



## The Black Mother And The Economic Vulnerability Of The Average Black Family

Until recently the Afro-American mother was thought by many to be the backbone of the Black family. According to some critics, she was too strong. However, she was always there—encouraging, exhorting her family to better themselves, to somehow circumvent the devastating and dehumanizing forces from outside the Black community, which no matter the historical time frame, had the common goal of Black exclusion from the economic and political sources of power in this country. Within this context, our Year 2000 Campaign, introduced in this month's Cover Story is most crucial.

### Traditional Courage Of The Black Mother

This spirit of undaunted courage in the face of adversity was shown by Sojourner Truth when she rose to speak before a hostile audience at a women's rights convention in 1852. She said:

Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best places...and ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm!...I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—ain't I a woman? I could work as much as any man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well—and ain't I a woman? I have borne five children and I seen 'em mos all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus hear—and ain't I a woman?

### Black Teenage Mothers

Today, Black teens in growing numbers are becoming mothers. Nearly one-third of all single Black females have a child before the age of 20. The twice-aired *CBS/Bill Moyers Special*, "The Vanishing Family—Crisis in Black America," focused on this subject. The program has sparked discussion and controversy around the country among both Blacks and Whites.

**The Statistics.** Twenty years ago, 75 percent of all Black children had two parents in the home. Today, nearly 60 percent of all Black children are born out of



wedlock. Single mothers, many of them teenagers, and their children are the fastest growing segment of Black America. These are the statistics that introduced the program. "What nearly four centuries of slavery, racism and segregation failed to do has happened in one generation," said Moyers.

**Moyers Documentary.** The purpose of the broadcast was to look beyond statistics. Moyers said:

We came out to listen to the people behind the numbers. We went to Newark, New Jersey, but we could have gone to any major city in America. The statistics are

paractically the same everywhere. They testify to the increase in a way of life that is harmful enough in its own right but now alarms many black observers who agree that the balck family faces a special crisis. The heritage of family traditions which long sustained blacks is threatened by children growing up without steady male role models and young mothers whose own personal potential goes unfulfilled.... These children are caught in a web they do not understand and cannot escape.... So they perpetuate it, creating tragedy for the lives involved, further deterioration in the fabric of black family life and a potentially explosive condition in American society.

While television brings immediacy and unforgettable drama to issues, one of the serious limitations of this means of communication is that it tends to oversimplify.

This particular show left numerous viewers feeling helpless and frustrated. The documentary seemed, to many, to have made the following points: (1) there is a problem; (2) Blacks have been reluctant to acknowledge it; (3) it will not go away; and (4) Blacks seem to have few ideas about what can be done.

**60 Minutes.** A number of Black observers preferred the way *60 Minutes* dealt with the same subject. The first segment of a recent program showed how one predominantly Black high school was aggressively handling teenage pregnancies. The school ran a clinic for pregnant teenagers which educated them about proper prenatal care and, at the same time, sought to prevent more adolescent pregnancies through birth control information. The school also provided day care to enable teen mothers to finish their education and thereby have a better chance in the job market. The second segment of the show featured the Dance Theatre of Harlem and its successful efforts to build pride in Black youngsters through the discipline of dance.

These same Black observers suggest that the Moyers documentary could have had a more educative effect if the invited panelists had been Blacks who were already actively involved in finding

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