INTRODUCTION

In the preceding papers in this series some of the relationships between family structures and relations, violence, gender relations, and gender identity were explored. In the entire exercise it was difficult to escape the overriding influence of the economic and material question. Variations in behaviour, attitudes and approaches could almost always be explained in terms of the extent to which respondents were caught up in the seemingly unending struggle for economic survival. The decay of the family structures, and the accompanying fluidity in and volatility of what should be social support institutions was described.

In countries such as Jamaica where there has been an almost unremitting economic decline, the consequences have become especially stark. The behavioural practices were found in all the societies in which the studies were conducted; but in as much as they found the clearest and most extreme expression in Jamaica, the experiences of this society will be specifically used to illustrate some of the likely consequences of social institutional collapse and cultural decay. This paper is then based on the compelling narratives of the survival strategies of young men and women in Jamaica – especially in its inner-cities.

Families both within this geographically defined inner ring and the pockets of deprivation throughout the Kingston Metropolitan Area (KMA), Jamaica, live under severe limitations and constraints in terms of material resources. Survival in such a context promotes the tough individualism that seems necessary. Men and women develop a range of situationally sensitive responses through which they pursue everyday goals and express necessary value choices. The conditions of life promote contest, competition and little conscious display of altruism at all levels, and in the relationship between males and females. In the real environment individuals attempt to secure benefits for themselves and adopt approaches which produce conflict, violence, lack of commitment, multiple partnerships and instability. In this paper we seek to show how earlier values, attitudes and behaviours come to be developed and reinforced on the streets - the central socio-economic arena for the non-and underemployed.
The Male Hustler

Street-based groups provide an important support network for young men. It influences and validates the emerging values and ideals, and may even be the foundation for an alternative community.

In Volume 4, No. 1 (pp. 11-15) of this series, the gender differentials in the socialisation process were described. Boys cannot be cosseted but have to be toughened since maleness gets its social power from toughness and strength. They must therefore be exposed to the rough and tumble of street life and consequently, from a very early age, develop a liking for street-based activities. The street corner is a zone of occupation by men, predominantly young men. It is the scene of conflict between and within gangs and between gangs and the police. The theatre of the street is also the arena where young men send out strong messages about themselves through the medium of designer goods, jewellery, their movement and their speech. The streets provide the basis for their identity and many of the styles of the street are accentuated in an effort to secure what is imagined to be styles of adult masculinity. The street is a dead end but it offers ways of hustling and working out a way of living. It seems to have a magnetic pull on the large number of boys who have not performed well in school; it thrives in an environment where the job options are as scarce as they are. At some time in their lives the young participants would have been members of formal groups related to the school or the church but membership had been temporary and by their early teens they had dropped out of these groups. With little engagement in community groups and with the contingent make-shift nature of family relationships discussed in Volume 4, No. 1, individuals fall back on the psychological and social support offered by male informal friendship groups. These groups consume a great deal of the energy and resources of males, and some become fundamental identity bearing groups that impose themselves on the behaviour of the young men. Different social character types emerge in this social context, but which in turn undermine and seriously weaken the glue of social organisation and order.

Detached Survivors

The street offers the unemployed male an opportunity for “hustling” a living from activities such as drug dealing. But the obvious problem with drugs is that it is illegal and is often associated with violence that can spill over and extend to family members. In addition, for persons involved in the drug business there is the need for mobility so that it becomes difficult to sustain relationships that require predictable functions and an ongoing pattern of interaction. From the accounts of the participants, drug abuse was a familiar occurrence and had the expected impact on social relationships:

Him use drugs ... and him act weird and him chop up dawg them ... and him t'ief small things ... him will steal anything.

I have two cousins, right. The guy, him tek drugs ... and one night ... him say to me ... come sleep with me no? ... and like him touching me up... me say, “me ah stab you, you know ... I swear to God I would stab you...”
Remember, it is his friends; people which him call friends, and dem mix the ganja with - I don't know what dem really mix it with - and him smoke it and it turn him mad.

Another common survival strategy also involves the act of informing on criminal activity within the community for a reward. Official government programmes have, for some time, offered large financial incentives to inform, and provide measures to reduce the risk to informants. The attitude among participants to informers – also known in the communities as “fraters” – is mixed. Some are critical of those who “use dem mouth to go pon tour ... [so as to] to live big”, because police activity in these communities is not always welcome. Yet, the need to make a living is recognised and conceded. The informer, who knows “when to hold him mouth”, is therefore tolerated, and may even be seen to be performing a service to the communities. But the reality is that this is an activity that can have dangerous repercussions on the “frater”, and the members of his family. It tended to be associated with a rather high level of residential mobility. One respondent illustrates the ambivalence:

Some little people inform on a bad man ... and come back inna de jungle and de whole of them dead ... them kill off the whole of them. That’s why dem say informer work is not good work. But people say dem have to live...

At the bottom of the totem pole are those young men who enter into forms of prostitution. Although prostitution is more an activity of women than men, men do engage in it. Female participants in the inner-city display a contempt for the men involved in such relationships and regard them as men who are unable to find women by other means:

People poopoo dem man dem; dem say that because some of dem no have no woman now they just live off you. It’s like fish: dem just lick up, and ah shine and go by, and think dem can just dust off [i.e. leave the scene].

The “Girls” Man

Respondents in all groups repeatedly described the limited options of young persons within the critical transition period to adulthood. The transition period is obviously a very significant one and what happens at this time sets the framework for later development. One way in which the young person finds an identity appears to be one which allows him/her to express, in a very dramatic way, the profile of self that is cherished and could be always ready for display. What is important is what draws attention and validation on the street and the street corner and the large nebulous public sphere that goes with it. Gender profiles, ideologies, and relationships are a part of this mix. The centrality of physical strength, the possession and display of money, and the “control” of many women to the definition of maleness and the exercise of social power may be recalled here. One of the lifestyles therefore offered and highly valued on the street culture is that of the “girls” man. This is an individual who deliberately develops a number of relationships with women, and does it in an expensive and expressive fashion so as to provide himself with a reputation and with the symbolic values of the culture.

Girls look for men with “razzy clothes...something that you see”. The faithful, monogamous male is more often than
not an object of derision and even contempt: he is a “one burner man”. The one admired is the one “with the sweetheart women all the time”. The DJ and the DJ lifestyle gives expression to the possibilities that could be achieved. In the minds of most, the DJ has status among women as well as men which is conferred by material possessions and are in the enviable position of being sought after by women:

You know why certain man have more than one woman? Its because they have all fame and money; and you see them DJ? dem don’t have one woman you know! ... [It is ] 'cause dem fame you know. Every woman want dem.

Individuals seem to function in situations in which the institutions are neither very secure nor elaborate. It therefore facilitates the production and reproduction of “anything-goes” behaviours. It is not a big step from anarchy.

The Hearth-Bound Females

For women, the options are more limited as they are generally not allowed the “freedom” of the street society. The socialisation experiences are designed to keep them out of it and protect them from its products. Further, girls do not appear to be involved in a large number of friendship groups and do have a fairly restrictive and even apprehensive attitude to friendship with other females. In their narratives girls of all ages repeatedly made the point that in friendships with other females confidences were not held, and that there was a tendency for competitiveness, for showing-off and for being drawn into larger controversies involving other female-friendship networks. They also reported that the friendships that they might develop with other girls were abandoned once their female friends became seriously involved with boys.

Their prime concern was with men — with finding men and keeping them and this concern appeared to override their friendship with girls who were competitors in their search for men. The presence of other resources or assets such as high levels of education or economically advantageous family backgrounds usually tempered or significantly negated this concern, but in the more resource deficient communities the manless household was not viewed favourably: “there is no boss...just two women living together”. Given the large number of female headed households, the attitude is an intriguing one.

Me ah tell you, say like you ... meet a guy ... when she look and she hear it, she eye get red; and when she see you a get a whole heap ah things her eye get red. Behind you back she and him gone out ...

Some friends, when they see you talk to one, like [there is] a group of boys and you talk to one of them out of the group, dem want one too.

... Like if a girl a pass and see you and her boyriend a talk, she a go say, “oonu [i.e. you] a go[ i.e. going to be] dead... Dem see you and dem ... throw dem word and tell their frien’ ...

At a later stage some girls do refuse to obey the conventions, and given the
authoritarian structure of family life, they felt that they could no longer remain a part of the household. They may then be claimed by the street.

...me go back to me grandmother [but] me grandmother can't look after me in a certain way; and is so me break out and start to do certain things...

Although many of the young girls saw leaving home as a means of establishing an independent life there are not many options as typically, they have had a limited education and no skills training. Some of the participants who had taken this course of action had been forced to return with young babies to their mothers homes having learned that pregnancy did not always bring with it a resident and/or supportive father: "belly for you and him gone". But having already "bruk [i.e. broken] out", they were no longer subject to parental control.

The Female Hustler

Notwithstanding the general recognition of the principal character of the male-female relationship there is a pervasive longing to be free of the power that men sought to, and often succeeded in wielding over women. But ironically, one of the commonest solutions sought still revolved around the male. Thus women go into multiple partnerships in the hope that an increase in the numbers would improve the chances of autonomy and independence. Operation of this strategy requires a significant degree of emotional detachment. Several respondents explained:

Me like, but me don't love; [instead] me spirit tek.

Right now me don't have no love for him...and nothing wrong if him hear that me have a boyfriend...him must see that me not interested any more. Him have him woman, and me have my man. All him do, just continue to mind him pickney [i.e. child]...so long as I get my money.

[they are] two idiots you know, but dem have money.

Since these were young girls, mostly teenagers, there were those who had not yet given up hopes of finding romantic love:

Now, the first relationship with me, me really, really did love ... but because him end up in prison ... me find another relationship ... but that ... wasn't love ... After that I get to know him and get to love him more than how I did love the first... Since lately now I just turn and say me not going to love again. Since recently I form a new love - so exciting and all of that, because I had said I am never going to love again because a get hurt so many times ... But me a puzzle inna me mind: Is it really love?

The reality however is that love/like cannot be equated with permanence and survival strategies are vital and necessary. To the extent that there is movement from one "relationship" to another largely for what could be derived from it, there is little confusion in their minds as to the motives for their actions. It is a straightforward transaction:

... you do it not because you really wan' do it, you know; but you wan satisfy - satisfy yourself with certain things -financial.
One night me [will] go out with dem...my own have some rotten teeth...

...you can have a likkle man yes, but one stay up at the house and one you have outside. But you find you can't make the two of dem buck up still, or else you find yourself outside.

You have to know to use your head or else the two of dem buck. You can't have the two of dem link.

They wanted nothing more from the "outside" man than the opportunity to "nyam [i.e. eat] him out". Some of the young girls prosaically referred to their activities as prostitution: "Me turn prostitute...me have a man most time".

For others, "hustling" does not always involve the selling of favours and they do their best to avoid reciprocating even when this was clearly expected. This can be a very dangerous game for the lone female and safety demands some trickery: "Every time we go out we use pad and ketchup". Or they could join an informal all-female group or "crew" for attendance at the dances and parties where they do most of their business:

We do everything together. One ting though, we not leaving out we one another, because if somebody come and say dem wan't to exact demself pon one, they have to exact demself pon the whole seven...if it is one crew now you have to prepare yourself. You have to go join in and go help because acid and everything [will be] involved inna it you know...

It is a serious "job".

The whole of us dress up and go and hustle...Me just like to be independent...

Caution and moderation is however, sometimes called for:

...me other friend is too lickey lickey [i.e. subservient] because she see him have money...[but] we to deal with the boy dem and nyam out [i.e. eat] the boy dem...me tell dem "me and you not sleep together you know". Him say "You know me and you come from show tonight, so let us walk go home"...Me just see the bus coming. That time me have to get me money out...sometime it not good for you to nyam out a man.

In this continuing struggle there is admiration for the woman who, by her own efforts, manages to become economically independent. Among the few who do in the inner-city is the female higgler who is able to "still get money over the posse [i.e. gangster] man. Big higgler....I saw women in Curacao buying stuff with plenty, plenty money. Yea man, they have money, you know".

Not surprisingly, this very achievement represents a serious challenge to the male, and is frequently a source of conflict and dysfunctionality in a relationship. It is difficult for a woman with the financial independence of the higgler to submit to control, and therefore, to sustain a relationship with a man. The economic independence of women undermines this authority:

Because you inna dem house you can't talk to them certain way - you can't raise your voice pon them.
In the minds of the young female participants, the only way that the independent higgler could exercise the power that was conferred on her by her economic strength would be to forge relationships with very young men:

...dem always take likkle boy mostly
.... Is likkle boy dem take and mind
and send him go school... Him can't
 go with no young girl you know!

Such men are however, seen as little more than "toy boys":

....me know this guy; him is just 20 yrs,
you know ... Big woman marry him
... [and] build him big shop.

The Challenge

Survival cannot be taken for granted in the circumstances of inner-city life. All individuals recognize the importance of access to resources and its importance in defining power and therefore must strategically scramble for scarce resources. The survival of the fittest is the general rule, and some of the mechanisms employed are neither safe nor sustainable. The activities of these youngsters put them at risk of violence and of sexually transmitted diseases for, although they usually recognize the dangers the cultural, social and material resources that could allow choice and utilisation of better solutions are in critically short supply. Unfortunately the street culture has become all too pervasive and dominant; large numbers of persons are entering adulthood without the social tools and skills necessary for productive and socially sustainable participation in a wider civil society. It is a truism that social order and social progress requires reasonably stable social institutions. If not urgently addressed the disintegrative effects will continue to haunt and plague all development initiatives in the near and distant future.

End Note

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