on Black women
• Black women who need assistance are characterized as greedy, lazy, ghetto, lascivious mothers
• Contemporary poverty rhetoric blames Black single mothers for perpetuating poverty by transferring a deviant lifestyle to their kids

Colorblind Racism: Construction of the Welfare Queen
Shift in media to images of Black people in the 1970’s at the peak of anti-welfare fervor
• 1976 Presidential campaign; Ronald Regan description of woman unjustly receiving aid
• Term “welfare” evokes racial imagery without being explicit about race
• Shifts in imagery of poverty leads to influences of public opinion about deserving poor

Conclusions:
The stigmatization of Black women as welfare queens and the criminalization of Black men become justifiable at the locus of the intersection of three mechanisms: 1) the policies created to demonize Black men and Black women by portraying them as criminals and unfit mothers, respectively 2) ideologies related to the Culture of Poverty wherein inequality within the Black community is perceived as pathological and the fault of Black single mothers 3) colorblind rhetoric that insists racial equality while tacitly appealing to racialized imagery and stereotypes. Where these three mechanisms meet, Black women are represented as the guilty party, responsible for the drug epidemic, poverty, and criminality within the inner-city. We believe that attempts to understand discrimination against African Americans must take into account how these three apparatuses function to ensure the simultaneous oppression of Black men and women.