



# Commentary on Men, Violence and Crime

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The nexus of crime, drug trafficking, gangs, violence and masculinity highlighted by the report “No time to Quit: Engaging Youth at Risk”<sup>1</sup> gives reason for pause as this report seeks to lend support to national efforts to get to the root of, and to develop solutions to, the complexity of young male violence and criminality.

The increasing focus of governments in the Caribbean region and globally on a citizen security agenda, which is often articulated as drugs and arms interdiction and the control of organized crime, makes the urgency of understanding root causes and solutions ever more apparent.

As the report emphasizes, the intersection of masculinity, economy, social exclusion, race and gender lend to a complication of contributing factors and formal and informal institutional arrangements which propel us to question male violence and criminality as a multi-layered dynamic.

In this dynamic relatively fixed gender roles place expectations on men to be providers in a system of economic arrangements in which young black men, in particular, face varied degrees of exclusion from access to economic power and resources. While organized crime for these young men may be seen as an

illegitimate means to a legitimate end, i.e. fulfillment of their masculine role, statistics which indicate higher rates of poverty among women and children, and that the responsibility for both financial and emotional care of children lies disproportionately with women, speak to the need to better understand dominant masculinities as multi-faceted, fluid constructions.

Where the qualities of provider, protector and authority figure lie in opposition to those of nurturer on the continuum of dominant masculinities, this serves to reinforce male absence from the home and the care of children. This continuum also helps to sanction the use of violence (including armed violence) as a resource to gain economic power and control, and as a mechanism to establish and maintain control over women, children and non-conforming males.

Viewing organized crime as an alternative societal institution enables us to question why the benefits of organized crime and involvement in other illegal activities by young men serves to contribute to definitions of masculine identity in which the roles of provider, protector and authority figure are significant but not the only part of the masculinity equation.

In addition to the expectations of the performance of violence and aggression that accompany crime, might not the resources gained from, and comradery of, organized crime and gang membership also allow for the fulfillment of the desires of youth in ways that current social institutions to which they belong, do not? The resources of crime allow for access to technology, social networking, exposure to interesting new spaces and worlds, opportunities to learn, to access the latest kit (clothing and accessories) and generally opportunity to engage in play and consumer culture in ways that would otherwise be restricted in environments of poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion.

If then the problem of young black male involvement in crime, drugs and illegal activities is a function of gender, age and economics, where do the solutions lie, even if these solutions are not immediate or linear? What opportunities are there to challenge the current citizen security paradigms in which crime prevention interventions, including those related to addressing violence against women and girls, are based?

Jackson Katz discusses the importance of male leadership in the process of movement toward positive masculinities. He raises a critical question. If male leadership is not part of changing the conversation about violent and harmful masculinity in parliaments, schools, police stations, faith-based organizations, homes, the armed forces and business places, then we remain in a space of “othering” young black men who choose crime as their means to an end, or alternatively in a space of “do as I say and not as I do”. The success of the journey towards change is then the difference between negative reinforcement by example at one extreme end of the spectrum, passive bystander in the middle and the active leader of a process of change at the other end of the spectrum.

Positive, active male leadership is rooted in accountability. Accountability of men in positions of power and authority to challenge existing ways of using power and privilege that alienate and divide instead of endearing and uniting. It also means accountability in challenging the many forms of violent, discriminatory and degrading behaviour toward women, children and men who do not fit within the dominant male ideal. Positive active male leadership means surrendering the benefits of individual and collective privilege which create hierarchies and enclaves to ways of sharing power with women and other men which support equality, non-discrimination and inclusion.

Positive active male leadership at all levels of social and cultural organization is therefore the first step in addressing the nexus of men, violence and crime, because positive active male leadership is centred in active rethinking and remaking of the relationship between masculinity and power at

the individual, inter-relational, and community level. It is not rooted in the premise that the solutions to crime and violence lie within or at the intersection of sectoral mandates, policies or initiatives, but that these solutions lie in the heart of every man, in every man's commitment to his own transformation and progressive action.

The benefit of positive active male leadership therefore is the transformation of values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and relationships which in turn positively impact changes at the level of social institutions' practices and policies, informing shifts in national ideologies and discourses. This fluid, non-linear process has implications not only for the definition of individual masculine identity but for social institutions which have historically been organized according to patriarchal ways of understanding power, social structures and relationships.

Essentially then solutions to the nexus of men, violence and crime which was previously linked to gender, age and economy are located within the ability of male leaders in partnership with women to engage in efforts to actively transform individual and collective spheres of influence. These opportunities offer the possibility and hope for changes in modes of economic organization, social relations, social support systems and networks, and spaces for the growth, development and exploration of young people which are not dependent on the use of violence and which are not supported by the logic of crime.

Over the past decade, UN Women Multi-Country Office (MCO) for the Caribbean has led the engagement of men and boys as leaders and key partners in efforts to end violence against women and girls. This strategic focus on the engagement of men and boys is a key component of UN Women's overall efforts to support a gender responsive citizen security agenda in the Caribbean region. The Partners for Peace court-mandated perpetrator accountability programme developed by UN Women in collaboration with a team of regional experts, is currently operational in five Caribbean countries. UN

Women MCO has also been one of the main supporters of the Caribbean Male Action Network (CARIMAN) — a male-run network which focuses on building positive masculinities, and building the capacity of men to work together toward the achievement of more gender equitable societies. Community-level social mobilization efforts which utilize innovative strategies, culture and the arts to engage a range of stakeholders, including faith-based organizations, media, law enforcement, the judiciary, youth and the health and education sector in addressing gender-based violence, is another core component of the UN Women's programme which emphasizes the engagement of men and boys in transformative efforts at the community level in support of shaping positive masculinities.

Working with a team of experts, UN Women MCO has developed and supported the implementation of psycho-educational tools for group-based work with young men and young women related to violence prevention and building competencies for empowerment and resilience. These efforts are aimed at the transformation of individual values, attitudes, behaviours and power dynamics between women and men which lie at the root of gender-based violence and which are also indispensable to a gender-responsive citizen security agenda in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> Selwyn Ryan et al. 2013. "No time to quit: engaging youth at risk". Executive report of the Committee on Young Males and Crime in Trinidad and Tobago. St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago.



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