



Boys, Masculinity and Education

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Data for three levels of education (primary, secondary, tertiary) for 202 countries across the globe¹ indicate that moving from primary through secondary to the tertiary level, Gender Parity Indices (GPI) increased from 0.96 to 0.97 to 1.40 indicating that at the higher levels of education enrolment ratios favour females. This pattern is consistent with the general situation in the Caribbean resulting in the now widely accepted but largely uncritical discourse on male underachievement, fuelled as this is by what appears to be a concomitant increase in violent crimes across the region, perpetrated, in many instances, by males under the age of 25 years.

Based on analyses of secondary level entry and performance data at two different time periods, 2004² and 2007³, it is evident that the phenomenon has more to do with **under-participation** than it has to do with underachievement. The data indicate that performance of the boys who remain in the system is creditable, particularly in critical areas such as science and technology. Claims of 'male underachievement', therefore, are relative and emerge by comparing the achievement of boys with that of girls. This approach to the problem draws

on a between-sex analytical framework and, in this paradigm, the issue is viewed as one manifestation of gendered social processes that occur both in the home and in the school.

The focus of the discourse, therefore, has been largely on explanatory frameworks which focus on cultural determinants of male under-participation which have serious limitations both in terms of explaining the phenomenon as well as informing interventions. Under this rubric, explanations are limited to home and school concerns and have included the feminization of education, the lack of relevance of the school curriculum for boys, the need to introduce pedagogical strategies that appeal to boys, the lack of male role models, the absentee father, testosterone that drives adolescent attitudes and behaviour and the impact of female headed-households on the parenting of boys. This work has its own inherent value but the phenomenon of male underachievement has to be also assessed in relation to ways in which institutionalized, macro-level, particularly political-economic structures and systems, privilege some and subordinate others.

The logical question which then follows is: **which boys are under-participating and therefore under-achieving and why?** This question can only be answered by moving away from a univariate, between-sex comparison which assumes that sex is the most important determinant of participation and performance to a more robust multivariate research framework. Such a shift in the research paradigm allows for an analysis of the intersectionality of sex with other critical factors which determine educational outcomes and to an examination of within-sex differences. Research conducted by the CGDS/IGDS⁴ drawing on this approach, showed that, at the secondary level, the sex of the student was not always a significant determinant of performance. Many other factors, which had either a direct or indirect link with socio-economic status of the student as well as ethnicity, were significant in explaining performance.

These findings are not unexpected given that historically, in the Caribbean, race and political economy have played an important role in access to formal education. From inception, different value and worth were assigned to the education of different groups: working class ex-slaves *vis-à-vis* the elite plantocracy; blacks *vis-à-vis* whites and males *vis-à-vis* females. One therefore needs to interrogate what seems to be an underlying assumption of the male underachievement discourse: **is education perceived by the State and by all sub-groups in a population as being equally essential for meeting their needs and aspirations?**

Any effort to identify factors that account for observed gender disparities in participation and performance in Caribbean education systems must take into account political-economic factors that frame and influence gender reproduction and male/female experiences both inside and outside of the school. Lewis (2004)⁵, a noted Caribbean scholar, cogently points to the shortcoming in this regard and posits that:

...it is precisely this systemic nature of the problem that is overlooked in many discourses of gender. Rather than contextualise the nature of the problem faced by men and women in terms of structural determinants, many reduce the problematic to the level of the individual or the collectivity, so that the issue becomes conceptualised as pathology to be corrected without reference to wider social (economic, political) considerations. (p.251)

Such an analysis reveals the diversity of class experience and leads to an interrogation of macro-level structures and processes. The question that then follows is: **What are the structural determinants that reinforce class difference and neutralize the equalizing role of education?** I would posit that the structure of opportunity in Caribbean economies which privileges males, in both the formal and informal sectors, is a major determinant. Data from a number of sources support this hypothesis. These can be summarized as follows:

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- a) The lower levels of certification of males in Caribbean labour markets but their higher levels of employment;
 - b) Males with all levels of educational attainment earning more than females with a resulting wage gap favouring males;
 - c) Economic restructuring and the emergence of post-industrial/ agricultural society with a shift away from semi-skilled, manual work and the loss of male, working class jobs to service-oriented feminized jobs. Boys from lower-socio-economic groups therefore opt to withdraw from education, both physically and psychologically, because, in this economic environment, schooling has little functional or symbolic value;
 - d) Increased opportunities for males in the informal sector especially in the sports and music industries as well as opportunities for economic gain associated with illegal, globalised activities such as the trade in drugs and small arms, the Caribbean being well positioned as trans-shipment points for these products.

These observations are not unique to the Caribbean. The universality of the pattern of male under-participation in formal education, therefore, can only be explained in terms of meta-principles of social organisation that are not only structural but also ideological. This leads to another critical question: **Are entrenched gender ideologies determinants of male under-participation and under-achievement in formal education?**

A pivotal dimension of a hegemonic masculinity and male heterosexual identity is the ideology of the male breadwinner. The dominant position of males in waged work and income generation, as outlined above, reflects this entrenched ideology which is perpetuated by economies around the world that privilege males with lower levels of certification over females with higher certification for certain jobs and positions. Further, even where both sexes have equal levels of education, males are also privileged. The result is the universal phenomenon of the horizontal and vertical sex-segregation of labour markets.

Simply put, certification does not carry the same social currency for males and females.

Data show that the phenomenon of female-headed households, possibly with the woman as the sole economic provider, is increasing in the Caribbean. This suggests that gender ideologies, including that of the male breadwinner, are slowly being challenged and disrupted. What cannot be ignored, however, is the fact that despite these challenges, patriarchal systems continue to serve traditional interest and motive which combine to maintain the *status quo* and ensure that the gains of men are not significantly disrupted. Under this system education, therefore, is seen by some males as unnecessary for guaranteeing access to paid work and for maintaining economic dominance.

Further, research points to the fact that attitudes and behaviours associated with traditional, hegemonic masculinity are antithetical to academic achievement and are therefore associated with male drop-out from school and under-achievement. This lack of interest in school is further reinforced by the fact that, based on the essentialist view that boys are naturally bad and girls are naturally good, the gender regime of schools metes out harsher treatment to boys than to girls, creating yet another disincentive for boys to remain in school.

Given the dynamic interplay between structural and ideological factors which impact male participation in schooling, the following question arises: **is a paradigm shift required in the quest to fully understand the problem of male under-participation in formal education and to find workable solutions?**

As alluded to earlier, I fully endorse the recommendation coming out of the World Bank Report on Youth and Social Development in Trinidad and Tobago⁶ which points to the need for a paradigm shift in research and policy formulation. It is suggested that instead of a focus on negative outcomes related to single, univariate issues and the identification of interventions to treat these symptoms intended to avoid repetition of the event, there should be a

shift to a framework which incorporates not only factors at the individual level but also takes into account the broader social, institutional and structural context of youth development. This, the bank contends, would allow for a focus on inter-related risk antecedents operating in both these spheres and therefore to address causes rather than symptoms and to take a more integrated approach to addressing these inter-related factors.

Such a conceptual model to address the issue of male under-participation in education proposed by Bailey (2009)⁷ allows us to take both the cultural and the political-economy perspectives into account; to address micro as well as macro level factors and to better understand not only between-sex differences but also within-sex differences mediated as these are by a range of personal and structural factors that impinge on participation and performance of both sexes in formal schooling.

¹ See <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/Metadata.aspx?IndicatorId=9>

² Bailey, Barbara & M. Bernard. 2004. Establishing a database of gender differentials in enrolment and performance at the secondary and tertiary levels of Caribbean education systems. Funded by the Canada-Caribbean Gender Equality Programme (Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean).

³ The University of the West Indies. The Centre for Gender and Development Studies, Regional Coordinating Unit. *Gender differentials at the secondary and tertiary levels of the education system in the anglophone Caribbean: Student performance report*. March 2007.

⁴ The University of the West Indies. The Centre for Gender and Development Studies, Regional Coordinating Unit. *Gender differentials at the secondary and tertiary levels of the education system in the anglophone Caribbean: Student performance report*. March 2007.

⁵ Lewis, Linden. 2004. Caribbean masculinity at the fin de siecle. In *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities, Theoretical and Empirical Analyses*. Edited by R. Reddock, Kingston, Jamaica: UWI Press.

⁶ *Trinidad and Tobago youth and social development: An Integrated approach for social Inclusion*. Document of the World Bank. Report No. 20088 - TR

⁷ Bailey, Barbara. 2009. *Needed! A paradigm shift in addressing boys' underachievement in education*. Paper presented at a Regional Conference on Keeping Boys out of Risk. Montego Bay, Jamaica. May, 2009. The World Bank and the Commonwealth Secretariat.