



The University of  
the West Indies  
Centre for Gender and  
Development Studies



Issue 2 – 2008

## Reflection

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### Abstract

Today, when I tell my roommates, all males, that I have stopped watching pornography, they respond in disbelief, “You can’t be serious.” Then, when I tell them how long it has been, they respond, “That’s torture, that’s not natural.” I remember as a young boy, in seventh and eighth grade, the time we discovered porn on the Internet. I was around the age of thirteen. The setting was perfect. Everyday after school about five of the fellas would go to Eduardo’s house, since his parents were not at home. We would talk on the phone, play basketball, light fires, shoot lizards with his BB-Gun, and watch porn. From a very young age, I learned that watching porn was something males did. The sex tape I found in the first house I stayed at in Puerto Rico belonging to the owner of the house, the tapes we found in my friend’s dad’s VCR, and the tapes belonging to my older brother, all told me that watching porn was a natural part of a man’s life; and I believed that it was natural until I took the Men and Masculinities course at the University of the West Indies.

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## **Introduction**

Born in Trinidad, but living out of the country since age nine, I returned to Trinidad in January of 2007 on a student exchange program from The Pennsylvania State University. Upon arrival at UWI, I enrolled in four courses; one of them was “Men and Masculinities in the Caribbean”. As a sociology major, I was interested in looking at society from different perspectives. At Penn State, I studied the issue of race and how it shapes the lives of individuals and society as a whole. I saw the study of gender relations as a way to further my understanding of the society in which we live, but it never crossed my mind that this course (Men and Masculinities) would change my way of life.

## **How “Men and Masculinities” shaped my ideas of manhood**

I learned a lot about men’s behavior through this course: male violence, homophobia, heterosexism, the policing of masculinity, notions of masculinity and the list could go on. My housing accommodations during this period also provided the perfect opportunity to reflect on what I was learning in the classroom, as I lived among males in one of the campus halls. Here, I saw every concept that was brought up in class played out in real life. One particular example illuminates some of these concepts.

Apparently years before I had arrived at the hall, there was some sort of show in which a group of people had to get on stage and put on a show in front of an all-male audience. One of the male performers saw it fit to dress up as a woman and dance in front of all these men. As he started dancing, he received whistles and a round of applause from the crowd. Recounting the story, a guy who was in that audience told me what happened. “Boy, when that thing come out in a short dress it looked good. She start to dance and I whistling and enjoying meh self. Is only when she turn around I catch my self and see who it was, see that it was a man. Boy, no lie, I feel to beat that, I feel to kill that.” Here I saw notions of what it meant to be a man. It was OK for him to enjoy the entertainment of what he thought was a woman. In fact, men are encouraged to do this. He liked what he saw until he realized that it was a man, to which he reacted with anger. This anger serves to police masculinity. By saying, “I feel to kill that”, he is saying it is not OK for a man to look at another man with lust. This anger also displays heterosexism and homophobia. Michael Kimmel writes that homophobia is the fear of being unmasked, revealing that you are not the “real man” you pretend to be. In his anger, I saw a man’s fear of being labeled gay by others, and more importantly I saw his fear of revealing to himself that he liked what he saw, that he lusted for another man.

One of the many things I learned about masculinity is that it is relative. There is no absolute way of being a “real man”, yet because we believe there is we set ourselves up for a life of constant posturing and pretending. If you have a good female friend, maybe you have heard a woman’s complaints about her male partner. “He’s just so different when it’s

just the two of us, but when he is with his friends he acts so immature.” Through “Men and Masculinities”, I realized the criteria one has to fit to be a “real man” were not decided by me. Instead, they were decided by other men; thus around other men we exaggerate our male behavior in order to be granted status as a man. I saw also that some of these criteria contradicted others, showing how fragile and unstable this concept of a “real man” is. For instance, a “real man” is supposed to be independent, yet the fact that we depend on other men to validate us, to grant us our status as a “real man”, shows that we are far from being independent, whether we know it or not.

### **How “Men and Masculinities” changed me**

“Men and Masculinities” also gave me the tools to analyze myself and my behavior. As I mentioned above, I, like many other men, started watching pornography at a very young age. As I got older, without knowing it, I started to adopt a view of women as objects, objects to satisfy my sexual needs. Before taking “Men and Masculinities”, I was blind to the way I viewed women. As I became exposed to the readings and concepts in the discourse of gender relations, I began to see how being a man shapes me and my relationships with others. I saw that along with using women as objects for pleasure, be it through watching porn movies or using women for sex, I used women as a way to enhance my status as a man. I looked back at my conversations with other men about sexual experiences with women, only to see that the only reason I did this was to get praise from my friends; and praise is what I got as men are supposed to be loved and love women, and the more women in the picture, the more praise.

Upon seeing how shallow some of my ways of being were, I started looking at my everyday life through gender glasses. I realized that I felt the need to look back at women as they walked past me. During almost every interaction with a female, the thought of sex was on my mind. The dominant ideas in many societies are the ideas of its ruling class. Because we live in a patriarchal society, the ideas dispersed to the masses will portray women in a false and incomplete way. Pornography and the overall representation of women as sex symbols distorted my view of women. I was taught that women were first to be used to fulfill my needs. The view of women as full human beings came second to the view of women as objects. This view (of women as objects) prohibits us from seeing women for who they are. It robs of every interaction its meaning and prevents us from developing meaningful relationships with women.

Not only am I changing the way I view women, but I am also challenging what I thought being a man meant. For example, I once believed that a man should not share his emotions and feelings. Today, however, not only do I share my feelings and emotions with others, but I believe that a “real person” is one who is not bound by unnecessary and unfounded rules such as those of masculinity. Why not share my feelings if they are part of who I am, as a person? Why should I hold misogynistic views if they do not agree with my morals and values? Why should I have to pretend in order for someone else to validate me? Taking the course “Men and Masculinities” made these questions clear to me.

### **What I will take with me for the rest of my life**

One thing I did that played a key role in my “engendered growth” was applying what I learned in class to society, and more importantly to myself. Above all, this is the one thing that I will take with me to my grave, because in doing this I change who I am and I show others that change is possible. In one of my conversations with my roommates, I tried to make them see that the way they treat women is disrespectful. They were talking about their relations with women when I said to them, “The same way you talk about this girl, another guy is talking about your sister.” One of them replied, “I am too old to change.” If I stand for nothing else, I can at least say that change is possible for all of us. The question is, are we ready to make the decision to change?

For me it was not difficult. Nevertheless, it was disappointing to accept that even though I loved and respected women, I was participating in a system that encouraged misogynistic thoughts and behavior. I found liberation, however, in knowing that by acknowledging my ignorance I had empowered myself and was thus able to work towards change.

As a man, it is obviously hard to precisely empathize with my sisters. I cannot understand and grasp exactly how it feels to be a woman in a patriarchal society, simply because I am a man. However, being a black man, among other things, I am able to understand how it feels to be oppressed, exploited, and disrespected. On this very general level, I am able to relate to women’s feelings and conditions, as we are both oppressed in the same world. I read many articles throughout the course, but one in particular was crucial in helping me to make this connection with women. By far the most influential excerpt, and one that continues to impress me today, comes from the book *The Gender Knot*, written by Allan Johnson.

“What men don’t get about gender, white people don’t get about race: whites don’t have to go out of their way to act hatefully in order to participate in a society that produces hateful consequences for people of color. Simply flowing with the mainstream and going about business as usual is enough.”

Just as whites do not have to go out of their way to participate in a society that produces hateful consequences for people of color, men do not have to go out of their way to participate in a patriarchal system that results in the mistreatment and oppression of women. This simple act, the ability to relate to women, is crucial in men’s involvement in the issue of gender relations and in the fight for just treatment of women.

I believe I was blind: blind to the implications of a patriarchal world, blind to my misconceptions about women, and blind to my fundamentally sexist and somewhat misogynistic thoughts, views, and feelings. Before taking the “Men and Masculinities” course, I was not familiar with the discourse of gender relations. Taking the course incited an unimaginable and immense growth in me, something that will stay with me for the rest of my life.