



September 2001

Black Working Wives: Pioneers of the American Family Revolution. Bart Landry. Review by Tracey Mabrey

Tracey Mabrey
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mabrey, Tracey (2001) "*Black Working Wives: Pioneers of the American Family Revolution.* Bart Landry. Review by Tracey Mabrey," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 3 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol28/iss3/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



Book Reviews

Bart Landry, *Black Working Wives: Pioneers of the American Family Revolution*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.

Sometimes the purpose of scholarship is to remind us of what truly was or what was never truthfully talked about. For this reviewer, Bart Landry's *Black Working Wives: Pioneers of the American Family Revolution* served as a memory book, of sorts. The reviewer recalled her childhood where most of the families in her working-class, African-American neighborhood were headed by two (working) adults, when women's work included work both inside and outside of the home, and when most Black girls' aspirations centered on the having a family and a good job (which is what a career used to be called). This book is filled with research and reminders about the one of the most-often ignored realities of life: for Black women, working outside the home is neither new nor revolutionary—indeed, for generations of Black families, women earning a paycheck is the norm, not the revolution. And corollary issues such as the need for affordable (and safe) child-care, changing roles inside the home and changing perceptions of womanhood outside of the home, which had begun to be important to White women, have been realities for generations of Black women and their families.

While this a book about contemporary family formation, the author nonetheless takes some care to trace the forces that led to the institutionalization of Black women's work outside of the home and its systematic disregard; many of these same forces present currently. Primary among these are economic need and the castigation of Black womanhood. Throughout the nation's history, there has been a need for the Black's women's work in other people's homes and factories. During slavery, Black women worked alongside of Black men in the fields and in the slave households. Black families depended on mothers to keep families together when fathers were sold or otherwise separated from their children. When Black men were denied opportunities to earn a "family wage" (p. 27), during industrialization, Black women's wages often was the means of family survival. But just as Black women were meeting the labor-force needs of the

nation and the paycheck needs of their family, Black women were very often forced to bear the brunt of social scorn. Black women's abilities (morality, intelligence, womanhood, beauty, domesticity, etc.) were often challenged by scholars and commentators; "...I cannot imagine such a creature as a virtuous Negro woman" (p. 56). Yet the reality was and continues to be that Black women created family structures which supported their activism, contributions, and expectations for uplift and prosperity and very often times, Black women have been their families' "...co-breadwinners..." (p. 73). Landry points out that Black women often concerned themselves not just with their families (which are oftentimes defined differently than those of White women) but also with the struggles of their communities. Clubs, churches, and associations play a significant role in the lives of working women in the Black community.

Much of this book's statistics are taken from census data. Perhaps the book's biggest asset lies in the attention given to the impact that money has on day-to-day living over time. The book's strengths is its use of personal narratives and documents of everyday life to provide contextual understanding of societal movements and change. Landry argues that traditional notions of women's role in the family, including expectations of who will do the cooking and cleaning and care-taking, are different among Black and White families; "[i]t would appear, then, that both the actual division of household labor and attitudes toward wives' employment support the notion that blacks hold a more egalitarian ideology of gender roles" (p. 162). In discussing the income contribution of women in middle-class families since the 1960's, Landry takes great pains to point out both the economic and social considerations which must be taken into account; "[i]ncome, being more tangible than an occupation, may be more readily perceived as a measure of a man's—and increasingly an employed woman's—self-worth" (p. 147). The book also contains analysis of emerging social issues such as family leave, the glass ceiling and other trends which are sure to impact families in the future. It is also worth noting that this book, while centering on Black working wives, contains a lot of data about Black men and White women and their families as well.

One of the book's strengths is its effective use of statistics and narrative. Landry uses each to provide a fuller portrait of Black families over time. Readers who prefer one means of presentation over the other will find this text to be uncomplicated. This book could be used in courses in social welfare policy and women's or family studies courses. Its graphics are a little dull but still the analysis is clearly written, blissfully succinct (yet inclusive) and the text contains an excellent bibliography. *Black Working Wives* should not be forgotten.

Tracey Mabrey
Western Michigan University

Pat Pridmore and David Stephens, *Children as Partners in Health: A Critical Review of the Child-to-Child Approach*. New York: Zed Books, 2000. \$ 59.95 hardcover, \$22.50 papercover.

This book could be placed in the context of any number of fields, including health education, international health, or public health, and maybe even child development. I hope I do it no disservice by speaking from the perspectives of child health and social work, since that is where I do my work. It is a field in which interventions on behalf of children are generally performed by professionals, with some notable (though insufficient as yet) partnerships with parents. This is the first approach I have read that targets children as the agents of change.

There is much to be said for this approach. For the field of social work, it truly starts "where the client is" and demonstrates a true appreciation for the dignity and agency of children as individual human beings. That by itself is unique. Perhaps more important, though, the Child-to-Child approach takes a long-term approach that promises to improve health not just in this generation, but in generations to come.

First developed as a response to the 1979 United Nations International Year of the Child in 1979, the Child-to-Child movement uses the school setting in under-developed counties to educate primary school children about health concerns, sending them home to their families and out to their communities to put what they learn into practice. The movement is based on a belief in