

beyond the myth

**single black
mothers
and their
sons**

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“There are plenty of women throughout history who have raised strong, balanced, respectable and happy boys. Women are the nurturers usually.”

Ann, mother

Introduction

“Single mothers can’t steer teenage sons to adulthood!”

“Black women raise their illegitimate children very badly, with no visible means of finance except the taxpayer.”

“Offenders are typically those without a father at home. They end up looking to the streets for their father figures, filled up with rage and anger.”

From politicians to journalists to comedians, a variety of figures have spoken negatively about single black mothers and their sons. The interaction of distorted understandings about women, blackness, young men and the family have generated untruths and inaccurate tropes. Single motherhood has long been vilified and a black boy raised by a single parent woman viewed as a potential problem. The single black mother-son combination is considered particularly toxic.

While some public discussions on the topic are occasionally well-meaning, commentary is typically grounded in unhelpful and biased social attitudes. Not only has misleading information misinformed policymaking and social practice, it has negatively influenced the ways single mothers and their children view themselves, their circumstances and their future possibilities.

It is for this reason that sociologist Miranda Armstrong undertook research with mature black women who have single-parented sons and also interviewed men raised by them. Through listening to their experiences and perspectives, it was found that gloomy statistics, bleak media representations and limited academic theories have seriously misrepresented this relationship.

This booklet was devised to provide an overview of the study’s findings. It is hoped that it will encourage readers to re-think their assumptions and to recognise the unbounded potential of single parent women and their children.

Thriving Quietly



“Me and my siblings grew up learning about people like ourselves and surrounded by positive imagery in books and posters around our room to try to reinforce a positive mindset.” Samson, 21

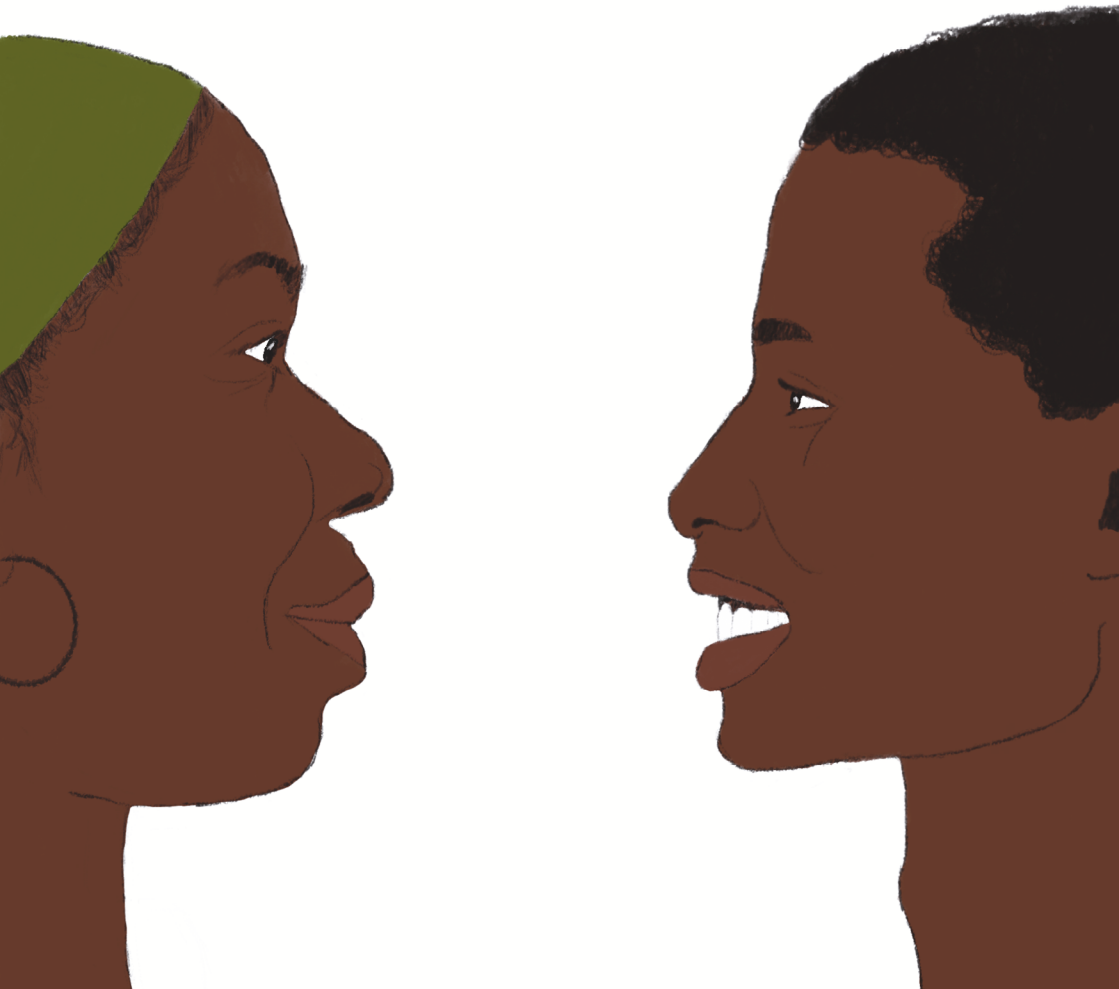
“Every evening the boys and me would have time where we would sit together, talk and pray.” Antonia, 46

The lives of single black mother households are different to how they are typically imagined. Mothers and sons who contributed to this research generally recalled close and well-functioning parent-child relationships. They also described their family’s world as being made up of discussions and debate, books, making use of the city’s parks, theatres and museums, time with relatives, attending cultural and community events and exploring the city.

People’s accounts indicate that mothers are very aware of the inequitable conditions faced. For this reason education is highly valued and prioritised, as are children’s enrichment activities. Mothers often undertake university study as mature students in order to secure professional jobs and therefore avoid poverty.

- Mothers create an environment where a child’s freedom of expression and open communication is the norm.
- A child is prepared for society with important social, historical, and cultural knowledge.
- A number of important others provide support to a woman and child, from grandparents to family friends.

Relationships Matter



“My mum taught me how to cook, she taught me how to clean, she taught me a lot about my body. My mum taught me just fine.” Lenny, 20

“He talks to me about anything because I purposefully made it that way. I wanted him to feel able to.” Harriet, 41

Previous discussions about single mothers raising sons have focused on gender difference and its perceived consequences. There has been a sexist assumption that mothers lack authority with boys, particularly teenagers. However research findings show that sons usually value, respect and even admire their mothers. The potential of the mother-son relationship has been underestimated.

Participants' accounts demonstrate that a mix of conversation, debate and affection maintain parent-child connection as sons grow. The ability of parent and child to be candid and open on a variety of topics appeared important. Strong bonds enable relationships to withstand conflict and positive mother-son relationships endure into adulthood.

Heavy Responsibility



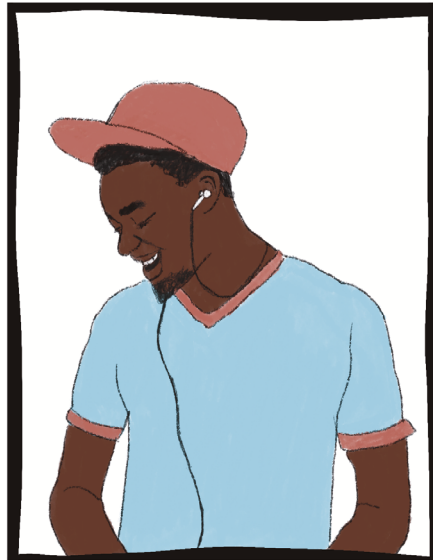
"I had the two children and was studying for my second degree during the day and working nights. You act as if you're a soldier, but I kept getting sick..." JJ, 50

"When making decisions there is nobody to ask "what do you think?" and take some of that pressure off - you've always got to make the right call." Natalie, 35

The study highlights that the amount of carework single parent women do is huge. Interviews showed that a mother's labour involves: working as many hours as possible as the household breadwinner, often alongside studying; providing ongoing emotional and educational support; responding to emergencies; clothing and feeding her child; organising childcare; planning activities for weekends and school holidays and teaching her child how to be self-sufficient. This required ongoing discussion about how society works and needed candid information about the complex experience of race and racism. Research participants lived predominately in the inner-city and the potential harms of difficult neighbourhoods necessitated keeping a child contained indoors or busy with clubs and enrichment activities.

Furthermore, single motherhood in particular involves a woman's constant sacrifices in the perceived interests of her child. Mothers recalled lacking energy and time, the economic cost of child-rearing and some mentioned choosing to curtail their romantic lives to focus on parenthood. In our society all of this is regarded as natural - as a woman's duty and as part of the virtue of motherhood.

Boys Flourish



“There isn’t a concrete definition of how to be a man. Masculinity is such a weird construct - I would say it’s quite a negative construct.” Vince, 22

“For me it’s been so powerful to see how many different black male identities there are. It’s been reassuring to see there isn’t just one mould.” Jeremiah, 22

Young men raised by women tend to develop into perceptive, thoughtful and contemplative adults. The troubled single mother-raised-boy depicted in media stories is a caricature which belies real life experiences. Sons reject stereotypical and limited understandings of black masculinity and try to embrace their individuality.

In passionately pursuing vocations or getting to university sons defy the dominant low expectations of them. Research accounts highlight that even in cases where sons have less parental support, they stay on track when they have confidence in their ability to build a decent life for themselves.

Not an Island



“I owe a lot to my grandparents. I think if it wasn’t for them Mum might have struggled.” Harlem King, 19

“I think that forming your own mini community is very helpful. I had mums who were experiencing the same things as me, had those same concerns and were interested in finding stuff to do with the children.” Natalie, 35

It has been assumed that single mothers and their children are isolated in a world of their own. This is viewed as potentially problematic, even toxic. However, the study highlights how women and their children drew on support through their ties to others. People described a variety of networks comprised of relatives, friends, local families and community members. Children’s grandparents usually played a large supportive role, as did aunts and uncles. Separated fathers often remain connected to their children, though the degree of involvement varies.

Beyond family, single mothers and their sons develop meaningful connections to others through education, work, places of worship and local groups. Mothers’ friendships with other mothers can be an especially important resource. In research interviews women described benefitting from the encouragement, support and validation of their concerns about raising racialised children in a hostile environment.

Enlightened



"I think everyone can be a role model for anyone." Harlem-King, 19

"The male role models that I've had in my life have been scant - they've all been women. I would say the toughest people I know are my mum and my gran, because of what they went through and how they maintained themselves and me." Michael, 39

Experiences of separated fathers were described by sons as emotionally challenging, confusing and deeply disappointing. However, to claim that young men act out or lose their way as a result of this is an inaccurate and irresponsible assumption. Sons contributing to the study told of working through their difficulties in relation to fathers, their own identity and masculinity through reflection and discussion.

Research findings also challenge the widespread belief that a growing boy - particularly one affected by the complexities of race and racism - require an adult male role model. Most sons were uncertain about this narrative, having done relatively well without a male role model themselves. Some dismissed the idea outright as it is based on a strictly gendered understanding of character. In fact, formidable women, typically mothers and grandmothers, were sometimes named by sons as role models, indicating the insignificance of gender and the pertinence of character.

- Sons come to understand socially prescribed gendered roles and expectations through everyday experiences.
- Young men are able to appropriately discern between potential role models, identity spaces and friendship groups.
- Sons spoke of thinking about how they might be good partners and fathers in their domestic futures.

Surviving the City



“I’m friends with gang members, all of that is around me, but I don’t take part in it - thanks to my mum.” Lenny, 20

“I told him the truth about the society he would grow up in, but also encouraged him to follow his dreams, told him he must not be deterred.” Ann, 51

The people who contributed to this research are from London, one of the world’s most expensive cities. The study showed mothers and their children trying to enjoy what the capital has to offer, with race, gender and class inequalities working together to create distinct experiences of the city. This includes:

- Difficulty finding a home in a child-friendly place and affordable for a one-income household.
- Limited educational opportunities amid poor quality local schooling and low expectations within educational institutions.
- Growing up against a backdrop of street violence in under-protected neighbourhoods. Sons were sometimes victims themselves, typically describing at least one experience of street robbery.
- Distinct experiences of public space through microaggressions and racial profiling.

Despite their precarious position and challenging conditions, mothers and sons generally do not succumb. They manage to find ways to beat the odds in a city that is sometimes cruel.

“It’s almost like it doesn’t matter how much you plan when you parent, and how well you’ve raised your children, it’s the other bit - it’s society that you can’t control. Those are the things that need changing.”

Natalie, mother

Conclusion

The study provides evidence that single black mothers are generally effective parents to their sons. It also shows that single black mother households are simply part of family diversity, rather than a cause for public concern. These findings indicate that we must:

- abandon our gendered perception of parent-child dynamics
- reject stereotypes about young masculinities
- challenge our assumptions about what we think growing boys need

It is essential that we create space for children and young people to voice their thoughts and explore their questions about identity, gender, family relationships and love.

It is important to underline the fact that the demands of motherhood - single motherhood especially - are oppressive to women. More must be done to spread the responsibility of caring for the next generation. This should go beyond facilitating the involvement of separated fathers and involve opening up our communities to create communal spaces for accessible childcare, youth work and peer support, as well as mutual-aid for parents.

Finally, blame for any difficulties single black mother households face must end. Race, gender and class inequalities intensify the already tough job of single parenting. What single black mothers and their sons often confront in our society is not dissimilar to an obstacle course of challenges. When certain people are rendered unable to ‘win’ we all lose.

Further Reading

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About the author

Miranda Armstrong is a research associate in the Sociology Department at the University of York and a PhD researcher at Goldsmiths. Her writing on single motherhood has appeared in outlets such as *Discover Society* and *Black Ballad*, and she is a contributing essayist to the pioneering anthology *Motherhood Untold*.

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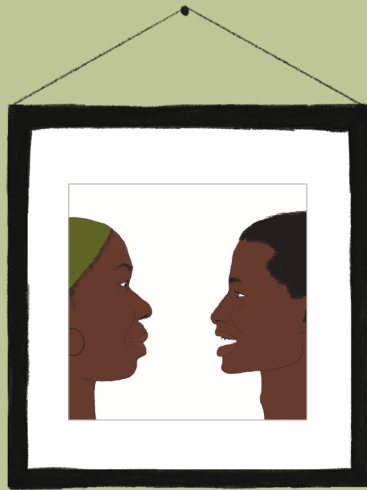
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**“The toughest people I know are my mum and my gran, because of what they went through and how they maintained themselves and me.”
Michael, 39, son**

“Women throughout history have raised strong, balanced, respectable and happy boys.” Ann, 51, mother

For too long single black mothers and the sons they raise have been unfairly vilified. Their voices are rarely heard in public debates about the perceived ills of this family structure and its claimed impact upon black communities. Here mothers and sons speak back. Based on ground-breaking sociological research in Britain, this booklet challenges our assumptions by exploring the experiences of single black mothers and their sons. In centering perspectives grounded in experience, it uncovers and celebrates the unbounded potential of single parent women and their children.