GENDER ROLE DEFINITION AND IDENTITY: THE CENTRALITY OF PRIMORDIAL VALUES

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INTRODUCTION

Almost all writers on the subject have, for a long time, agreed that in the Caribbean there has been very clear gender role demarcation, and that gender role-stereotyping has been fairly well entrenched: "Boys will be boys". Boys should only have certain kinds of domestic responsibilities and duties, and which would in any event be few; girls, on the other hand, are expected to bear the full responsibilities of domestic management and family nurturing. Boys should pursue certain kinds of occupational activities - such as engineering, mechanical work, or farming, while areas such as teaching and nursing are the preserve of females. One aspect of this differentiation has been the strong "macho" image of the West Indian male. Although commonly found in most Caribbean countries, it is most noticeable in Jamaica (Parry 1996).

On the face of it, it would appear somewhat contradictory that this sharp gender differentiation survives and persists in a socio-economic environment in which females have often had to perform both male and female social roles, and in which single-parenting (usually by females) is frequently found - sometimes accounting for as much as 30 percent of all household arrangements. The possible reasons for this apparent contradiction are insufficiently fathomed. More generally, it is also fair to say that the causes, characteristics and consequences of the role definitions that currently prevail, are themselves inadequately probed and understood. There is greater awareness of the increasing levels of interpersonal violence; the declining educational performance of males - relative to that of females - is evident in the achievement data being produced by the institutions at the secondary and tertiary levels; and in some of the countries (e.g. Jamaica and Barbados) the falling labour force participation rates of males have begun to induce fears about the "feminisation" of the labour force (Coppin 1995). It may be that all of these can be linked together in cause-effect relationships, but there is not now a great deal of clarity as to what is cause and/or effect, and therefore also about the process of gender role identification and crystallisation.

This paper draws on material provided by youngsters aged 8-20 years' about their attitudes, values and actual experiences in respect of gender roles, behaviours and expectations at home and in school. The
information derived from focus group discussions with individuals in three Caribbean countries, and who come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds not only throws additional light on the characteristics and pervasiveness of gender role demarcation, but also facilitates a better grasp of some of the consequences of the limited role identities allowed by the surrounding social and economic environments. To the extent that the identification process is more sensitively understood, then policy interventions aimed at altering role definitions and behaviours could be more effectively designed and targeted.

**GENDER BOUNDARIES**

*Tasks, Obligations and Comportment*

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<th>Expectation #1: Females do housework; males are tough and strong.</th>
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The observations and thoughts reported by boys and girls from all the age groups support and confirm what is already known about the sharp gender separation imposed on social behaviours. The role differentiation is in the “nature of things”, and the specification begins in and around the home where domestic tasks are supposed to be the preserve of females:

I would prefer the girls to wash the dishes, girls are the best to wash plates, because if a boy washing the plates, they like to call those boys sissies....sometimes when my mother tell me to go wash plates and my friends pass and see - they say ‘boy, you are a girl’....

Girls at least understand this arrangement. When asked about the domestic division of labour one rural girl explained:

I wash up the plates and sweep the yard, clean the house and make breakfasts .... Sometimes I cook on Sunday... chicken and rice and peas...

Boys are expected to be rough, tough, and very active. By the age of 10 boys began to realise that toughness, physical strength and sexual dominance were expected of them, and it was this physical dimension which determined the division of household tasks and the manner in which he would interact with his environment. It is expected that physical domination is part of his nature and that he has to be treated and controlled by physical punishment. Harsher physical punishment is therefore deemed to be both necessary and justified by the fact that “dem know sey we tougher”. At home

Boys get more punished....girls tend to lessen up....sometimes boys need to be disciplined differently; if you hit a girl, girls will take it and cry and grumble, but the boy, he would go to the end to make sure he get back revenge...

The expectation of resistance to discipline and of the tough strong masculinity therefore seemed to require a regime which included “nuff licks”. In this perspective boys need to be disciplined by fathers because they could provide more physical treatment and psychological terror.

These views are replicated and reinforced in the school environment. Here, the image of boys as tougher, less cultured more recalcitrant and rebellious is con-
solidated. Problems with boys are felt to be an "everyday thing", and boys are expected to be more difficult to manage. It is a general perception that teachers see girls as more socially responsible. As a result boys in co-educational schools often feel excluded from important roles in the school, while girls are seen as the ones who will be left to manage, supervise and even discipline a class in the absence of the teacher.

It is interesting however to note that while boys often feel unfairly treated at school, and may resent the teachers and their treatment, they do not challenge the stereotypes in terms of which they are perceived. The boys concede that they are "difficult to control":

*We tek off and give trouble.... We too active, we have too much energy.*

**Expectation #2: Tough boys need rough punishment.**

In general then, those parents or other authority figures who are perceived as being "too soft" on boys, and who do not want their "little boys" to play contact sports such as football, are effectively bringing up their boys as girls, and run the risk of producing sissies. They must "rough them up". At school, the greater incidence of physical punishment of boys is easily and quickly described in terms that also illustrate the perceptions that girls get preferential treatment:

*If the girl dem doing something very, very bad, dem not going to slap dem...just going to talk to them. But if the boys do it one time, or even just whisper in the class, dem hold you down and spank you.*

In other words, boys appear resentful of the greater likelihood of their being defined as delinquent and troublesome. At the same time, the girls themselves recognised that more often than not their lapses are overlooked and the teachers "don't see us".

**The Hearth versus The External Fields**

These distinctions between the responsible, ordered and domesticated female are closely related to - if not equated with - the firmly held view that males operate in a relationship to the yard and the larger external environment, while females function within and around the household. There is a tradition that boys cannot be homebound. They cannot be treated like girls and, even at early ages, must be given freedom to roam the streets. Girls, on the other hand, are to be carefully confined to the house and yard. Although women worked in the economic sector it is expected that the demands of their family will be given priority. After school, the boys would

*...go all over the field and play cricket, and then go home late...Some of them - by the time dem reach home dinner done already...*

Domestic chores are similarly disaggregated, and boys are more comfortable with chores outside the home.

*The girls are to do the housework ...and they are more hardworking than us.*

In the rural groups the contrast can be more obviously expressed, as there are farming and livestock activities to be performed by the boys in the fields. Thus, "serious farming" is a job for strong males, while girls can only look after vegetable and
flower gardens. Girls do not often challenge this gender division of work:

Girls should do the washing up of wares and the sweeping and the cooking... the boys should take out the trash and clean up the yard or whatever...

Expectation #3: The natural and principal domain of males is in the outside world where conquest and control are necessary.

At school, dominance and control on the playing field is demanded and expected. Girls on the field are likely to be chased away:

You see if we are over the field and we are playing... they always come and start running us... But we ask them to move and they are saying that they are not going to remove... So it is aggravating.

Or again:

Them was playing a game. Dem play dandy shandy, [but] dem don't want the girl to win and it is some boys who tek away the ball.

Boys conceded that in the classroom most girls were brighter than boys. But boys, being tougher and more physically powerful, are expected to dominate girls. By the age of 12 years any egalitarian atmosphere on the playing field tends to disappear, and in mixed play a boy must dominate or “mash up” the game.

The greater freedom given to boys to move outside of the household almost inevitably encourages and even guarantees the later influence of the “street”, and quite often, in ways not necessarily felt to be desirable. This street influence is especially critical for those boys not performing well in school and without good job or vocational options. The street then provides the basis for the identity of the adolescent moving into adulthood, and is seen to be where a “man is made”. In the inner-city it offers ways of hustling, surviving, and working out some relatively independent manly way of living, and the pressure to “tek up the gun” can be overwhelming.

Many girls find the greater external freedom ceded to boys irksome:

My father didn’t give my brother any special time for him to come home... but me now, sometimes it is just boring... you stay at the gate while the boys playing basketball across the road... you just stay at the gate and watch them.

It is not challenged however, and one important rationalisation for this dual treatment is that girls need to be protected from early and/or unwanted pregnancies, as well as from rape. Thus,

Some parents don’t let their girls out because they would get breed; but the boys go out because they can’t get breed.

Primordial Distinctions

The belief that boys have “too much energy”, and naturally “give more trouble” is related to the common theme running through almost all gender concepts, and especially in the lower socio-economic groups. This is that maleness gets its meaning from physical strength, and the display of toughness is the
hallmark of the “real” male. Among the youngest boys, the difference between girls and boys is defined almost entirely in terms of physical strength and features: “Man stronger than woman”. As they get older, the development of bodily discipline in a power-oriented way distinguishes how they are expected to realise themselves in family and community.

Basic gender distinctions are elevated to become the principal defining criteria for differential gender socialisation and behaviour.

For the younger boys in Jamaica puberty means little more than the growing of hair and a beard and the change in voice. Among the girls of similar ages, menstruation and the ability to have babies are the principal, if not only markers, and accordingly regulates the socialisation process and differential treatment of girls and boys.

What I know about a girl and a boy is that they have different reproductive parts. Boys sometimes have breasts, but a girl usually have breasts and boys don't carry milk in their breasts as girls do.

Girls are perceived to be more “sickly”, and here again this is related to the defining facts of menstruation and pregnancy. In other words, the only other general and fundamental distinction recognised and conceded is that women get pregnant; men do not.

As the child matures, he then attempts to approach the world and relationships with the belief that he can and should physically dominate. According to two young boys:

Boy is boy, and girl is girl. If you behave like girl, then call you bumsi...

A boy is stronger and so must be the boss

An inner city girl further explains:

Every girl dem see, dem like to say [that] dem bad...you see, if them lick (i.e. hit) you up, you not supposed to hit them back; but if you lick them back, them ready to fight you and draw weapon...knife, stick. One boy - him tek a book from another boy, and lick me with it in my eye. Me go inside for a broom and use it to lick him back. Him lick me again, and me jook (i.e. stab) him, and [then] him hold me, and me hold him back... Him trouble me, and me chuck him again... and then because the girls tease him with it every day, he is now going on as if him bad...

In later years men would often resort to violence so as to maintain their position and keep control in a sexual relationship. Resort to physical violence can and often does occur if males feel that their partners show disrespect, have other partners, or won’t listen and obey:

You shouldn't beat them too much, you should talk to them. If I tell them first, and they come back with the same foolishness [then it is] blows: punish them, Don't give them no food for two days....

I never used to take anything from any girl, no disrespect from anybody. She can't talk to me in any and any way.
Don't disrespect me in crowd. It depends on how you speak, and if me say don't go certain places and she go, she [is] going get lash for it.

Socialised Restlessness and “Toughness”: Some Consequences

This kind of distinction between the domestic female, and the tough, outwardly-directed male who conquers and manages the external environment, and brings home the benefits is neither novel nor unique to the Caribbean. What may however be peculiar is the apparent effect on male performance levels at school, and later on in the workplace. Of critical importance too are the consequences in a socio-economic environment in which there are few outlets or opportunities for the operationalisation or articulation of those values and ideals.

A restricted socio-economic environment spawns and encourages limited and restricted role identities.

It may be argued that the limited opportunities for economic mobility in societies characterised by high levels of poverty, unemployment and underemployment, and in which economic stagnation and decline have come to be almost permanent features sharply curtail the possibilities for the development and expression of male identities. Unemployment levels have normally hovered somewhere between 15-25 percent in almost all the Caribbean countries; in some of them—such as Jamaica, approximately 30 percent of the population falls below the official poverty line, and unemployment levels among first-time job seekers can run as high as 47 percent. In addition, while the movement out of the agricultural sector has been generally widespread, the consequent job-mobility path for males has not always been obvious. Females now dominate the main and traditional employing sectors such as the civil service, teaching, service and commerce, as well as the self-employed sector. Certainly in the post-war period, in the countries for which there is available data, female mobility rates have exceeded those of males (Anderson and Gordon 1987; Coppin 1994; 1995). In Jamaica, although the female unemployment rate is still higher than that of males, male labour force participation rates have declined relative to that of females. Given these movements and trends in the labour force it is not difficult to suggest that the opportunities and avenues for feeding and supporting the male identity as defined have been limited.

The problems can begin early as young boys try to come to terms with the real contradictions between the expectations and ideals of masculinity, the absent or distant father, and the daily observance of negative male behaviours.

I don't want to be a drug addict. Drugs send you to jail and your friends bad talk you...My father does take drugs and steal people money. What does that do for you? I don't want to be in that position...

In the Classroom

At school, the classroom seems unable to accommodate the boys' socialised restlessness: boys are rarely given responsible roles, and are more often than not described as “lazy, disruptive, noisy and rude”, even while the girls tend to be seen as “attentive,
serious and promising”. Even more important however is the view also reported by Parry (1996) that educational motivation and achievement tend to be equated with effeminacy: they are dismissed as “nerdish”. At the end of the school experience, the girls leave not only with superior qualifications, but also with more social and communicative skills. These translate into greater advantage on the labour market. The dominance of female teachers and administrators at the primary and secondary levels of education – where they are 78 percent of total staff – (Educational Statistics, Jamaica, 1995-95) only serves to exacerbate the problem. The general absence in the classroom of accomplished, and motivated male educators means the absence of successful male role models for the young male entering with a physique-dominated male identity.

The lower than desirable educational performance levels reinforce and perpetuate the problem. It becomes a vicious circle, and the display of physical dominance, and visible control of several females continue to be critical sources of male self-esteem.

Males who feel challenged in their maleness do not at all have a wide variety of responses. One is to resort to “compensatory violence” so as to maintain their position and keep control in a relationship. The “challenge” can come in different ways, and as will be shown later in this series (see Vol. 4, No. 2:1-7), the response can be swift, automatic and violent. Obedience and respect from the female is demanded, jealousy is barely tolerated, and encroachments on personal social space abhorred.

*The woman must hear what man say, she must hear but not everything you will tell the woman. The woman must hear you. The woman respect you, and you must respect the woman [but] it’s just that I used to like show authority and I like to dictate.*

One respondent had clearly given the matter some thought:

*Alcohol is a factor. But men who hit women, to me, hit women to compensate; there is something lacking in his life…they make it look like is something you do why they hit you. They don’t feel that is something wrong with them…they treat it as something wrong with her.*

**Multiple Partnering**

Restricted role identities induce over-dependence on violence and multiple partnering as the strategies for negotiating and managing interpersonal relationships and partnerships.

The other method of compensation is the pursuit and maintenance of multiple sexual liaisons and partnerships. Among male respondents, three of the reasons for involvement in multiple relations frequently advanced are that first, it is in the nature of things. Known as the “white liver syndrome”, this “born so” factor meant that the behaviour could not be helped:

*Faithfulness can’t work. It’s just like animals; just can’t resist.*

Second, it is useful as a defensive strategy: if one became committed or dedicated to one individual, this could be seen as an indication of social or psychological weakness – inspiring contempt and disadvantage.
If you love a woman never mek she know you love her because if she ever know say you love her, she wi’ tek advantage of you, ‘cause she know you nah go lef her...

You don’t know bird can’t fly pon one wing? You nuh know say if you lef me, me must have another one....

Third, having several women indicates status and power, as well as the dominance in sexuality required by the male role; another partner implies independence and strength:

You know that why certain man have more than one woman is because them have all fame and money...

...if he keep one girl, she might believe say he [is] a one burner... but when him have bare (i.e. plenty) girl now you see she come and start look....

The term “one burner” as applied to a faithful male in some Jamaican communities is then a phrase of derision, as it is a statement of the absence of social power.

THE CHALLENGE: THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMALE AND MALE EMPOWERMENT

All in all, males develop a restricted identity with implications for the capacity of the male to enter mutually satisfactory and equity-oriented gender relations. It also has important consequences for their willingness and ability to take advantage of the educational opportunities that may be available. The current bases of male self-esteem, and the inadequacies there encourage the frequent resort to violence as a principal method of negotiating and managing interpersonal social relationships. The constant and routinised pursuit of multiple liaisons may also be seen as an expression of the fragile and limited character of the male identity. In societies where the bases and opportunities for identity development are so limited, and where there are real contradictions between that demanded and expected, and that actually facilitated the retreat into a dependence on primordial distinctions may not be surprising. It must however draw attention to the importance of identifying ways for the empowerment of not only females, but also the males. The preceding discussion has focussed much attention on the use of violence by males. This should not be taken to mean that the practice is one-sided: it is not. The extent to which females are also perpetrators is discussed elsewhere in this series. In this paper attention was focused on some of the possible cause-and-effect relationships between male disempowerment and their use of violence. Approaches which analyse the practice solely in terms of male dominance and the expression of patriarchy are therefore likely to lead to inappropriate policy prescriptions for addressing the problem. It is an issue to which it will be necessary to return later on.

End Note

1Further details on the methodology of data collection are provided in the Foreword to this volume.
References


