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## Rethinking the Neighborhood Watch: How Lessons from the Nigerian Village Can Creatively Empower the Community to Assist Poor, Single Mothers in America

Dehlia Umunna

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# RETHINKING THE NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH: HOW LESSONS FROM THE NIGERIAN VILLAGE CAN CREATIVELY EMPOWER THE COMMUNITY TO ASSIST POOR, SINGLE MOTHERS IN AMERICA<sup>1</sup>

DEHLIA UMUNNA\*

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1. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the poverty threshold in 2011 for a family of four was a household income of less than \$22,811. *Poverty Thresholds*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/> (last visited Apr. 28, 2012). For the purposes of this Article, "low-income," for a family four, is defined as a family with an income of less than 200 percent of the poverty threshold (approximately \$45,000). A single-mother family is defined as a family headed by a female who is not cohabiting with a spouse or partner and is the sole caretaker for children under the age of eighteen. A single mother may be divorced, widowed, or otherwise separated from her spouse or partner.

\* Clinical Instructor, Harvard Law School's Criminal Justice Institute. Former felony one trial attorney, Public Defender Service, District of Columbia; Former Practitioner-in-Residence and Adjunct Professor, Washington College of Law, American University; Master in Public Administration (MC) Harvard Kennedy School of Government; J.D. George Washington University National Law Center; B.A. California State University, San Bernardino, CA. I am grateful for the invaluable assistance and guidance of Professor Andrew Taslitz of Howard University School of Law and would also like to thank Ieshaah Murphy for her priceless research assistance and help in completing this Article. I would like to thank my parents for their assistance in coordinating the interviews with the Nigerian women cited in this Article and Gloria Tan for her helpful comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank Professor Ogletree, Professor Sullivan, Professor Soffiyah Elijah, and the rest of the HLS CJI staff for their support. I am eternally indebted to the brave women in the United States of America and Nigeria, who willingly shared their experiences with me and provided the vision for this Article. I thank the organizers of the 2012 AALS Conference: Joint Session on Theory and Praxis in Reducing Women's Poverty. Finally, thank you to my daughter Ifeanyi, and son, Edozie, two amazingly bright and fun children; I am humbled, honored, and blessed to be your mom.

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INTRODUCTION

On April 12, 2011, LaShanda Armstrong,<sup>2</sup> a twenty-five-year-old black, single mother, strapped her four children into her minivan and took a fatal plunge into the Hudson River.<sup>3</sup> Her ten-year-old son was the sole survivor.<sup>4</sup> Two issues become clear in the post-tragedy analysis: first, LaShanda was poor, and second, she was overwhelmed by the depression that arose from the pressures of raising her four children without adequate communal support.<sup>5</sup>

LaShanda Armstrong’s narrative is not unique. There are numerous stories of how poor, single mothers, many of whom are women of color, are turning to violence towards themselves and their children to escape the desolation and despondency they feel from raising their children alone in America.<sup>6</sup> A running theme in the media reports about LaShanda’s case

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2. Larry Hertz, *Family Says LaShanda Armstrong Acted Oddly Before Newburgh Tragedy*, POUGHKEEPSIE J. (Apr. 14, 2011), <http://www.poughkeepsiejournal.com/article/20110414/NEWS05/104140337/Family-says-LaShanda-LaShanda-Armstrong-acted-oddly-before-Newburgh-tragedy> (reporting that Ms. Armstrong, a single mother of four children, ages eleven months, two, five and ten years old, balanced single parenting with work and school and, unfortunately, was also a victim of domestic violence).

3. James Barron, *Mother and 3 of 4 Children Die as She Drives Van into Hudson*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 14, 2011, at A1.

4. *Id.*

5. Hertz, *supra* note 2. For example, while some of LaShanda’s neighbors commented that she was an attentive mother who balanced care of her children with work, others commented that they did not know her name or where she worked. *Id.*

6. See, e.g., Dirk Johnson, *6 Children Found Strangled After Mother Confesses to 911*, N.Y. TIMES (Sept. 5, 1998), <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/05/us/6-children-found-strangled-after-mother-confesses-to-911.html>. In September 1998, Khoua Her, a mother of six, called 911 and confessed to killing all of her children. *Id.* Khoua, a native of Laos, had been living in poverty and raising her children alone, after her husband left a few months before the killings. *Id.* According to police records, there had been at least eight calls since January to Khoua’s apartment for domestic violence and Khoua had started dating another man once her husband left. *Id.* A friend of Khoua’s described her as being “depressed over the amount of responsibility she had.” *Id.* One neighbor described Khoua as someone who was “not really taking care of her kids.” *Id.* Christina Riggs was executed for killing her two children by poisoning and then smothering them. *Christina Marie Riggs*, CAPITAL PUNISHMENT UK, <http://www.capitalpunishmentuk.org/riggs.html> (last visited Apr. 27, 2012). She was depressed and suicidal after her divorce from her husband and was left alone to raise two children in a poor financial situation. *Id.* In 2008, Leatrice Brewer drowned each

was that no one knew what was going on in her life. The questions are these: How is it that American society bears no social responsibility to support its most vulnerable members in raising their children? How is it possible that a young, single mother with four children does not have a community to be aware of her needs, reach out to her during her most vulnerable period, and assist her in ways that encourage her to replace violence with compassion, fear with love, and despair with hope? In many ways, the answers can be found in America's fundamental and pervasive "go it alone" attitude that causes single mothers to tackle the challenges of single parenting alone. We have heard the African proverb, "it takes a village to raise a child."<sup>7</sup> In practice, however, America can do much more to provide the poor, single mother with the support she needs to overcome the challenges of single parenting.

What does it really mean to be part of a "village community?" Partially raised in Nigeria, I experienced firsthand that it truly does take a village to raise a child. I witnessed how everyone in the Nigerian community felt a sense of shared ownership and social obligation toward each community member's success and well-being. Raising my children in America, I am acutely aware of the stark differences between America's cultural isolationist attitude and the emphasis on shared social responsibility inherent in the Nigerian village philosophy. As a single mother who struggled financially, I could have become another LaShanda Armstrong had I lived without the communal support of the Nigerian Diaspora in America. Though no physical village existed, a spiritual and political one formed around me because the members of my community felt obligated *by our shared community membership* to help my children and myself.

The goal of this Article is to suggest a solution to alleviate the many struggles that isolated and impoverished single mothers face—a solution that *could potentially* decrease the incidences of abuse and violence towards the children of these mothers, while at the same time fostering communal support for low-income, single mothers to break the cycle of poverty. The proposed solution rethinks the Neighborhood Watch model<sup>8</sup>

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of her three children in a bathtub before attempting suicide by jumping out of a second story window. *They Tried to Help – But Mom Still Killed Kids*, MSN.COM (Mar. 1, 2008, 11:34 PM), [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23426244/ns/us\\_news-crime\\_and\\_courts/t/they-tried-help-mom-still-killed-kids.Tv3kwna](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23426244/ns/us_news-crime_and_courts/t/they-tried-help-mom-still-killed-kids.Tv3kwna) bMd. Leatrice was a twenty-seven-year-old, single mom living in an impoverished working class neighborhood in Nassau County, New York. *Id.*

7. *African Proverb of the Month*, AFRIPROV.ORG, <http://www.afriprov.org/index.php/african-proverb-of-the-month/23-1998proverbs/137-november-1998-proverb.html> (last visited Apr. 27, 2012).

8. James Garofalo & Maureen McLeod, *The Structure and Operations of Neighborhood Watch Programs in the United States*, 35 CRIME & DELINQ. 326, 327 (1989) ("A Neighborhood Watch (NW) program is meant to provide an organizational framework for citizen involvement in local crime prevention activities, the primary

by merging its structure with the traditional Nigerian village philosophy to provide structured, communal support for single mothers. In other words, the solution encourages Americans in low-income communities across the country to actively engage in Collective Watching.<sup>9</sup> At least in this one area, America needs to incorporate these Nigerian communal values and become more of a supportive village and less of a collection of discrete social competitors. Part I of this Article will explore America's societal isolationist attitude towards single mothers and critique how that attitude leaves these mothers to struggle alone, with horrific consequences.<sup>10</sup> Part II will examine the communal structure of Nigerian villages, specifically centered on the Igbo community and the lessons to be drawn from the "communal mentality," that is, what it really means to be part of a village community.<sup>11</sup> It will also discuss Nigerian Igbo's unique social responsibility towards all members of the community, especially single mothers.<sup>12</sup> Part III proposes a series of solutions that rethink the American Neighborhood Watch Program and combine that framework with the Nigerian village philosophy.<sup>13</sup> This combined model focuses on empowering members of the community to act under a sense of shared responsibility to each other, with a special emphasis on addressing the struggles that American single mothers face. Instead of encouraging community members to report suspicious and criminal activities, this innovative proposal will provide financial incentives that encourage

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activity being increased surveillance by residents over their neighborhoods.").

9. Collective Watching is a phrase I use to signify the moral and social obligation that a larger society should have towards the individuals within that society. The objective is to encourage communities to develop a stronger sense of togetherness in order to reduce the effects of poverty among its most vulnerable members, including single mothers and children. Practically, Collective Watching involves an informal network of committed individuals who have access to local and/or federal grants that allow them to provide essential services to poor single mothers within their own neighborhoods. The services to be provided may include childcare, laundry services, grocery shopping, transportation, and home visits, among other services. The main objective is to provide financial incentives that encourage community members to help lighten the burden of single parenting and remove the barriers that perpetuate the cycle of poverty in the lives of poor, single mothers. Collective Watching is based on the premise that with ample proactive assistance from her pregnancy throughout the first five years of a child's life, the single mother is better equipped to return to work or school, regain her independence, and maintain a lifestyle that enables her to ward off poverty.

10. See *infra* Part I.

11. *Igbo*, EVERYCULTURE.COM, <http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Mauritania-to-Nigeria/Igbo.html> (last visited Apr. 28, 2012). The author traces her Nigerian family heritage to the Igbos of Nigeria. "The Igbo are the second largest group of people living in southern Nigeria. They are socially and culturally diverse, consisting of many subgroups. Although they live in scattered groups of villages, they all speak one language." *Id.* They have distinct cultural values and rules for marriage, and child rearing. *Id.*

12. See *infra* Part II.

13. See *infra* Part III.

communities to assist struggling single mothers.

### I. THE AMERICAN SINGLE MOTHER: DEPRESSION, POVERTY, AND VIOLENCE

Parenting, though an extremely rewarding venture, can be quite difficult at times. Indeed, parenting is hard work, and single parenting is even more challenging. The notion that one person is required to do the work of two is daunting enough, but when combined with issues of poverty, depression, and inadequate social support safety nets, one can begin to appreciate the magnitude of obstacles that single mothers face. Clearly, not all single mothers are poor, depressed, or resort to violence against their children; however, for the many that are, the challenges of raising children in poverty oftentimes leads these mothers to develop high levels of depression.<sup>14</sup> As a means of escaping the overwhelming realities that they face, some resort to violence against themselves and their children.<sup>15</sup> As the cases below illustrate, a lack of social support combined with severe poverty can influence some poor, single mothers to resort to violence.

Like LaShanda Armstrong, Shaquan Duley was a poor,<sup>16</sup> single mother.<sup>17</sup> A mother of two children under the age of three and one five-year-old, Shaquan confessed to smothering her two youngest children with her bare hands and then rolling the car with their bodies into a river in Orangeburg, South Carolina.<sup>18</sup> Shaquan was twenty-nine years old, unemployed, and had no apparent means of taking care of herself or her

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14. Deborah Belle, *Poverty and Women's Mental Health*, 45 AM. PSYCHOL. 385, 385-86 (1990); David H. Demo & Alan C. Acock, *Singlehood, Marriage, and Remarriage: The Effects of Family Structure and Family Relationships on Mothers' Well-being*, 17 J. FAM. ISSUES 388, 388-407 (1996). The study, involving reports from over 2700 mothers, indicated that single mothers, compared to married mothers, experience more depression and lower feelings of self-esteem. Demo & Acock, *supra*, at 396-97.

15. See, e.g., *Blackmon v. State*, 7 So. 3d 397 (Ala. Crim. App. 2005) (affirming the defendant's conviction of capital murder for beating her 28-month-old daughter to death where doctors who treated the child said she had "multiple bruises and contusions and an imprint of the sole of a shoe on her chest"); *People v. Eubanks*, 266 P.3d 301 (Cal. 2011) (affirming defendant's conviction on four counts of first degree murder for shooting and killing her four young children where defendant left a note saying she had been strong for twenty-five years and was "tired of all the fight and hurt"); *Berry v. State*, 233 S.W.3d 847 (Tex. Crim. App. 2007) (affirming defendant's conviction for killing her son where the infant's body was found in a dumpster with duck tape over his mouth and the defendant made statements to a CPS worker about transporting him to the dumpster in a trash bag).

16. Robbie Brown, *Mother in South Carolina Killed 2 Children, Police Say*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 18, 2010, at A15 (describing Shaquan as "financially desperate").

17. *Sheriff: Mom Confessed to Suffocating Sons*, MSN.COM (Aug. 17, 2010, 9:37 PM), [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38734910/ns/us\\_news-crime\\_and\\_courts/t/sheriff-mom-confessed-suffocating-sons](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38734910/ns/us_news-crime_and_courts/t/sheriff-mom-confessed-suffocating-sons) (reporting that Shaquan was "estranged from the children's father").

18. *Id.*

children.<sup>19</sup> Media reports described Shaquan as a “financially desperate woman,”<sup>20</sup> living with her children and her mother, in a house along a street filled with abandoned houses.<sup>21</sup> From all indications, Shaquan was depressed, desperate, and despairing.<sup>22</sup> The lack of community support and watchfulness led to a situation where it was only a matter of time before something tragic happened to her or the children. It was not until she committed the atrocious acts of violence towards her children that anyone took notice.<sup>23</sup>

Shaquan’s story sounds all too similar to Venisha Clarke’s story. Venisha Clarke had a history of abusing her daughter.<sup>24</sup> In 1999, Venisha’s two-year-old daughter died after Venisha beat the child over the head with a ten-inch action figure because her daughter would not stop crying.<sup>25</sup> By age twenty-one, Venisha had three children, and was pregnant with her fourth.<sup>26</sup> She was a single mother who relied on public assistance to support herself and her children.<sup>27</sup> However, as Venisha’s multiple shoplifting convictions show, she had trouble making enough money and often stole clothes, selling them on the street to make money to provide for her children.<sup>28</sup> Neighbors thought she was overwhelmed with the stresses of single-motherhood and simply needed more support.<sup>29</sup> Although the neighbors could discern that she was under immense pressure, apparently no one intervened.<sup>30</sup>

The reasons that some single mothers resort to violence, either through harming themselves or their children, are varied.<sup>31</sup> However, in the lives of

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19. *Id.*

20. Brown, *supra* note 16.

21. *Sheriff: Mom Confessed to Suffocating Sons*, *supra* note 17.

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

24. Robert D. McFadden, *Mother of 3 Is Charged in Daughter’s Death*, N.Y. TIMES (Sept. 14, 1999), <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/09/14/nyregion/mother-of-3-is-charged-in-daughter-s-death.html>.

25. Tara George & Michelle McPhee, *City Probes How Abuse of Slain Tot Was Missed*, N.Y. DAILY NEWS (Sept. 15, 1999), [http://articles.nydailynews.com/1999-09-15/news/18124831\\_1\\_social-worker-abuse-records-show](http://articles.nydailynews.com/1999-09-15/news/18124831_1_social-worker-abuse-records-show).

26. McFadden, *supra* note 24.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*

29. *Id.* (stating that one neighbor remarked, “I think she was overwhelmed taking care of her kids, and with another on the way it may have been too much to handle. She didn’t have a husband or a mother who could help her. It could send someone over the line.”).

30. Drawing reasonable inferences from media accounts of Venisha’s situation, it appears as if she did not have access to the type of community support to which I am referring.

31. See Susan Hatters Friedman et al., *Filicide-Suicide: Common Factors in Parents Who Kill Their Children and Themselves*, 33 J. AM. ACAD. PSYCHIATRY & L.

those American single mothers, it is likely that extreme poverty, hopelessness, parenting isolation, and depression certainly contributed to their tragic outcomes.<sup>32</sup> Violence is just one consequence, albeit a serious consequence, of leaving poor, single mothers to raise their children alone, without any community support.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, it has become increasingly likely that unless there are proactive Collective Watching services coupled with incentives that create a culture of social accountability towards the most vulnerable members of society, the violence towards children at their mothers' hands may continue. There is a definite need to disseminate more services and create innovative programs, such as Collective Watching initiatives, to assist single mothers and the millions of children living at or below the poverty line in single female-headed households.<sup>34</sup>

Critics might argue that there are currently a myriad of formal social support networks available to these poor, single mothers, and their failure to avail themselves of such services is squarely their fault. This argument is flawed. In an attempt to comprehend why poor single mothers do not avail themselves of available support networks, it is imperative to explore societal attitudes towards single mothers and their perceived dependency on governmental support. In America, we pride ourselves on being a nation of exceptional individuals, who value independence, self-reliance, and individual responsibility as core American values.<sup>35</sup> This notion of being self-sufficient permeates every aspect of our society, especially the family.<sup>36</sup> There is a pervasive belief among many Americans that each

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496, 500 (2005) (indicating that eighty percent of the thirty parents studied, who had killed themselves and their child, had a history of "psychiatric contacts").

32. Based on the media reports and cases mentioned it appears as if those factors contributed to the tragic outcomes.

33. Robert L. Flewelling & Karl E. Bauman, *Family Structure as a Predictor of Initial Substance Use and Sexual Intercourse in Early Adolescence*, 52 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 171, 175-77 (1990) (suggesting, from results of a two-year study involving over 2000 young adolescents, that children from non-intact families are at a higher risk of using controlled substances and engaging in sexual intercourse); Steven Garasky, *The Effects of Family Structure on Educational Attainment: Do the Effects Vary by the Age of the Child?*, 54 AM. J. ECON. & SOC. 89, 97 (1995) (showing that children in single parent families, who spent their first fourteen years of life in the same family structure, had a lower likelihood of graduating from high school than those who grew up with both biological parents).

34. Norman A. Polansky et al., *The Psychological Ecology of the Neglectful Mother*, 9 CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT 265, 273-74 (1985). Researchers interviewed 152 neglectful mothers, who were identified by Child Protective Services, and 154 non-neglectful mothers. The neglectful mothers reported having less support from informal support networks within their communities and fewer people whom they felt like they could approach for practical and emotional support.

35. C. Eric Mount, Jr., *American Individualism Reconsidered*, 22 REV. RELIGIOUS RES. 362, 363 (1981) ("Nothing is more American than Individualism.").

36. Thomas E. Grouling, *American Values*, AMERICANHOSPITALS.COM, <http://www.americanhospitals.com/questions/american/amervalues.htm> (last visited



person is in control of his or her own destiny; people are encouraged to fend for themselves, and those who cannot are deemed weak.<sup>37</sup> This concept of American individualism can create a hostile environment for poor, single mothers by encouraging them to suffer and struggle in silence. American individualism can also discourage other people from extending help to these struggling mothers. This explains the stigma that is often attached to reliance on welfare, rent-controlled housing, and other forms of government intervention.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, these sentiments drive an already vulnerable population into further helplessness and despair, and ultimately may encourage some to commit violence towards their children out of desperation.

## II. NIGERIA'S UNIQUE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS RAISING ITS CHILDREN IN A COMMUNAL SETTING: THE VILLAGE PHILOSOPHY

While the general American attitude is one that promotes individualism and self-reliance, the Nigerian village philosophy generally promotes communalism and togetherness.<sup>39</sup> Communalism and the basic concept of working together for the common good are at the heart of many African cultures.<sup>40</sup> Africans from many cultures recognize the necessity of the interdependence of people.<sup>41</sup> This philosophy helps to strengthen, rather than isolate entire communities.<sup>42</sup> Embedded in this communal attitude is the core belief that each community member has, by virtue of membership alone, a cultural and moral obligation to assist other members of the community in reaching their highest potential.<sup>43</sup> In Nigeria, the village is the central force of life for many, and Nigerians view children as their most valuable assets.<sup>44</sup> Children in the Igbo communities belong to everyone.<sup>45</sup>

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Apr. 27, 2012).

37. Claire Andre & Manuel Velasquez, *Creating the Good Society*, ISSUES IN ETHICS, Spring 1992, <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/ie/v5n1/>.

38. Over the past ten years, I have had the pleasure of having informal group and individual discussions with single mothers in Maryland; California; Washington, D.C.; and Massachusetts, regarding parenting challenges, societal reactions and cultural inhibitions to seeking assistance. Many of the women have experienced poverty, depression, and in many cases, domestic violence. Many of the women expressed dismay, frustration, and disappointment with the way society reacted to them. In my discussions with some American single mothers, they reported how they have heard retorts such as: "Why do you have children if you cannot take care of them?," "It's not my job to raise your children," "You need to pull yourself up by your bootstraps," and "I'm tired of y'all expecting the government to take care of you people."

39. Elza Venter, *The Notion of Ubuntu and Communalism in African Educational Discourse*, 23 *STUD. PHIL. & EDUC.* 140, 149-60 (2004).

40. *Id.*

41. *Id.* at 151.

42. *Id.*

43. *Id.* at 153-54.

44. Silke J. Dyer, *The Value of Children in African Countries: Insights from*

This view is highlighted even in the names given to children, such as *Ora na azu nwa*, which means: “[i]t takes a village or the community to raise a child,” or *Nwaora*, which means: “the child belongs to the community.”<sup>46</sup> In my time in Nigeria, I learned firsthand the practical implications of the proverb, “[i]t takes a village. . . .” For example, if a child received a great report, everyone, including his teachers, neighbors, and even the butcher, commended him. Everyone in the community shared in his success. On the other hand, if a child engaged in any crass behavior, the community uniformly disapproved. Growing up, one was constantly aware that community members were always watching out for him with the express purpose of being accountable for his future. Nowhere is this commitment to collective communal social responsibility more evident than in the *omugwo* practice.

The *omugwo* is a ritual that is observed immediately after the delivery of a baby.<sup>47</sup> The birth of a child almost always triggers a collective response that focuses on providing essential services, including food, shelter, childcare, and moral support.<sup>48</sup> During this period, the maternal grandmother of the newborn comes to stay with her daughter’s family in order to provide care for both mother and baby.<sup>49</sup> This venerable practice amongst the Nigerian Igbos has cultural, social, and health-related significance.<sup>50</sup> The unique character of this form of social support is that it is not commercialized or mandated by the government, and depends entirely on “the strength of the ties” between the groups concerned.<sup>51</sup> During this period, the mother is expected to rest and recuperate.<sup>52</sup> As a matter of duty, the *omugwo* caregiver takes care of the following chores: bathing the newly delivered mother, bathing the baby, cooking, cleaning, and providing childcare.<sup>53</sup> Although the *omugwo* is ideally provided by the biological mother of the woman who has just given birth, it can still be

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*Studies on Infertility*, 28 J. PSYCHOSOMATIC OBSTETRICS & GYNECOLOGY 69, 77 (2007).

45. *African Proverb of the Month*, AFRIPROV.ORG, <http://www.afriprov.org/index.php/african-proverb-of-the-month/23-1998proverbs/137-november-1998-proverb.html> (last visited Apr. 27, 2012).

46. *Id.* (stating that in 1996, then-First Lady Hillary Clinton published a book titled “It Takes a Village,” the title of which was derived from the well known African proverb “it takes a village to raise a child”).

47. EDLYNE E. ANUGWOM, *CHILDREARING AND INFANT CARE ISSUES: A CROSS CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE* 155 (Pranee Liamputtong ed., 2007).

48. *Id.* at 158-60.

49. *Id.*

50. *Id.* at 155.

51. *Id.* at 156.

52. *Id.* at 159.

53. *Id.* at 161.

performed by any other older female relative.<sup>54</sup> The *omugwo* continues to play a very important role, not only in childrearing, but also in cementing familial and societal relationships that foster stronger communities. The *omugwo* is seen as a compulsory obligation; therefore, not performing the *omugwo* is regarded as a form of cultural taboo and is socially unacceptable.<sup>55</sup> For the Igbos, this form of social support does not end within the first few months of the child's existence; indeed, it continues long into the baby's infancy, throughout their childhood, and in many instances, into adulthood.<sup>56</sup> The observance of the *omugwo* highlights important psychological benefits, as it focuses on care for both the baby and mother, unlike many other support systems that focus on care of the baby alone.<sup>57</sup> The Nigerian women who benefit from this practice often feel less overwhelmed, less stressed, and less isolated from their communities than they would without this culturally entrenched, informal support system.<sup>58</sup> These practices, which illustrate certain values within Nigerian villages, can provide a template for more community-based practices, such as Collective Watching, that could improve the welfare of impoverished single mothers in American communities.

#### *A. Being a Single Mother in the Nigerian Village*

Like their American counterparts, many single mothers in Nigeria are poor.<sup>59</sup> In fact, many single mothers in Nigeria are much poorer than their

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54. *Id.* at 158.

55. *Id.* at 162.

56. This *omugwo* tradition is still practiced today. Women with female children in Europe and America still travel from Nigeria to spend time with their daughters after the child is born. As the needs of the family change over time, so do the services provided by the community at large.

57. ANUGWOM, *supra* note 47, at 162-63.

58. In preparing this Article, I administered surveys and conducted phone interviews with single mothers living in Nigeria. The objective of the surveys and interviews was to determine the influence of the Nigerian Village philosophy in the lives of poor, Nigerian single mothers. Specifically, I wanted to determine how the Collective Watching that occurs in Nigerian villages affects the everyday experiences of these single mothers. The questionnaire sought responses from the Igbo women in relation to five major issues: (1) the respondent's view on their financial/socio-economic status; (2) the respondent's marital status/family life including any experience with domestic abuse; (3) the respondent's experience with single parenting; (4) the respondent's experiences on societal (non-governmental) response to respondent's challenges; (5) the respondent's view of the impact/influence of societal intervention on respondent's parenting decisions. I surveyed a total of twenty-one women, many of whom I knew while growing up in Nigeria from 1982 to 1992, and some of whom I met again in 2006 while visiting Nigeria. I interviewed three of those women by phone, in the Igbo language, to clarify some of the answers on the questionnaire. All of the women surveyed and interviewed indicated that they were better off because of the Nigerian community's emphasis on Collective Watching.

59. See *At a Glance: Nigeria*, UNICEF, [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/nigeria\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/nigeria_statistics.html) (last visited Apr. 26, 2012); *Rural Poverty in Nigeria*, INT'L

American counterparts, subsisting on an average of one dollar a day, with about seventy percent of Nigerians being classified as poor and thirty-five percent of them living in absolute poverty.<sup>60</sup> Women and households headed solely by women are often the most chronically poor groups, especially within villages.<sup>61</sup> Basic necessities such as water are in short supply for the average Nigerian woman, while social services and infrastructure are limited and often nonexistent.<sup>62</sup> Like their American counterparts, there is increased pressure from balancing parenting with the realities of poverty, domestic violence, and depression.<sup>63</sup> However, none of the women I interviewed believed that resorting to violence towards themselves or their children was an option.<sup>64</sup> Put another way, many of these single women do not resort to violence against their children because “the village” refuses to let them.<sup>65</sup> In my interviews, I discovered that many of the Nigerian single mothers had similar experiences to their American counterparts; however, the Nigerian women I interviewed believed they did not resort to violence against their children because the Nigerian village was engaged in Collective Watching.<sup>66</sup>

Ngozi Ogueri, one of the interviewees, is a fifty-four-year-old Nigerian woman with two children.<sup>67</sup> While she was eight months pregnant with her second child, her husband assaulted her at their flat in Abakpa Nike, Enugu.<sup>68</sup> She was badly beaten and suffered injuries that required hospitalization.<sup>69</sup> Her husband moved in with another woman and stopped supporting her financially.<sup>70</sup> She was devastated.<sup>71</sup> When Ngozi’s mother

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FUND FOR AGRIC. DEV., <http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/web/guest/country/home/tags/Nigeria> (last visited Dec. 29, 2011).

60. *Rural Poverty in Nigeria*, *supra* note 59.

61. *Id.*

62. *Id.*

63. Telephone Interview with Adaeze Ikpechi (Oct. 30, 2011); Telephone Interview with Ngozi Ogueri (Oct. 17, 2011); Telephone Interview with Ijeoma Okeke (Oct. 30, 2011).

64. Interview with Adaeze Ikpechi, *supra* note 63; Interview with Ngozi Ogueri, *supra* note 63; Interview with Ijeoma Okeke, *supra* note 63. I asked each of the Nigerian women I interviewed about the potential for a violent response to her child. Each woman denied resorting to violence towards her children, crediting the communal intervention and cultural expectation of Collective Watching.

65. Interview with Adaeze Ikpechi, *supra* note 63; Interview with Ngozi Ogueri, *supra* note 63; Interview with Ijeoma Okeke, *supra* note 63.

66. Interview with Adaeze Ikpechi, *supra* note 63; Interview with Ngozi Ogueri, *supra* note 63; Interview with Ijeoma Okeke, *supra* note 63.

67. Interview with Ngozi Ogueri, *supra* note 63.

68. *Id.*

69. *Id.*

70. *Id.*

71. *Id.*

came to visit two days later, she found her daughter bruised, depressed, and without food.<sup>72</sup> The landlord was demanding his rent, the refrigerator was bare, and the contractions were intensifying.<sup>73</sup> Ngozi's mother sent word to the neighbors, relatives, and her church community about her daughter's predicament.<sup>74</sup> Within days, many of the neighbors had brought in food, collected money for her rent, and ensured that her older child was attending school.<sup>75</sup> One of the neighbors took in the oldest child for three years while Ngozi attempted to free herself of her abusive marriage.<sup>76</sup> She went back to school and got a job as a teacher, and she continues to strive in a community that has invested in her success.<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, Ijeoma Okeke is a thirty-eight-year-old mother of two girls, ages two and five.<sup>78</sup> She lost her husband in a tragic car accident about a year ago and subsequently found herself unable to cope emotionally and financially.<sup>79</sup> She had been a stay-at-home mom while her husband was the family's sole breadwinner.<sup>80</sup> Before long, the bills were piling up, the rent was due, and the future looked bleak.<sup>81</sup> "I had no money; we had no savings; the children and I had nothing; I was depressed over the loss of my husband; and, I truly did not know where to begin," shared Ijeoma.<sup>82</sup> She stated, "There are no government agencies to turn to, and I'll look at the children and just break down."<sup>83</sup> However, as Ijeoma quickly pointed out, "[T]he community rallied around us.<sup>84</sup> People brought yams, palm oil, garri, and soap.<sup>85</sup> There was no way I could harm my children.<sup>86</sup> It is taboo for you to murder your children."<sup>87</sup>

Adaeze Ikpechi is a twenty-eight-year-old woman living in Enugu, Nigeria.<sup>88</sup> She is married with three children ranging in age from two to

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72. *Id.*

73. *Id.*

74. *Id.*

75. *Id.*

76. *Id.*

77. *Id.*

78. Interview with Ijeoma Okeke, *supra* note 63.

79. *Id.*

80. *Id.*

81. *Id.*

82. *Id.*

83. *Id.*

84. *Id.*

85. *Id.* Garri is a staple West African food made from cassava tubers.

86. *Id.*

87. *Id.*

88. Interview with Adaeze Ikpechi, *supra* note 63.

seven.<sup>89</sup> She is the third wife of her husband.<sup>90</sup> Unable to bare a male child, Adaeze was often mistreated and neglected by her husband and the other wives.<sup>91</sup> Unable to fend for her three daughters on her own and lacking any useful vocational skills, she moved in with her parents.<sup>92</sup> The village, including members of her church community, rallied around her by collectively providing food, clothing, and moral support for her and her children.<sup>93</sup> Two older women from the neighborhood provided childcare for Adaeze while she trained as a seamstress.<sup>94</sup> Her oldest daughter was temporarily adopted by a distant uncle who provided the basic necessities, including tuition for her schooling.<sup>95</sup> Five years later, Adaeze has a small stall at one of the local markets where she sells clothes and hand-woven artifacts.<sup>96</sup> Her three daughters appear well and her struggles appear under control.<sup>97</sup> She attributes her success to the community that rallied around her to prevent her collapse.<sup>98</sup> She hints that she still relies on the community to continue its support through the years to come.<sup>99</sup> Adaeze also told me that because of the support she received, she is now in a position to better assist other women facing similar challenges.<sup>100</sup>

The Ijeoma, Ngozi, and Adaeze experiences present similar issues to those encountered by LaShanda, Shaquan, and Venisha: poverty, abuse, abandonment, and depression. One of the main differences between them is that the impoverished and often abused Nigerian women I interviewed indicated that they were less burdened because of the community's collective response.<sup>101</sup> Their American counterparts, however, did not fare as well. Though it cannot be said that one factor alone led LaShanda, Shaquan, or Venisha to harm their children, it is clear that none of them appeared to have the extensive community support to which Ijeoma, Ngozi, and Adaeze attributed their survival in the face of so many obstacles.

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89. *Id.*

90. *Id.*

91. *Id.*

92. *Id.*

93. *Id.*

94. *Id.*

95. *Id.*

96. *Id.*

97. *Id.*

98. *Id.*

99. *Id.*

100. *Id.*

101. *Id.*; Interview with Ngozi Ogueri, *supra* note 63; Interview with Ijeoma Okeke, *supra* note 63.

*B. Lessons from the Nigerian Diaspora in America*

In November 2001, I found out that I was expecting my first child. I was in a physically and emotionally abusive marriage, and I was too embarrassed, humiliated, and ashamed to seek help. I kept the details of my abuse as quiet as possible—masking the fear, anguish, and mental torment that besieged me. I timidly hid the bruises on my body under well-tailored suits and retreated to work as an escape from the daily torture. A couple of months into the pregnancy, I summoned the courage to leave my abuser. Although I was relieved to have escaped the jaws of incessant abuse, it quickly dawned on me that I was up against formidable obstacles, mainly the stigma of being a single mother. I was alone in the truest sense of the word. At the birth of my child, Ifeanyi Ruth, the realities of depression quickly set in. I was discharged from the hospital without any idea of how I would cope with a newborn. It soon became clear that I was going to need a lot of help, at least in the early months of my child's life. I am convinced that but for the rallying of the Nigerian community, there is a significant possibility that I would have ended up like LaShanda and many of the other women described in this Article. In the days after my daughter's birth, the Nigerian Diaspora in the Bowie/Silver Spring area of Maryland, consistent with cultural expectations, visited us, stayed overnight for weeks on end, and provided much needed moral and spiritual support through what was, without question, the most traumatic time of my life. The women assigned themselves specific tasks based on our immediate needs. What was evident in their actions was the critical importance of my survival. This support has continued through the years, with coordinated well-being check-ins from the women in the community. Due to the sustained, concerted, and well-coordinated efforts of some of the older women, I learned the rudimentary techniques of taking care of an infant. The childcare the women provided during the first three months of my daughter's life allowed me to start a new job as a practitioner-in-residence at an area law school without much anxiety. The women prepared meals and performed some household chores, which meant that I could focus on attachment exercises with my child, in addition to focusing on my mental and physical healing process. Nor can I overlook the financial benefit of the communal assistance. I was able to weather a financially trying time, due in part to the altruistic efforts of my community members. Finally, their moral and spiritual support was immeasurable. Every week, I had someone calling, visiting, or writing to encourage me "not to give up," while extolling the virtues of perseverance during periods of adversity. As a beneficiary of the Collective Watching model, I am expected to pay it forward by assisting other individuals in need in my community. This is the heart of the Collective Watching model—a sense

of community that compels individuals to act for the good of the community and its beneficiaries, and in turn, pay it forward by reinvesting in the community that once came to their aid.

### III. HOW SOCIAL POLICY CAN ENCOURAGE AND PROMOTE THE NIGERIAN VILLAGE PHILOSOPHY IN AMERICA

Alleviating the many struggles that poor and isolated single mothers face requires bold, innovative, and non-traditional action that is not entirely dependent on government intervention, but instead harnesses and expands upon society's willingness to assume social responsibility towards its most vulnerable members. As data shows, nearly one-fourth of the seventy-five million children in the United States are living in a single-mother household, and a staggering seventy percent of these children are poor or low-income.<sup>102</sup> Children in single-mother households make up the majority—fifty-four percent—of poor children in the United States.<sup>103</sup> Existing research suggests a nexus between the rates of child abuse/maltreatment and the degree to which mothers in a particular neighborhood are subjected to socioeconomic stress without adequate support systems.<sup>104</sup> Invariably, poor, single mothers who lack the adequate support to take care of their children are often forced to cope with their economic stresses alone. The end result is that a child is more likely to be abused in a household where the mother lacks social support in raising her child.<sup>105</sup> However, where members of the community provide adequate support and single mothers do not feel socially isolated, research suggests that child abuse could be minimized.<sup>106</sup> This research suggests that there needs to be a shift away from legalistic intervention and a move towards a community-based model of assistance. In my proposal, the sphere of the modern village should extend well beyond the physical boundaries of a village and translate into a cultural expectation of Collective Watching in order to improve the well-being of both the single mother and her child.

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102. See MARK MATHER, POPULATION REFERENCE BUREAU, U.S. CHILDREN IN SINGLE-MOTHER FAMILIES 1 n.\* (2010), <http://www.prb.org/pdf10/single-motherfamilies.pdf> (defining single-mother families as a sub-set of female-headed families, and defining poor as total income equaling less than 100 percent of the official poverty level).

103. *Id.*

104. See James Garbarino, *A Preliminary Study of Some Ecological Correlates of Child Abuse: The Impact of Socioeconomic Stresses on Mothers*, 47 CHILD DEV. 178, 183-85 (1976) (discussing the potential for more research on the behavioral dynamics of child abuse in areas with lower socioeconomic conditions).

105. See *id.* at 183 (claiming that areas with less resources and more isolation experience higher rates of child abuse); see also Polansky et al., *supra* note 34, at 273-74.

106. See Polansky et al., *supra* note 34, at 273-74.



*A. Reducing Women's Poverty and Despair by Collectively Watching:  
Rethinking the Neighborhood Watch Model*

The idea behind the traditional Neighborhood Watch model is to encourage community members to become active in reducing crime within their neighborhoods.<sup>107</sup> Specifically, the model is meant to allow citizens to “exercise some degree of social control in the environments where they live.”<sup>108</sup> Neighborhood Watch programs can take many forms. In addition to the informal watching that community members do, some programs may work to educate community members on crime prevention, encourage the use of household security measures, and encourage community members to mark their properties to indicate that the neighborhood has a watch system in place.<sup>109</sup>

In addition, community members' willingness to enforce standards of behavior in their own neighborhoods is seen as a critical element in the prevention of crime and disorder.<sup>110</sup> In this vein, the Neighborhood Watch is similar to the Nigerian Igbo village in its premise, values, and structure. Both forms of informal social control seek to protect the neighborhoods by collectively watching out for the welfare and success of its citizenry. Though the traditional Neighborhood Watch model was designed to get citizens involved in reducing crime rates, this model has proved useful when applied to other contexts.<sup>111</sup> The basic framework, which simply encourages citizens to be cognizant of, and responsive to, events unfolding within the neighborhood, can serve as the foundation for a community-based program whose primary goal is to assist poor, single mothers. Applying the same rationale, I am proposing a Neighborhood Watch for single mothers in impoverished communities with the primary focus of cultivating a desire among residents of each neighborhood to be their “sister's keeper.” In practice, this proposal requires a grass roots organizing that prioritizes the well-being of poor, single mothers. Combining the Neighborhood Watch model and the Nigerian village philosophy, local, state, and federal governments should pass statutes or ordinances that:

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107. Garofalo & McLeod, *supra* note 8, at 326-27.

108. *Id.*

109. *Id.* at 330.

110. *Id.* at 327.

111. See Ramon M. Salcido et al., *A Neighborhood Watch Program for Inner-City School Children*, 24 CHILD. & SCH. 175, 178-79 (2002) (explaining that the Neighborhood Watch model was used to create a program called “Kid Watch,” in which community members watched kids walking to and from school with hopes of preventing them from encountering violence within their neighborhoods).

(1) *Provide grants to “block clubs” in low-income communities for the specific purpose of establishing Collective Watching programs for single mothers*

If communities lack block clubs, the government should provide these communities with grants that allow them to start block clubs dedicated for this purpose.<sup>112</sup> The grants would be used to develop programming that helps community members get to know one another. Essential to Collective Watching in many Nigerian communities is the genuine desire of community members to look out for and help one another. Though these policy proposals cannot force neighbors in American communities to take an active interest in each other’s welfare, they can certainly attempt to eliminate barriers that prevent people in low-income communities from Collectively Watching, as well as encourage these community members to become more involved.

(2) *Provide financial incentives for community members to take on leadership roles within low-income communities*

These community leaders, armed with more economic assistance, would be responsible for organizing activities to better acquaint neighbors with one another, notifying community members about single mothers in the neighborhood, and identifying the specific areas of need for these mothers and community members who can lend support in those areas (i.e. child care, food assistance, and emotional support). In my case, the Nigerian community did not need financial incentives to come to my aid in my time of need. However, overcoming the isolationist attitude that is prevalent among many Americans requires innovative approaches that enable people to get involved. Moreover, the concept of Collective Watching can be found among many white, middle-class, and suburban neighborhoods across the country.<sup>113</sup> The existence of this type of neighborhood is, in part, due to the two-parent structure that allows many of these mothers to stay home and participate in a community of other stay-at-home mothers focused on collectively raising all of the children within the community.<sup>114</sup>

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112. Funding for these programs can come from a variety of sources, including those at the federal, state, and local level. My proposal focuses more on laying the foundation for Collective Watching programs, rather than determining the precise details concerning how these programs will be funded.

113. See Sally Bould, *Caring Neighborhoods: Bringing Up the Kids Together*, 24 J. FAM. ISSUES 427, 436-37 (2003) (describing one instance in which there was a family of six children who would often be left alone during the day without any food. One family in the neighborhood would give the older boy extra food to take home to his siblings while another would take in the kids during the day and wash them. The community members did not need child protective services or police intervention. They took matters into their own hands to assist parents and children who were the most in need).

114. See *id.* at 438 (pointing out that the presence of two-parent families, in which the mothers were able to stay home and remain engaged in their young children’s lives,

Creating financial incentives in low-income communities makes Collective Watching more doable for people who may not otherwise have the time, resources, or finances to maintain such an extensive community-based system.

The funding for the proposed Collective Watching programs can come from a variety of sources, either federal or local. Neighborhood Watch programs are funded at the state and local levels across the country. Rhode Island, for example, passed the Neighborhood Crime Prevention Act, which provides funds for communities to encourage residents to get involved in crime prevention strategies.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, Pennsylvania has established legislation that allows a designated board to make annual appropriations towards neighborhood crime watch programs.<sup>116</sup> The city of Phoenix administers its own Neighborhood Block Watch Grant Program to encourage community members to devise innovative proposals to reduce the occurrence of crime in their neighborhoods.<sup>117</sup> Not only should low-income communities have access to various grant programs and funding opportunities to start Collective Watching programs, but there should also be more financial incentives, such as paid salary positions for community organizers, to get members from these communities involved.

There are several programs in communities throughout the country that do provide essential services to single mothers similar to those that would be provided using the village philosophy. The Nurse-Family Partnership is a free maternal and child health program provided to low-income, first-time mothers.<sup>118</sup> Child health nurses serve as a valuable resource to mothers from pregnancy through the child's first two years of life.<sup>119</sup> Each mother receives over sixty home visits from a maternal and child health nurse.<sup>120</sup>

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was essential to the neighborhood functioning).

115. See R.I. GEN. LAWS ANN. § 42-96-3 (West 2011) (allowing the Director of the Rhode Island Justice Commission to enter into contracts with neighborhood crime prevention organizations for the performance of organization activities); *id.* § 42-96-4 (providing payment from the justice commission to organizations for approved activities, but restricting payment to sums required for the payment of employee salaries and the purchase of necessary equipment for approved activities).

116. See 53 PA. CONS. STAT. ANN. § 56575 (West 2011) (clarifying that the funding is at the discretion of the board).

117. See *Neighborhood Block Watch Grant Program*, CITY OF PHOENIX, <http://phoenix.gov/police/nbwgrant.html> (last visited Apr. 27, 2012) (providing an overview of the neighborhood watch program in Phoenix, and providing instructions for the application for its associated grant program).

118. See *Pregnancy Assistance for First Time Moms*, NURSE-FAM. PARTNERSHIP, <http://www.nursefamilypartnership.org/first-time-moms> (last visited Apr. 27, 2012) (providing a brief description of the pregnancy assistance program).

119. *Id.*

120. See *Maternal and Child Health Nursing*, NURSE-FAM. PARTNERSHIP, <http://www.nursefamilypartnership.org/nurses/nurse-home-visitors--role> (last visited Apr. 27, 2012) (listing the program's various services).

During these visits, the mothers get advice on prenatal practices, health and development, and general life coaching advice that encourages mothers to seek education and stable employment.<sup>121</sup> The Welcome Baby Program<sup>122</sup> and Baby TALK<sup>123</sup> are similar programs designed to provide mothers with the necessary prenatal and early childhood care.

Though the aforementioned programs in the United States appear to model the Nigerian Village philosophy, these programs are limited in scope and require single mothers to reach out for help themselves. Furthermore, all of the programs mentioned end once the child has reached two or three years of age. The Nigerian model has no distinct end. As long as mothers continue to care and provide for their children alone, community members will continue to provide assistance. Collective Watching in Nigerian villages continues well into adulthood, fostering a tradition of agency, ownership, and accountability. When a woman has a child, the collective presumption is that caring for the child is a communal effort. The community assumes that she needs help, and community members provide this unsolicited help. To that end, instead of incentivizing single mothers to enroll in specific programs that require more government funding and intervention, we need policies that incentivize community members to reach out to single mothers. The proposed model empowers community members with developing, implementing, and monitoring these programs themselves.

### *B. Potential Benefits of Collective Watching*

The potential benefits of implementing Collective Watching programs in low-income communities, based on the American Neighborhood Watch framework and the Nigerian philosophy, are countless. On a smaller scale,

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121. *Id.*

122. See Marion Atkins, *The Welcome Baby Program: A Community-Based Volunteer Prevention Model of Caring, Sharing, and Support for New Parents*, 7 *INFANT MENTAL HEALTH J.* 156, 161-62 (1986). Welcome Baby is a community-based volunteer program that offers support to parents of newborns through hospital visitations by trained volunteers, emotional support for new mothers, referrals to appropriate services, and follow-up contacts with families for up to one year after a child's birth. *Id.* at 162. Some of the goals of the program include better emotional preparation for parenthood, prevention of child abuse and neglect, and increased parental awareness of available community resources. *Id.* at 161.

123. See Claudia Quigg, *Baby TALK: A Community Builds a Trustworthy System to Support Parents of Young Children*, *DELTA KAPPA GAMMA BULL.*, Winter 2010, at 27, 27-28. Baby TALK started in Decatur, Illinois in the late 1980s with a goal of "positively impact[ing] child development and nurture[ing] healthy parent-child relationships during the critical early years." *Id.* Similar to the Welcome Baby Program, Baby TALK sends professional early childhood parent educators to visit parents of newborns at local hospitals to promote nurturing parent-child relationships and to help encourage early literacy. See *id.* at 28. Each family's needs are assessed individually, and educators provide them with access to a variety of resources. *Id.*

the observations and interviews conducted during my research highlight the benefits of Collective Watching. None of the Nigerian women I interviewed felt compelled to resort to violence towards their children as a result of the pressures of poverty combined with single parenting. On a larger scale, research has shown that some of the benefits of implementing interventionist programs for mothers during their pregnancies and throughout the first two years of their child's life include reduction in the mother's reliance on public assistance,<sup>124</sup> reduction in anti-social and criminal behavior among children,<sup>125</sup> and decreased occurrences of child abuse and neglect.<sup>126</sup> Specifically, studies on the positive effects of intensive nurse visitation programs for single, low-income mothers have yielded many of the above-mentioned benefits.<sup>127</sup>

A counterargument to developing and funding community programs based on the Neighborhood Watch model and the Nigerian village philosophy of Collective Watching is that this type of program will only create further dependence. However, involving single mothers in these preventive support programs may actually reduce their dependency on public assistance in the long term.<sup>128</sup> A study conducted on a sample of

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124. See Harriet Kitzman et al., *Enduring Effects of Nurse Home Visitation on Maternal Life Course: A 3-Year Follow-Up of a Randomized Trial*, 283 J. AM. MED. ASS'N 1983, 1987 (2000) (detailing the results of a study showing that after being enrolled in a prenatal and infancy home visitation program for two years after the birth of their first child, the nurse-visited mothers used fewer months of Aid to Families with Dependent Children and food stamps than the comparison group).

125. See David Olds et al., *Long-term Effects of Nurse Home Visitation on Children's Criminal and Antisocial Behavior: 15-Year Follow-Up of a Randomized Controlled Trial*, 280 J. AM. MED. ASS'N 1238, 1241 (1998) [hereinafter *Long-term Effects of Nurse Home Visitation*] (providing the results of a fifteen-year follow-up of a study on the effects of home visitation by nurses on children's antisocial behavior, showing that the adolescents of mothers who received nurse visits during pregnancy and postnatally had fewer arrests, convictions, instances of running away, sexual partners, and reports of alcohol use than the comparison group).

126. See David L. Olds et al., *Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: A Randomized Trial of Nurse Home Visitation*, 78 PEDIATRICS 65, 71 (1986) [hereinafter *Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect*] (showing that in a study involving women at high risk for caregiving dysfunction, four percent of the women who received home visits by nurses had abused or neglected their children during the first two years of their children's lives, compared to nineteen percent of the comparison group).

127. See Kitzman et al., *supra* note 124, at 1987 (detailing that after fifty-four months, low-income mothers who received nurse visitation postpartum had fewer months of utilizing welfare programs than mothers who did not receive nurse visitation); *Long-term Effects of Nurse Home Visitation*, *supra* note 125, at 1241 (showing that adolescents born to single, low-income mothers who received nurse visitation had fewer arrests, convictions, probation violations, instances of running away, and sexual partners than their comparison group); *Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect*, *supra* note 126, at 71 (explaining that although their study showed that incidents of abuse increased in relation to risk factors, the rate of abuse and neglect remained relatively low among high-risk families who received nurse visitation).

128. See Kitzman et al., *supra* note 124, at 1987 (indicating that among a group of single mothers who had socioeconomic risk factors, the mothers who received home visits by nurses used fewer months of both Aid to Families with Dependent Children

over 743 low-income, black women in Memphis revealed that women who received intensive home visits from nurses reported fewer months of using Aid to Families with Dependent Children and food stamps by their child's fifth birthday than women who did not receive any post-partum care.<sup>129</sup> A Denver study of 735 low-income, pregnant women also revealed positive effects for women who participated in home-visit programs.<sup>130</sup> Compared to women who did not receive home visits, women who received intensive home visits from paraprofessionals<sup>131</sup> worked more and reported better mental health, among other effects.<sup>132</sup> Mothers who received visits by nurses<sup>133</sup> reported less domestic violence and greater intervals between the births of their first and second child, among other effects, than did women without any postnatal care.<sup>134</sup> These results suggest that preventive programs have the potential to increase women's economic self-sufficiency, thereby reducing their need to rely on public assistance. In addition to these findings, none of the Nigerian single mothers I interviewed required government assistance.<sup>135</sup> They achieved some level of self-sufficiency through the Collective Watching of their community.<sup>136</sup>

Furthermore, Collective Watching could potentially reduce criminal and anti-social behavior among children.<sup>137</sup> A study conducted in Elmira, New

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and food stamp benefits than did mothers in the comparison group).

129. *Id.*

130. See David L. Olds et al., *Effects of Home Visits by Paraprofessionals and by Nurses: Age 4 Follow-Up Results of a Randomized Trial*, 114 PEDIATRICS 1560, 1563 (2004) (showing that two years after their child's birth, women who received home visits worked more, demonstrated better mental health, displayed more nurturing interaction, and had home environments that better facilitated early learning than the comparison group that did not receive home visits by nurses or paraprofessionals).

131. *Id.* at 1562 (noting that paraprofessionals in the study completed an average of 6.3 home visits during each mother's pregnancy and sixteen visits during infancy).

132. See *id.* at 1563 (detailing that two years after the end of the home visit program, women that were assigned to paraprofessionals worked more, demonstrated better mental health, interacted more sensitively to their children during play, and lived in environments that were more conducive to early learning than the control group).

133. *Id.* at 1562 (noting that nurse home visitors completed an average of 6.5 home visits during pregnancy and twenty-one visits during infancy).

134. See *id.* at 1566 (explaining that two years after the completion of the home visitation program, nurse-visited women had longer intervals between the births of their first and second children and experienced less domestic violence, and nurse-visited children demonstrated better language development and better preparation for entering elementary school than the control group).

135. Interview with Adaeze Ikpechi, *supra* note 63; Interview with Ngozi Ogueri, *supra* note 63; Interview with Ijeoma Okeke, *supra* note 63.

136. Interview with Adaeze Ikpechi, *supra* note 63; Interview with Ngozi Ogueri, *supra* note 63; Interview with Ijeoma Okeke, *supra* note 63.

137. See generally *Long-term Effects of Nurse Home Visitation*, *supra* note 125, at 1241 (providing the results of a fifteen-year follow-up on children born to mothers who received home visitation by nurses, demonstrating that home visitation has positive long-term effects on children born into high-risk families that can help to reduce antisocial behavior).

York on the long-term effects of home visitation nurse programs indicated that adolescents who were born to single, low-income women, who received nurse visits during pregnancy and during the first two years of their child's lives, reported fewer instances of running away, arrests, convictions, probation violations, and lifetime sex partners, among other behaviors.<sup>138</sup> Perhaps the most important benefit of the Collective Watching proposal is that it has the potential to reduce the occurrence of child abuse and neglect. Another Elmira study indicated that of the mothers who were most at-risk, nineteen percent of the mothers who did not receive nurse visits had abused or neglected their children within the first two years of their children's lives, compared to only four percent of nurse-visited mothers.<sup>139</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Differences clearly exist between the Nigerian and American cultures. Nigerian culture and institutions cannot be picked up and placed wholesale into the American context. In at least one respect, however, America can learn from Nigeria. The United States is not homogeneously individualistic, and in fact, has many communal strains in its history. Taking its cue from the Nigerian village philosophy, American social policies should strengthen those communal strains when it comes to rearing children. The similarity of the Nigerian village philosophy, in which children are viewed as belonging to everyone, to the American Neighborhood Watch model, which encourages citizens to actively engage in protecting their community, shows that Collective Watching may not be so difficult to implement. Many American communities already have this framework on which they can build. As the disquieting stories of poor, single mothers resorting to violence against their children show, there is an urgent need to implement innovative, non-traditional policies that empower these mothers to tackle the challenges of single parenting. It is imperative that the legal system take steps to promote and foster a sense of communal obligation towards the most vulnerable members of our society—single mothers and their children.

I understand that privacy concerns might counsel against my recommendations. However, any privacy invasion is likely to be minimal. A single mother could still refuse to accept help from the Collective Watching program. While a complete analysis of the privacy issue would take a separate article, it is reasonable to say that robust privacy protections here would oppress far more than liberate. Moreover, the privacy of the

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138. *Id.*

139. *Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect*, *supra* note 126, at 71.

mother is not the only key consideration. The child's welfare is at stake. I acknowledge that my examples have focused on women being driven to the extremes of murder and suicide. Those examples highlight what is at stake. But even in less drastic circumstances, poor, single mothers compelled to struggle in isolation will suffer emotional and financial pain, their children will likely be raised in unhealthy environments, and their demands on the limited public resources available to them will be great. Collective Watching serves as a viable option, which could potentially combat both the more severe and the less drastic consequences of single parenting in poverty for low-income communities across the country.