

# **Gender and Achievement in Higher Education**

**(Examines male/female differential in the Caribbean/Belize) <sup>1</sup>**

**The National Women's Commission in partnership with UWI Open  
Campus-Belize**

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**The Bliss-Centre @ 5:30P.M. March 30, 2011**

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## **Introduction and Background**

In 1986, Professor Errol Miller published what would become a historic monograph – *The Marginalisation of the Black Male: Insights from the Teaching Profession*. Although many never bothered to read the text, its provocative title drew attention to a reality that was beginning to become apparent in the Anglophone Caribbean Region. That is, females who in this region had always had relatively high enrolment rates in primary and secondary education in comparison with some other parts of the world were now beginning to surpass males in some areas. It was this publication that in many ways brought what we now refer to as issues of masculinity to public attention in this region.

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## **What is the Situation?**

According to the *Global Education Digest, 2009* the number of students pursuing tertiary education globally skyrocketed over the past 37 years from 28.6 million in 1970 to 152.5 million in 2007 (UNESCO/GED.2009:10). Part of this expansion was fuelled by expansion in sub-Saharan Africa but also by the expansion in women's participation. Overall the number of women enrolled in tertiary institutions grew almost twice as fast as that of men – “While the number of male students quadrupled from 17.7 to 75.1 million, the number of female students rose six-fold from 10.8 million to 77.4 million” ( UNESCO/GED,2009:12).

Using the Global Parity Index(GPI) which represents the ratio of male to female gross enrolment, it was found that the ratios of men to women reached parity around 2003 however since then, the average global participation of females has exceeded that of males. In 1970, male enrolment was 1.6 times that of females, but by 2007 this had changed as females' participation ratio was 1.08 times that of males (UNESCO/GED, 2009:12). Female participation rates are higher than males in North America and Europe (by one-third) as well as in Latin America and the Caribbean and Central Asia. There is parity in the Arab states suggesting that if trends continue even here women will soon be the majority. In sub-Saharan Africa however women still face significant barriers to higher education as in 2007, the ratio was 66 females for every

100 males but this too is an improvement on 1970 when the ratio was 27 females to every 100 males (UNESCO/GED, 2009:12). Males also still predominate in South and South West Asia where the gross enrolment rate is one third higher for men than for women. According to the UN Statistical Division, in its statistics for 2008, of the 172 member countries for which data were available, in 114 of these women's share of tertiary enrolment exceeded that of males. One conclusion that has been drawn from this analysis is that where tertiary education opportunities are limited, women are less likely to access them. However in countries where access has expanded women are more likely to seize the opportunities than men (UNESCO/GED, 2009:12-13. This suggests further that where higher education begins to move from a more elitist education and its class characteristics begin to change, it is women who are more likely to fuel this expansion.

**Table 1 – Women's Share of Tertiary Enrolment in the Caribbean**

<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>YEAR OF DATA</b>	<b>Women's Share of Tertiary Enrolment</b>
Anguilla	2006	83.0%
Barbados	2007	58.4%
Belize	2004	70.2%
Bermuda	2005	65.1%

British Virgin Islands	2005	69.0% (UIS Estimate)
Cayman Islands	2006	71.6% (UIS Estimate)
Guyana	2006	68.7%
Jamaica	2003	69.9 %(UIS Estimate)
St. Lucia	2006	84.6%
Trinidad and Tobago	2005	55.6%(UIS estimate)
<b>Non-Anglophone Countries</b>		
Aruba	2007	58.4%
Cuba	2007	63.6%
Dominican Republic	2004	61.3%
Netherlands Antilles	2002	59.7%
Suriname	2002	62.0

Source: UN Statistical Division: Statistics and Indicators on Women and Men, December 2008,  
<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/indwm/tab4d.htm>

Today there is widespread concern in the Caribbean region around the issue of gender and achievement in education in general and higher education in particular, but quite understandably, this is not a concern only of this region. The data presented above is interesting as tertiary

education would include not only higher education but also other levels of tertiary education including vocational and technical areas; twenty years ago this would not have been the case. What was also apparent from these data was that Caribbean countries generally had some of the highest rates of female participation in the world, with Anglophone Caribbean countries having the highest rates overall. It is not surprising therefore that this region has been at the forefront of international discourse, research and theorizing related to this phenomenon.

### **Understanding the Situation**

As early as the 1970s, in the wake of the successes of the women's movement globally at that time, global concerns began to emerge about women's increasing educational parity with men. But it was in the 1990s that these issues really came to the fore with studies in Caribbean, Europe, North America and Australia. Indeed it is true to say that masculinity studies in the Caribbean region began with a concern about male performance in education. Errol Miller's *The Marginalisation of the Black Male: Insights from the Teaching Profession* identified education as the main arena where 'male marginalisation' was taking place in the Caribbean. The colonial and present-day education system he argued had created a situation where women were advantaged and men disadvantaged. He used data on changes in teacher employment over the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, to argue that the colonial male rulers had sought to

reduce the power of colonised males by favouring female teachers over the more militant males; those in the Teachers Unions - a process further developed in his later work *Men at Risk*. In that work he argued that powerful males use women against less powerful males with the result that women gain the greater share of opportunities for social advancement among subordinated groups. In his own words "The liberation of women is the unintended consequence of the use of women as pawns in the conflicts between men (Miller, 1991:289). He continues:

Women will not only continue to progress, the unintended consequence of being used as pawns in male conflicts, but will go on to assert themselves and seize power from men in some societies (Miller, 1991:282).

There have been numerous critiques of the Marginalisation Thesis as well as the emergence of alternative formulations. Not least of these is the fact that females are not seen as having any agency of their own, as their success is perceived as the unintended result of conflict among men (Lindsay, 2002:72). Disagreeing with the Miller thesis Barry Chevannes put forward some alternative explanations. He noted that there was a high attrition rate for boys who more frequently dropped out of the education system. Additionally he noted that boys underperform in English – the medium of instruction, which is today perceived as a ‘girls’ subject, Chevannes argued that this probably

handicaps boys much more than girls lower performance in mathematics handicaps girls (Chevannes, 1999). This was supported by Odette Parry who in a study of fourth forms in Jamaica, Barbados and St. Vincent and the Grenadines reported that teachers described English as a subject that was “too effeminate”, “not macho enough” “nerdish’ and “too girlish” for males (Parry,2004:176). One teacher reported that in Barbados “a nerd is a boy who shows academic inclinations” (Parry, 2004:177).

In the Anglophone Caribbean, this concern with education has been coupled with the situation where men continue to dominate the prison population, are the main purveyors of crime, especially violent crime which has escalated in many communities. Again this is true not only for the Caribbean but also for the rest of the world especially during the era of neo-liberal globalisation. This was observed by Chevannes who already in the 1990s, highlighted the clear link between poor educational performance and young male criminality; identifying a number of factors contributing to the social construction of a certain kind of masculine identity.

In conclusion, Chevannes called for more attention to the patterns of gender socialization, a subject on which he has also carried out pioneering work (Chevannes, 1999:33). He observed that although there are proportionately more unemployed young females than there are young males, young males are more visible - on the streets and in public

spaces. Following Figueroa (1996), he argues that the present patterns of gender socialization which privilege boys have potentially problematic implications for male youth in a work environment increasingly being determined by educational competence (Chevannes, 1999:34).

Despite the theoretical discourses that have been taking place among scholars, at a lay-persons level a number of popular explanations have emerged for the perceived male under-achievement in the education system in this region. These have centred on women and girls and can be summarised as follows:

- the preponderance of female teachers at primary and secondary level and absence of male teachers as role models;
- the large number of female single-parent households where there is no resident male present to serve as a role model;
- the opening up of educational opportunities for girls; and
- the introduction of co-educational schools where boys are 'distracted' by girls.

Odette Parry has referred to this as the “Women as Villain Thesis” where women are blamed for what is perceived as the underperformance of boys. What is also important is that most of those factors relate not only to women but also to the post-colonial stratified



education and class systems. In their report on *Boys Underachievement*<sup>2</sup> the authors caution us not to approach this problematic as one of rivalry or competition between males and females. Rather they suggest that we understand these as the outcomes of a number of gendered processes which we need to examine in order to properly address them.

Interestingly it is this concern with male educational achievement that has in some ways opened the field of gender studies to a wider audience. For many who previously rejected this field because of its association with women as irrelevant or unimportant, it has now emerged as a space where these difficult issues could be understood and addressed.

### **Gender and Educational Achievement**

The Commonwealth Secretariat in a 2006 study *on Boys Underachievement* observes that gender equality in education has always been a problem although in the past it was girl's education that was the concern.

Gender Equality in education they defined as:

“...ensuring equality of entitlement, equality of opportunities and equality in the capacity to exercise the entitlements and use the opportunities for both girls and boys belonging to diverse social, ethnic, linguistic or economic groups. The notion of equality also refers to relational aspects and is linked to the issues of justice and

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<sup>2</sup> Commissioned by the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

freedom. Any practice or trend that prevents either boys or girls, or both, from realising their full potential to grow into responsible and aware individuals needs to be perceived as a hindrance.” (Jha and Kelleher, 2006:9).

As a result they remind us that gender equality cannot be understood separately from other forms of inequality such as class and socio-economic status, ‘race’ and ethnic inequalities, rural or urban location, disability or any other axis of social difference. In this regard it is important in our analysis to examine not only difference between males and females, but the ways in which economic or ethnic difference for example may shape the outcomes of different groups of males and females. In other words we need to understand the diverse ways in which gender is experienced even *within* the same sex as well as between sexes. To cite Barbara Bailey:

Inequalities resulting from gendered social processes are not only evident between males and females. There are also clear **within-sex** differences resulting from these processes. To limit a gender equality framework to an examination of only **between-sex** differences masks several important within-group differences resulting from the intersection of gender with the hierarchies referred to earlier: socio-economic status, race/ethnicity etc., and which are only revealed through **within-group** comparisons. A paradigm shift away from the between-sex, mostly univariate,

approach to the problem to one which accommodates a more robust multivariate analysis of difference both between and within the sexes, is essential if the problem of boys' underachievement is to be fully explored and understood ( Bailey,2009:5).

The terminology used to address this issue is also important. It has been referred to as one of gender imbalance, under performance, or underachievement. The first – gender imbalance suggests that what is required is parity i.e. equal numbers of males and females in the various sectors of education. The major concern here would be the factors contributing to this and what this really represents. It also raises the question that if gender balance is required in education, is it also required in other areas of life. The notion of underperformance on the other hand suggests that males are not performing to the degree that is expected, or possibly to their full capacity – whereas girls are. This is problematic as this hides the fact that indeed at least in most of our region; the majority of our young people males and females have not been performing adequately<sup>3</sup>. A focus on underperformance of males therefore directs our attention away from low performing girls.

The question of achievement on the other hand, is related to performance on achievement criteria e.g. tests, examination results, transition to higher or tertiary education etc. These understandings

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<sup>3</sup> The low pass rates at CSEC are testimony to this.

however need to be juxtaposed against other criteria of achievement which may not be centred on the education system; as well as changing notions of achievement emerging among various population groups. As suggested by Barbara Bailey therefore at a 2009 CARICOM meeting it may be necessary to “interrogate what seems to be an underlying assumption of the male underachievement debate; that is, that education is perceived by **all** groups as equally essential for meeting their perceived needs and aspirations(Bailey,2009:3).

### **Trends in Gender and Higher Education**

Generally the data suggests that globally, more young women complete secondary school with qualifications for university as girls opt for programmes that prepare them for higher education to a greater extent, while boys select vocational programmes. According to the Programme for International Student Assessment -PISA – in a study of student interests of 15 year olds in 2003 - boys were still more interested in mathematics than girls and “In countries where there was a considerable difference in interest in mathematics between boys and girls (i.e. boys stated that they were considerably more interested), the proportion of men who took degrees in mathematics and computer

science tended to be higher.” However in two-thirds of the OECD<sup>4</sup> countries, more female 15 year olds were interested in going on to higher education than males (Högskoleverket, 2008:98).

The study also found that girls felt that they were forced to access higher education because otherwise they would not be employed - a decision supported by the available data. Stephanie Seguino in a 2003 published study, observed that despite having higher levels of education than men, Caribbean women still were “... almost twice as likely as men to be unemployed” (Seguino, 2003: 1). Yet Seguino observed that the Caribbean is characterized by: high rates of female headedness among households and a high reliance by women on paid work to support children and other family members. As a result, many migrate in order to support families. Barbara Bailey cited a recent ECLAC study that found that “females require at least three more years of schooling than males to be equally competitive with males who enter the labour market at an earlier age with less certification (Bailey, 2009:9).

Herein lies one of the biggest clues about male academic performance - the reality that as an economist said to me once years ago - “women get a larger return on their investment in formal education than do men” or as one report on higher education opined – “Women

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<sup>4</sup> OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development/ founded in 1948 and currently has 32 members mainly in Europe and the Global North but including some countries of Latin America and The Republic of Korea.

Learn – Men Earn.” For despite women’s higher access to formal and higher education men overall still earn more than women. Bailey and Seguino both identified a wage gap which acts as a further disincentive for males to remain in school. Census data from Jamaica indicate that at all levels of education, except where the response was ‘none’ males, on average, earn more than females annually. Similar patterns are also evident in other Caribbean countries (Bailey, 2009:9). Not surprisingly many low-income households and young men themselves, yield to the temptation to drop out of school in order to earn a living. Vulnerable young men who are unemployed or unemployable, presumably school drop-outs, are the primary catchment population used in the trade of drugs and small arms and light weapons across the region and their disposal and use within communities (Bailey, 2009:10).

There is, as a result, many more employment or financial opportunities (legal or otherwise) available to school-leaving male youth than for young women; as a result there is more incentive for the latter to stay longer in school. Our alienating, violent and competitive school system is not one that many children enjoy, boys have an economically viable escape – at least it seems so at the time. Additionally, money in the context of male-bread winner ideology is a marker of our contemporary masculinities. It is with money that men get access to women and visible access to women is a confirmation of their masculine and heterosexual sex/gender identity. In-school youth observe that

employed out-of-school male youth have access to the in-school girls because of their income; the options are now clear. There are also many stories of school girls running away from home to live with their out-of-school partners, an option which often results in the reproduction of this very situation.

### *Understanding Gender*

Gender is now a word that is liberally used by many in various contexts. It is one of these things that everyone feels that they instinctively understand because after all - "we all have a gender". As a result few seek to properly examine, read and reflect upon what it actually means. For example it is now popular on survey questionnaires and government forms to replace the word 'sex' with the word 'gender.' Maybe it is assumed that gender is the modern word for sex (which it is not!). As someone who has been privileged to work in this field for close to thirty years, I am continuously humbled by its complexity and by its rich possibilities for enabling a deeper comprehension of so much of the human condition.

The more we study this phenomenon the more we are fascinated and realize how much more there is still to know. But many in our region, possibly including some of you here this evening, have resisted

the urge to learn more. This is partly out of fear; because gender will certainly change your way of thinking and of understanding yourself; the society and the world; your relationships; body and sexuality. But also partly because gendered knowledge is transformational and necessitates that we re-think much of what we have accepted in the past and much of what we are currently doing. The interesting thing about gender though is that although we may not be conscious of it, virtually all of our actions, our thoughts and our beliefs are gendered. This is because human beings are gendered beings.

Sex/Gender identity is possibly the most fundamental identity that we possess. Human beings find it difficult to relate to persons outside of a gendered context, hence the very first question we ask of new parents is – is it a boy or a girl? This is because we have no knowledge of how to relate to persons outside of gender. This in some ways also accounts for our discomfort with sex and gender ambiguity and diversity, but this is the subject possibly for another time in another place. For now I will simply define gender as I understand it as – the social, cultural and historical constructions of masculinity and femininity and the related power relations *or* the social determinants of what it is to be a man or woman which may vary with social, cultural and historical contexts and the unequal power related to this.

The term gender assumed this new meaning with the emergence of the new feminist theory and scholarship of the 1970s – 1980s. It was



used to facilitate an analytical and conceptual distinction between the biological differences of being 'male' and 'female' and the socially constructed or socially determined differences and meanings attached to 'masculinity' and femininity'. These scholars therefore established a conceptual distinction between **sex** which was seen as biological or anatomical and **gender** which was seen as social.

What was also important is that the social value attached to masculinity and femininity was and is not equal. Masculinity and maleness has always been valued more highly and seen as superior to femininity and femaleness, as a result masculine status is never bestowed automatically. Males are under constant pressure to prove their eligibility to this valued state, even today with the improvements in women's situation. The specifics of various 'gender systems' however vary from society to society, shaped by history and factors such as ethnicity, class and economics, religion and belief systems, ability and disability and so on, with all of these factors interacting with each other with diverse outcomes.

### **Theoretical Insights from the Literature**

Jha and Kelleher (2006) identified the main themes that characterised early discourses on masculinity and education starting in the 1970s as follows:

- that working class boys lacked the middle class values towards education of middle class boys;
- that emerging feminism was a threat to young boys who reacted against it by poor performance in schools;
- That schools were failing boys by not catering to their needs; and
- 'boys will be boys' i.e. that boys were inherently incompatible with the structures and strictures of the formal school system, e.g. could not sit still or do monotonous tasks etc. (Jha and Kelleher, 2006:13-14)

But it is in the 1990s that this field would come into its own in the United Kingdom, Australia and definitely in the Caribbean. Although many of the studies did not focus specifically on higher education, what was clear in all the writings is that children's performance at lower levels was a determinant of their future involvement in higher education. While some other areas of tertiary education remained primarily a male stronghold such as the skilled trades and crafts, something not always remembered. What is also interesting to note is that men were less inclined than women to do the remedial work to address educational gaps in order to matriculate into higher education.

In the Caribbean and globally a number of interesting conceptual frameworks have emerged to understand this situation. In addition many of the popular perceptions have been studied with interesting conclusions.

## **Mark Figueroa – Male Privileging**

In his 2004 publication Mark Figueroa observed that underperformance could be seen as one aspect of maleness in Jamaica. The emerging difference in male and female academic performance he attributes to “the historical privileging of males” in gender socialization practices where males are accorded greater social space. These include the following:

- Males enjoy a greater freedom of public space and have the freedom to roam the streets whereas girls tend to have greater confinement to the home, still today many of them minister to the needs of males. The irony is that girls learn the discipline of performing monotonous tasks without immediate gratification;
- As boys grow older they are exempted from many household tasks - chores as well as self-care such as washing, cooking etc. Girls usually have responsibility for household tasks and boys for outdoor tasks, in many urban settings these outdoor tasks have all but disappeared, so while boys have the privilege of not doing much housework or being cared for, they do not acquire the skills of time-management, self-discipline and a sense of process required for success in the largely rote-learning education system;

- The requirements of girls' self-care such as – nails, hair, dress, personal hygiene etc. also placed specific demands on girls and young women which boys were spared, although this may be changing (Figueroa, 2004:148-149)."

This is supported by Chevannes when he observes that for both Indo and Afro-Caribbean men, the street or street corner or bar in urban communities is almost entirely a male domain, where it is a sign of manhood to be able to visit without censure. He notes that men of both groups attach great significance to the activities that take place in this space, as "it is the principal means of expressing and solidifying male bonding and enhancing reputation." (Chevannes, 2001:211). One of these activities is *liming* and Chevannes cites the late Richard Alsopp's definition of liming in his Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage as –

" To sit, loaf or hang about with others, usually on the sidewalk or open space, chatting aimlessly, watching passers-by and sometimes making unsolicited remarks about them"

(Chevannes,2001:211).

Hence a drive through many parts of the region would see young and older men congregated on street corners. The block therefore becomes a critical area for gender socialisation of young males – for good or for ill. Gender socialisation, therefore is another factor which must be brought into the equation. The processes at home, at school, on the block, among peers, in religious institutions where young women and men learn

about acceptable masculine and feminine behaviours and the sanctions which could result for not staying within these boundaries.

### **Homophobia and the retreat into Physicality**

But it is in this space according to Chevannes where, “the final stages of male socialization are accomplished. This is important as for Caribbean parents he observed, there is a major concern with “the consolidation of male identity” - that is the homophobic fear that if young men do not engage in acceptable ‘masculine activities’ their sex/gender identity would be confused at best, homosexual at worst. Indeed homophobia prevents especially working –class but parents of all classes from challenging accepted yet detrimental forms of male gender socialization. Caribbean parents, especially single mothers’ fear of homophobia often affects their parenting styles with negative consequences in the contemporary world.

Adherence to a strict sexual division of labour for example, means that girls may receive skills of multi-tasking, discipline, time-management through their involvement in housework (Figuerola,2004); although this is changing this is largely still the case. Their capacity for nurturing is also developed through participation in child care something from which young men would no doubt benefit. As noted by Barry Chavannes, the place of young men in many Caribbean communities is in the street, not the ‘house’ or ‘the yard’ (Chevannes, 2001).

Contradictorily, one of the characteristics of gendered societies is the differentiation of masculine activities, normally more valued, from feminine activities. Women therefore seek equality and improved status by entering fields and areas previously inhabited by men. These include the jobs which have higher prestige and more remuneration. The opposite is not the case as women's activities by definition, have lower value. [Interestingly according to the research, men who enter predominantly feminine occupations rise swiftly to the top - a phenomenon that is now known as "The Glass Escalator" (Williams, 1992).] So as women enter predominantly masculine areas men tend to retreat resulting in fewer and fewer spaces that men can claim as their own. The retreat into the physical, one of the last remaining areas of male dominance through for example, sport, violence and other forms of hypermasculinity therefore become one means of reclaiming masculine power and identity. As observed by David Plummer former UWI Professor of HIV-AIDS Education:

"Physicality is particularly important in contemporary life because it is an important way that men can differentiate themselves from the 'opposite' sex and is therefore central to modern gender identity formation. The emphasis on physicality also has consequences for relationships, for example men are more likely to use physical means to resolve disputes. The converse is also true: that a man that backs away from a physical confrontation risks his reputation as a man (Plummer and Simpson, 2007:4).

This retreat to physicality is one of the factors which we see reflected in young men’s academic decisions. What is interesting though is that although male participation in these ‘technical’ areas is higher than in other areas. These too are now being challenged by young women but primarily in the formal school system. Indeed a study in Sweden and other OECD countries in 2006, found that while women predominated in the Humanities, men still dominated in the technology areas but by reducing margins in some countries.

**Table 27. Proportion of women qualifying in various subject areas (longer undergraduate and third cycle programmes).**

Health and welfare	Life sciences, physical sciences & agriculture	Mathematics and computer science	Humanities, arts and education	Social sciences, business, law and services	Engineering, manufacturing and construction
OECD average	72 52	29	72	56	26
Sweden	83 58	36	78	61	30

Source: Högskoleverket, Stockholm, 2008, p. 99.

### Male Role Models

The absence of male role models from the household as well as the classroom is a factor that comes up regularly within the literature on boys’ underachievement, as well as in popular discourse. There is a

strong view that boys need a “strong male presence” for a number of reasons – to discipline them; so that they could learn respect (the assumption is that they cannot respect women) and so that they would learn about manhood, how to be a father. Some even suggest that without this young men may seek out negative macho role models to take their place (Hunte (2002, cited in Jha and Kelleher, 200:19).

At another level it is noted that boys, could benefit from a nurturing and caring father’s presence but more critically, without one they tend to feel deserted, and abandoned which may contribute to anti-social behaviour. Others suggest that having only female teachers’ associates education and learning with women “West (2002) suggests that by giving messages that ‘only women teach’ and ‘only women read’ boys are disadvantaged (cited in Jha and Kelleher, 2009:20).

But while some may suggest that *any male role model is better than no male role model*, studies suggest that many males whether as teachers or as fathers often contribute to rather than ameliorate the situation. Recent studies in this region suggest that even where children share households with both parents, there was still much emotional distance from fathers. As reported in one Jamaica study:

“...the fact that a father shared a home on a consistent basis with his children did not mean that there was effective communication



or that he played an important role in his children's personal development or socialisation. There seemed to be an acceptance, mainly among some members of the female groups, that fathers were not interested in their activities. There was also an expectation that they would play a distant role, functioning mainly as breadwinners." (Bailey, Branche and Henry-Lee: 2002:5).

These researchers also noted that:

"Some fathers totally abandoned their children, and several of the male participants expressed keen disappointment over this abandonment and the fact that they had not experienced the nurturant and supportive relationship that they felt ought to exist between a father and son. Still there were fathers who were loving and supportive although even in such cases the children felt a stronger emotional bond with their mothers. (Bailey, Branche and Henry-Lee: 2002:5)."

Additionally Odette Parry in her study of fourth form students in Jamaica, Barbados and St. Vincent and the Grenadines found that head teachers reported that many male teachers tended to reinforce traditional identities, many of which run counter to the academic ethos of the school. This is supported by Martino and Berrill (2003) writing on the United Kingdom who also found that male teachers in particular sometimes reinforce gender stereotypical behaviours in boys rather than challenging them." (cited in Jha and Kelleher, 2009: 21). In addition the few male teachers tend to be clustered in the "traditional male subjects

of mathematics and physics and were less visible in other areas such as English (Parry, 2004:180). One head teacher reported the following:

I have a young graduate science teacher who will not correct English errors of pupils because he says he is a science teacher and it's not his job. He's not the only one who won't pay attention to language skill because it is a woman's subject. They refuse to use English themselves when they set and mark work. We are having some problems with this right now. So many students and particularly men cannot cope with English when they get to University (Parry, 2004:131).

What is clear therefore is that any old male role model just won't do. Issues of gender and masculinity need to be confronted directly at all levels if we are to comprehensively address the situation at hand.

### **Single Sex or Co-Education**

The issue of single-sex or co-education has also emerged as a factor contributing to male academic achievement. It has been found that in this region boys tend to perform better in the former than the latter. This however is a complex issue as single-sex secondary schools tend to be more elitist, to be smaller, more selective in their admissions – accepting better performing students; have more financial resources and stronger more successful alumni – in other words a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Indeed according to the research not only do boys perform better but girls also perform better in single sex- schools. “Interestingly, however as one study found - even though boys in single-sex schools outperformed both boys and girls in co-educational schools, *they lagged even more significantly behind their female counterparts in single sex schools than they would have done their female counterparts in co-ed schools* (Aitken, 1999 cited in Jha and Kelleher, 2006:22). In other words single sex schools would improve boys’ performance but would not necessarily create parity.

### **What Can We Do?**

The answer to this puzzle may be very simple. As an aspiring and emerging group, women have responded very much like migrant workers in a new country. Where one’s status is unstable, and one’s citizenship unclear, there is always the need to work harder, sacrifice if necessary, in order to achieve. There is no entitlement. One has to earn one’s place in the sun. The citizen on the other hand, is secure in his/her space, they belong, they resist the intrusions of the migrant who challenges their position but they are not prepared to do what is necessary to as that would reduce their status in the eyes of fellow citizens.

In responding to this situation it is first of all necessary for us as (higher) education administrators, teachers and scholars to understand the complexities of the phenomenon and not be swayed by the simplistic and commonsense answers. Our informed analysis must be more sophisticated. In order to do this we need to confront our fears and to engage with the new knowledge, insights and personal understanding that come from greater knowledge of gender and gender analysis. In doing so we should not simply take an instrumentalist approach such as - I am studying gender to understand men, I am not interested in women. This is impossible really as masculinity and femininity are inextricably interlinked.

But the issues of gender cannot be understood outside of their relations to other factors such as race/ethnicity, class and socio-economic status, location and even issues of health and ability. We refer to this in the field as *intersectionality* - the recognition that all the factors intersect in shaping human experiences and intersect differently in relation to women and men. Our post-colonial education system is one of the bastions of social and economic inequality and it should not be surprising that this in itself also a contributor to the situation we seek to address. It is imperative that we move towards a more equitable and enabling educational environment which is less affected and infected with the issues of social difference and social inequality as our system continues to be. In the same vein we need to support parents including

single parents with the skills and resources necessary to fulfil their responsibilities in a more effective way (See Reddock and Bobb-Smith, 2005).

In my 2008 William G Demas Memorial lecture I called for childhood to be recognized as a pivotal period for children's development, arguing therefore for an education that is gradual, playful, child-centred and based on evidenced-based research on child development. This suggests that our education system which in some instances has focused primarily on qualification and certification and not on real learning needs to be totally re-conceptualised. We need a system that empowers, transmits knowledge, skills and awareness and facilitates social, civil and regional engagement. To achieve this, an understanding of gender must be central. Teachers, parents, social workers and guidance officers all need to be trained in gender analysis to a high level in order to address some of the issues raised in this presentation. The Commonwealth Study on *Boys Achievement* ends with some concrete recommendations which I would like to leave with you:

1. An emphasis on cooperation, confidence-building and conflict resolution helps create an enabling environment in schools and learning environments;
2. A focus on active learning and respect for students helps to engage young learners;
3. Schools, universities and education systems generally should actively question stereotyped gender identity.

The change that is required is a fundamental one that requires that each one of us also change the ways in which we understand ourselves. A complex problem by definition must have a complex solution and we must be up to the task.

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