

Redefining fatherhood: a report from the Caribbean

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'The Contribution of Caribbean Men to the Family' A pilot study in Jamaica

A survey of early childhood programmes conducted in eleven Caribbean countries by the Caribbean Child Development Centre (CCDC)⁴ in 1987 determined that, despite growing recognition of and support for organised child care programmes around the Caribbean, on average 85 percent of children below the age of four remained at home, in the care of parents or other family caregivers. It also showed that parenting education efforts in the region were primarily directed toward women and teenage

girls. Further, a search of materials on the Caribbean family produced considerable literature on women and mothers, but almost nothing on men and the family. Instead, stereotypes about men's attitudes and behaviours in relation to their families – mostly negative – were substitutes for informed data.

As a result, CCDC set out in 1990 to examine men's contributions to the family in Jamaica, undertaking to:

- provide a socio-historical perspective on the roles men in the Caribbean have played within and

- on behalf of the family;
- survey and describe the current attitudes and behaviours of a cross-section of men in Jamaica;
- use ethnographic/participatory methods to generate data and local analysis and problem solving related to the topics of the study;
- make research findings available in formats that would serve not only professional research/teaching interests but also the concerns of public educators, family life workers, and gender studies groups; and
- design formats and materials to be used in conducting similar

investigations in Jamaica and other Caribbean countries that could provide data to complement the Jamaican study.

This initial study probed a range of issues related to men's attitudes and behaviours about family life and childrearing, through a questionnaire administered to 700 Jamaican men from two urban and two rural communities. Complementary series of discussion groups with men and women were conducted in the same communities as those surveyed or in adjoining ones.

It was soon apparent that this study needed to be concerned with *man and his families* because a Jamaican man's family is defined differently at different points in his life. There are life long family responsibilities to parents (especially the mother); to his siblings and their children; to the women who bear his children; and to his 'outside' children (children from earlier unions that he is not living with). In addition, there may be responsibilities to children of his common law or married life, with whom he now resides.

Traditionally, in Jamaican/Caribbean culture it has been clear that a man's primary obligation to his family(ies), his role as a family man and father, is that of **providing for the family**. It also showed that there were very low expectations of fathers playing an active role in raising their children beyond financial provision. Mothers carry the major burdens of childcare, and many are also breadwinners. If a father is able to provide regular financial support, he is deemed the 'rightful' head of the family, even when non-resident, and is expected to be the ultimate disciplinarian and a guide for his children. However, if unable or

unwilling to provide sufficient financial support, he often remains peripheral to the family, literally or figuratively, fuelling the stereotype of the 'absent' and 'irresponsible' father.

Socio-economic realities and definitions of manhood

Two factors emerged that are significant in understanding the reality of how men actually fulfil the expected roles of fatherhood – or do not. The first relates to **contradictions** that men experience as they try to live out these expectations in a socio-economic climate which makes fulfilling them very nearly impossible. High unemployment and underemployment, migration to earn, women's increasing entrance into the formal labour market (away from home), the erosion of the extended family's resources to assist with child care: all present barriers for men and women as they attempt to fill their understood roles.

The second factor concerns the meanings fatherhood has for Jamaican men. Initially, 'getting' a child testifies manhood. Sexual prowess with females – preferably in multiples – is a strong

cultural value, important to prove long before any consideration is given to settling into a stable union. Men in this initial study distinguished 'getting' children (being named as father, accepting paternity) from 'having' them, which implied maintenance and care, and was most often used for the children of a more mature man, or one able to provide and be a real father. While men derived self-definitions from paternity – believing that without children they would be incomplete, lonely, empty, less mature – for many, 'getting' children was sufficient for this end. Ability to provide for them bears little weight, particularly for younger men, in accepting paternity.

In this first study, **nurturing** children was rarely described as a man's function. While the majority of men in both the survey and discussion groups described their active, often daily, participation in tidying, playing and reasoning with their children, and in helping regularly with homework, these tasks are perceived by most men and women as primarily women's work. Men themselves do not yet value them, particularly if the man is not seen as the breadwinner and thus family head, roles

that imply authority and decision-making status.

The study in fact indicated that men are far more involved in positively contributing to family life than popular stereotypes suggest. They have clear ideas about what good fathers should be, agreeing that they should counsel and communicate with their children, be responsible with the mother for inculcating moral values and social skills in their children, be the financial providers, and act as role models. On the other hand, many admit they cannot or do not always fulfil their responsibilities to the extent they feel they should. Irrespective of some men's efforts to redefine manhood in more fatherly ways, economic deprivation can serve to retard the development of more positive mating and childrearing behaviour. Attitudinal change and structural changes are clearly interrelated.

Other emergent issues from the Jamaican study

The interviews and group discussions pointed to a number of other lessons learned.

- Men welcome the opportunity to talk about their family relationships, particularly in groups of men only, where they felt less need to be defensive.
- Many feel great pain at their own shortcomings as fathers, whether they blame themselves, their partners, or the wider society for these deficits.
- The frequency and quality of the man's relationship with his children was highly dependent on his relationship with the child's mother.
- Outside children are often sacrificed to the welfare of those children within current unions.
- Little is known about the quality and impact of stepfathering by women's new partners.
- Conditions of poverty and underemployment, and the growing economic independence of women, leave both men and women calling for changes in division of labour and responsibility in matters of childrearing, but as yet there are no real challenges to the traditional gender roles that constrain these changes.

'The Gender Socialisation Project'
A participatory research project in Jamaica, Guyana and Dominica

In 1993, the University of the West Indies, at the invitation of the Caribbean office of UNICEF, began a two year participatory research project to redress the shortage of research literature on men's family roles and to provide material which would further understanding of how gender roles are played out within families. Six communities, three in Jamaica, two in Guyana and one in Dominica were chosen as study sites, representing a range of urban to rural, and no-income to low-income, Indo- and Afro-Caribbean populations. The project's rationale was similar to that of the pilot study in Jamaica discussed earlier, but was also cognisant of such factors as:

- male under-achievement in schools relative to the performance of girls;
- the 'feminisation' of the education system;
- obvious early gender differentiations, and the implications of these for children's identity, relationship formation and social roles;



Dominican Republic
photo: Esperanza Luengo



Trinidad & Tobago: Father and child in preschool
photo: Servol

- high and rising crime rates, particularly for young males;
- the number of male street children;
- and the disproportionate number of males in penal institutions and children's homes.

In many ways, the research project can be seen as a conceptual extension of the Jamaican study. It started from the view that the male's role in family and community decision making, in influencing the nutritional and

psychological development of children, and in sharing financial responsibility for family welfare, has not been well understood. It then went on to consider how cultural and economic factors at both local and regional levels – which

determine how gender roles are defined – vary greatly and should therefore be considered in the design of development programmes.

Common themes emerged from the findings of the ethnographic teams who spent approximately six months visiting the communities. These themes are summarised below.

Caribbean manhood

As in the Jamaican pilot study, discussions of the concept of manhood concentrated almost exclusively on three elements: sexuality/sexual identity; man's primary role as provider and protector; and scriptural authority for man as family head.

Sexuality/sexual identity

This was usually measured by the number of serial or concurrent female sexual partners; and by the resultant number of children. Fear and disgust of homosexuality were commonly expressed, with many parents believing that certain childrearing practices or child behaviours could lead to this 'deviance'. Demonstrating manhood enhanced the self-image of young males

and alleviated the worry of parents about homosexuality. Sexual activity for boys therefore begins early, often with the discreet knowledge of parents, and the encouragement of fathers.

Man's primary role as provider and protector

A man who cannot provide for his family is not a man. Even when a female partner is working, providing for the family is never seen as her major responsibility. Related to this role, man also is to be the 'protector' of his family, implying not only literal defence of his children against adversity, but ensuring their financial security. Domestic tasks are still seen as predominantly women's work and do not enhance a man's self-image. Nurturing and homemaking skills, when acquired by men, are not generally seen as options that broaden the definition of manhood, or as substitute contributions when financial provision is lacking.

Scriptural authority for man as family head

Manhood implies authority, particularly over women and offspring. This authority is seen as natural, being part of 'God's plan'.

Almost equally with men across the six communities, women subscribed to these elements of manhood. But, as the Jamaican study also concluded, an inherent dilemma lies in this pattern. Scoring high 'manhood' points as a young man by early sexual activity and secured paternity with multiple partners sows the seeds of later difficulty, even impossibility, in achieving success at later stages of manhood. As some respondents expressed it, some men never become real men who can meet the later criteria for manhood, beyond the exercise of their sexuality.

Man/woman relationships

Man/woman relations are characterised by high degrees of distrust and disillusionment. The following themes which emerged repeatedly in all community discussions, evidenced this overall characterisation.

Male-female fidelity

Men generally defended their right to and need for multiple partners although some stipulated that this should not interfere with the maintenance of their children. Women saw their own

concurrent or serial partnerships as economic necessity, while men saw female infidelity as unacceptable for any reason, and punishable.

Men's ultimate power and authority

The assertion that man is the head of the house remains the point at which almost any discussion of male-female partnerships begins and ends – if not in fact, at least in spirit. It is defended by Christians, Hindus and Moslems as religious tradition, ordained by God, and as historical and cultural inheritance. More recent forces – such as harsh global economic realities, the international women's liberation movement, and foreign media intrusions – are credited by both men and women with challenging history and tradition, upsetting 'natural order' and contributing to the erosion of man's authority in the home and to power struggles between men and women. These struggles often seemed related to the growing economic independence of women, and affected all areas of family life.

Expectations of men as primary source of family finances

It was always understood that men are

responsible for giving their partners money to run the household and to support the family's needs. Women generally see any money they earn as their own, to spend on the household and on themselves, as 'insurance' against any future desertion by their partner, or for any outside children they may have. There were wide-ranging opinions on whether, and how much, earnings affect power relationships between men and women. Better education for females, women working outside the home, and male migration were often discussed as threatening male headship and upsetting relationships.

This study reinforces previous research findings which suggest that the partnership with the children's mother becomes vulnerable and the man's authority tenuous when he cannot provide sufficiently for his children. Other women, and long hours in the rum bar or at the domino table with male friends, are common male recourses to the resulting financial pressures and demands, reinforcing his marginal status to his family(ies).

Division of domestic labour across traditional gender lines

Men and women see division of labour differently: the male is prescribed the roles of breadwinner, provider and protector, and the woman assumes the roles of homemaker and nurturer; this division largely determines how men and women see domestic duties within the home. However, the discussions revealed that men often do a considerable amount of work within the domestic sphere, especially when children are young and can't share in the labour. But there were many contradictory and ambivalent messages about whether such tasks really belong to men or are only required when a woman can't manage all of the work. Such participation is rarely celebrated by men and not always by women, some of whom see a very domesticated man as 'soft' or as someone who watches and criticises everything the woman does in the home, thus intruding on her domain.

Domestic violence as a result of broken relationship 'contracts'

Not all groups discussed this topic freely, but some had candid and heated debates about the levels of acceptability

of physical violence against one's partner – usually men beating women. A rough thread that ran through the accounts of partners resorting to violence was the notion of broken contracts, contracts that were often based on unstated or misunderstood expectations. For example, a man was defended in a group for beating his wife when she didn't prepare dinner for him on a Friday night. Why? Because he was away from home all week doing farm work to support his family. He kept his side of the bargain, but she didn't.

Whether the woman feels she is entitled to challenge the man's authority often relates to the woman's level of education and/or financial independence. When a woman feels she can survive without depending on a man's labour, that she has options by way of her education or with other available men, she is less inclined to accept physical abuse, and may in fact prefer to live without a man at all.

Give and take

Distrust, disillusionment, broken contracts, domestic violence ... these certainly did not characterise all the man-woman relationships in all six

communities. There were many men and women who still spoke of love, of sharing and equity, and of give and take, and humour and mutual respect redeemed many a potentially inflammatory discussion of sensitive topics. However, the degree to which more negative sentiments dominated many conversations represents a significant outcome of the socialisation patterns common in raising the children who become men and women.

Parent/child relations and practice

The research suggests that traditional childrearing strategies are becoming less and less effective. At the core of traditional strategies is the concept described in Guyana as 'Tie the heifer, loose the bull', implying the protection and monitoring of daughters while sons are allowed, even encouraged, to have more freedom and independence. For a girl, the point is to avoid early pregnancy while equipping her for economic independence and/or (usually and) partnership with a man. In contrast, sons are encouraged to develop independence and assumption of responsibility by seeking earnings;

and early sexual encounters are considered normal.

The ultimate goal for both boys and girls is that of gaining economic independence and readiness to take up the responsibilities of providing for and protecting a family. But gender distinctions and assumptions are central to most childrearing practices. These include a preference for boys because of their economic potential and because they carry on the family name; and the prevalence of homophobic myths about the development of male sexuality.

In addition, parents feel increasingly helpless against external factors that influence their children. The survival strategies traditionally employed in raising boys seem no longer realistic. Education and skill acquisition for a livelihood by traditional routes – school achievement and apprenticeship – are often blocked or severely hampered by economic deficiencies at home and in the school system. If boys do not drop out of school to earn for themselves or their families, they often leave school with few skills that can be turned to ready profit. 'By any means necessary'

for some becomes an alternate strategy, as more and more young men end up in illicit activities to achieve their material goals; on the street instruction in these skills is readily available, particularly in poorer urban settings. In such settings, apprenticeship opportunities to learn useful skills are less available and less attractive.

Protection strategies for girls are also increasingly difficult to enforce. The need for mothers to work outside the home reduces opportunities to supervise and instruct. Liberating options for girls and women have expanded their choices outside home and family, and the growth of consumerism has fuelled a range of economic activities among girls and young women, including bartering with sex to meet their material needs. Urban environments, in particular, also offer ready exposure to alternate lifestyles to girls as well as boys. Such lifestyles often appear to work against the values and goals of parents.

External factors in socialisation

In addition to the many economic factors that impact on families, on

definitions of manhood and on fathering, other external factors were also investigated by the research teams, including the influences of peer groups, social class and ethnicity, community role models, organised religion, education, and other cultural and subcultural institutions.

The influence of the peer group is perceived as being dominant, particularly as children reach puberty and beyond. Many parents feel that they have little countervailing influence against peer pressure as the teen years approach. There is considerable evidence that peers and peer groups (such as sports clubs, school cliques, street gangs) more strongly influence male socialisation than female.

There were numerous references to the influence of the media, particularly television, in conveying and strengthening non-traditional images and ideas that are perceived by many informants as having a negative impact on cultural values and practices – including traditional gender roles – that they would wish to preserve. The influence on children was decried most



Caribbean: Men generally defended their right to and need for multiple partners
From: *Why Men Stay So - Tie the Heifer, Loose the Bull*; University of West Indies

often, but some men also declared that their wives spent too much time watching soap operas and neglected their duties in the home.

Organised religion, on the other hand, whether Christian, Hindu or Moslem, is seen as both generating

and supporting traditional roles and values. But church/temple attendance and religious practices have a stronger hold on girls than boys, largely through differential parental enforcement and/or the perception that boys are under less parental influence at earlier ages and can

therefore stop attending on their own. Interfaith friendships are less often opposed on religious grounds as on the fear that strong cultural/ethnic traditions will be eroded and contribute to family conflict.

If social class differences were examined more thoroughly than was possible in this study, many differences would be found in the areas described above. In one community, teachers agreed that upper classes in the present day Caribbean are more susceptible to cross-cultural (including cross-ethnic) influences on gender roles, while the lower classes tend to cling to traditional male/female roles. These effects on the upper class are not always seen as positive, as this same group of teachers felt that street gangs are primarily the work of children of wealthy parents who are so busy accumulating wealth that their children are left unattended and unguided, and are thus easy prey for the Western youth cultures through films, television and other media.

Much more investigation of persons' understandings of cultural/racial/class differences is clearly needed, as these

attitudes to history, community and self have obvious implications for the socialisation of male and female children. Discussions within this project barely scratched the surface of these issues.

Acting on the research: 1995 to the present

Overall, the research findings suggested the need for a range of interventions to target the key socialisers of the young: parents, educators, church leaders, sports coaches, musicians, and community leaders, as well as the young themselves. Such interventions should facilitate exploring, without defensiveness or fear, the ways in which cultural/social constructions of gender roles can erect barriers to selfrealisation and familial role satisfaction for both men and women. Bob Marley's plea to 'emancipate yourself from mental slavery' speaks evocatively to both men and women about many of the unchallenged structures that constrain them. It was felt important to encourage the trends, however tentative, in the direction of defining manhood and fatherhood more widely to include nurturing, and the sharing of domestic tasks. It was also felt that a man's

broadened investment in family roles would not only be of greater benefit to his children, but that he, too, would benefit from being a better father, and from improved relationships with his children and their mother(s).

A number of initiatives followed directly from the research, supported by UNICEF:

- participants from five of the six communities in the research shared with their communities in skits, songs, school poster contests, discussions and other activities, their perceptions of the research and its implications for them.
- Three symposia were held between June and October 1995 in the three countries studied, to present the findings of the research to a total of 185 programme and policy level colleagues. The symposia each addressed:
 - implications for policy, education, employment, health, community organisation and development, and family life; and the roles of the media, churches and other mentoring organisations in acting on the implications.

- Specific programmes and strategies for following up these issues, particularly for developing a deeper understanding of the Caribbean male in family, community and national life.
- The implications for further research.
- In May 1996, a new Caribbean radio drama series was completed and made available to radio stations within the English-speaking Caribbean and to stations serving West Indian communities abroad. The series presented many of the common and often contradictory attitudes and perceptions of Caribbean men about themselves within their various worlds – in relation to women, their children, friends, and the wider society. The primary objective of these programmes was to foster more discussion and debate, and more personal reflection about the important ways in which men and women live out their social roles day to day, how they pass these roles on to their children, and how they see these roles changing. Although these programmes were aired in many countries and – reportedly – were repeated in some, no systematic feedback on impact was obtained⁵.

- In 1996 Participatory Learning for Action (PLA) methods were used to examine gender-related issues at community level in St. Lucia, Grenada and Jamaica, confirming many of the findings of the earlier studies.
- In Jamaica the focus of this activity more specifically addressed how very young children are socialised into gender roles. Funds from the international Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development made this possible as part of a multi-country study⁶.
- Materials based on the research have been developed for use in multipurpose workshops on gender equity and gender role confusions/contradictions. Two short summaries of the two research projects have been published in user friendly formats, one a workbook of participatory sessions to explore the common issues of the research in community groups, the other used by University of the West Indies students in several courses as well as available to the general public.
- A full monograph by Chevannes will be available in the first quarter of 2001.⁷

Without the benefit of specific impact studies, it can only be hoped that these project output activities have compounded and perhaps accelerated the growing awareness of and pressures for change in Caribbean definitions of manhood and fatherhood. While the numbers of children born to teenage mothers is still rising slightly, change is reflected in a dropping overall fertility rate and shrinking family size. The costs for caring and educating each child at least through secondary school are steadily rising in a no-growth economy, and government is not yet able to provide a social safety net that ensures a minimal level of living standard for all.

In this climate, gender issue debates flourish on the plethora of daily radio and TV talk shows, in theatre offerings, youth group meetings, parent-teacher meetings, etc. Several organisations have sought to channel these airings of often contentious and contradictory topics from simple ventilation to a more structured focus on personal reflection and change, and on collective problem solving, aided by skilful facilitators.

Since the 'men only' sessions kickstarted by the Caribbean Child Development Centre in 1991 (see box on 'Fathers, Incorporated' on page 37), several groups have used this approach to try and develop men's agendas for change. Religious groups have been in the forefront, organising several men's conferences with calls for more responsible fatherhood and a 'return to family values'. Jamaica's inordinate number of churches, large and small, are made up of predominantly female members, even though the pulpits remain a largely male domain. The church community as a whole feels it has a strong mandate to help restore men to their Biblical/traditional role within the family, and as responsible providers for their children.

Some church groups take this outreach role to men well beyond the pulpit; there are many church-sponsored sports clubs and church men's groups who work with young boys, particularly in activities designed to reduce their risk of antisocial or illegal behaviours. One such new group formed in 1999 calls itself The Gappists, taking its name from the Biblical reference to God's search 'for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap

on behalf of the land, so I would not have to destroy it'. Founded by a group of mostly young university students, the Gappists have organised a summer camp for low-income boys in a nearby high school, and have held a series of seminars aimed at aiding men and women to better understand issues of male identity, male sexuality and fatherhood. They have also recently established a Gappist chapter in a prominent all boys high school, targeting future leaders.

The discourse on these issues has qualitatively deepened over these past years, and has become more than just defensive retorts to feminist challenges for change. The discourse continues across the Caribbean. We note a men's group in Trinidad formed against domestic violence;⁸ university-level seminars on issues of manhood;⁹ male parent groups meeting regularly in Dominica;¹⁰ a fatherhood conference scheduled for Belize in 2001;¹¹ and a male adolescent programme for teen fathers that extended into a parish-wide men's movement in Jamaica.¹² A report on men's workshops in the Eastern Caribbean highlighted how in the dark most men are about how their bodies function, and how male-unfriendly most of the health care systems in the region



Caribbean: Overflow families prefer to have the male child first
 From: *Why Man Stay So - Tie the Helper, Loose the Bull*: University of West Indies

are in specifically addressing men's ignorance and fears.¹³

More recent research has served the dual purposes of keeping manhood and fatherhood issues on the public agenda as well as supplying policy and public debates on these issues with harder

data. This is illustrated in the following four studies.

- 1 A uwi three-country examination of youth attitudes to family and gender relations¹⁴ showed that for children and teens, money is 'critical in the very definition of the role of the
- 2 The uwi's Fertility Management Unit has just completed a major study of male reproductive behaviours.¹⁵ One section of the report examines men's

male in relationships', and that 'the family was a contingent, negotiated accomplishment' that took into account property ownership and control of resources as much as fulfilment of gender role expectations. The greatest bitterness expressed by these young persons towards their fathers related to non-performance in their role of economic provider; they did not expect much else from them. However, it was reported that lifelong respect was gained by mothers who juggled roles of both mother and father. Violence in man-woman relationships was seen as inevitable by these children, not much more than an extension of the often harsh disciplinary practices they have grown up with. Young boys complain that they cannot get the attention of their female classmates, who look for older males with earnings.

attitudes to unwanted and ill-timed pregnancies; it was significant that the pregnancy of a man's 'bona fide' partner (primary among multiples) could be considered mistimed, but rarely unwanted. The children which resulted from unprotected, casual sex, were most often unwanted. A second section of the research describes men's concepts of fatherhood, strongly underscoring the findings described in the two studies herein reported. Throughout the study poverty intervened to largely determine a father's 'fate':

In denying men the opportunity to perform the function that is central to their concept of fatherhood, poverty robs them of their self-esteem. One of the most poignant and instructive remarks made in the focus group discussion suggests that a mask of indifference often hides a mountain of despair: 'Sometimes a man want to do something but he can't. So him just pretend like him nuh want fi do nutten.' [Sometimes a man wants to do something but he can't. So he just pretends that he doesn't want to do it.]

3. A major longitudinal study of almost 2000 Jamaican children¹⁶ who were assessed on a wide range of variables at birth and again at age 11, provided some sobering data in relation to fathers.

- Half of the mother-father unions at birth had ended over this period, most in the first three years of the child's life.
- One third of fathers did not continue their parenting roles; a high percentage of these maintained no contact with the child.
- In examining school performance and behaviour, the father's presence in the home, a stable parent relationship, and higher level of parental education were associated with positive child outcomes in the study group.
- Conditions of poverty were demonstrably evident in these findings.

4. Data compiled by Chevannes¹⁷ has provided further insights into the phenomenon of male under-achievement at all levels of formal

schooling. Chevannes' review of Ministry of Education records clearly documents high male drop out rates, poor male school attendance, male avoidance of 'female' subjects (such as English!), and differential treatment of boys and girls throughout the school system. (See also Evans¹⁸).

How do these latest research activities bear on redefining maleness and fatherhood?

- They have raised serious alarm bells among educators, policy makers, service organisations, and the business sector, as to the implications of growing numbers of under-educated males fuelling unemployment lines and the nation's jails; some even worry about the implications for educated women seeking 'suitable' male partners.
- The 'marginalisation' of the man to the family is now seen as a wider 'under-participation' of men in the broader social goals and values of the society – thus no longer only a complaint from women about inequitable domestic loads, but a

more broadly expressed fear for the fabric of the whole society.

- The reports draw attention to the strains on men unable to support their families without migrating, or resorting to illicit activities.
- More and more women will be carrying the double parenting roles, and the numbers of children without adequate care and supervision will continue to grow as a result.

The way forward

The decade of raised awareness of fatherhood issues that began in the arena of gender role disparities and contradictions is moving into a new period of broader debates, engaging men in examining issues of identity formation, in challenging traditional cultural values, and, for some, in reasserting their right to greater access to their children.

These new debates have forced many men and women to ask deeper questions about the kind of society they really want (in the face of perceived erosion of traditional family roles and values), and about the roles

men are to play in economic climates analogous to quicksand for many. Add in an educational system that appears to be programming male failure, and issues of redefining manhood and the roles of fathers move to the front burner.

The challenge for those who are concerned about children's rights and welfare within these debates is to ensure that the importance of men as fathers, as nurturing, supportive and protective influences in their children's lives, becomes central. This is nascent but happening. The emergence of child rights issues over the past decade, originally almost a foreign concept to the culture, has aided in reminding the society of a child's right to the care and attention of both parents, and has brought the broad needs of children beyond just financial support to greater public notice. Preschool and primary school practitioners have begun to focus more deliberately on parent involvement and education, joining churches and community groups in this endeavour. A National Coalition on Better Parenting has emerged to share strategies and



Dominican Republic: *Boys preparing a meal*
photo: Esperanza Luengo

materials among scarce professionals and local community-based organisations, in order to strengthen the engagement of fathers and mothers in understanding the critical importance of their roles. There is visible evidence on the streets of men caring for their children, taking them to clinic, even fighting for their custody in court.

But there is much more work still to be done with and by men, before they can more publicly begin to celebrate these aspects of their manhood; before they can understand their direct opportunities to affect positively their children's performance and behaviour; and before they can see that their investments of time and caring have to go beyond financial support. The Father of the Year Awards (see box on next page) have provided one such public celebration in Jamaica. Its impact on real behaviours is not known, but it is a move in the direction of enhancing men's self-concepts with the nurturing aspects of fathering. This direction is slowly gaining momentum.

Conclusion

Ten years of research and experimental interventions still add up to only the start of greater understanding of gender socialisation issues in the Caribbean, and of removing some of the obstacles that define male-female relationships and gender role conflicts. Education, in all its broad definitions, is critical in challenging many of the constraining attitudes and values transmitted daily from adults to children. Education planners and policy makers, in tandem with community leaders and NGOs, must continue to provoke personal and collective reflection and problem-solving, while at the same time seeking deeper understanding of the underlying cultural, economic and psychological causes for some of the society's most harmful inequities. In all of this, the welfare of children, particularly in the earliest formative stages of their development, must come to the foreground of this agenda, so that men and women work together at gender role resolutions, with their children at the centre of their exchanges. ○

Notes and references

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8. The 'Men Against Violence Against Women' group, founded in 1996
9. University workshops/seminars: a) 'Family and quality of gender relations' (1997) University of the West Indies, Mona; b) 'The construction of Caribbean masculinity: towards a research agenda' (1996) University of the West Indies, St. Augustine
10. The Social Centre, providing most of Dominica's preschool services, has convened fathers' group meetings for many as part of their parenting education programme
11. National Organisation for the Prevention of Child Abuse in Belize: Conference on 'Issues of fatherhood' scheduled for August 2001
12. Mordecai M (1996) *Putting May Pen on the MAP: Male Adolescent Programme*; Bernard Van Leer Foundation/CECE/University of West Indies
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Fathers, Incorporated

A workshop in 1991 for fathers only was attended by 17 men, participants at the Caribbean Child Development Centre's (CCDC) first parenting symposium. A common denominator among these men was the belief that women stereotype them unfairly as irresponsible fathers. Under the leadership of facilitator Dr. Barry Chevannes, the group was eager to meet again, and a core group of approximately ten men began meeting weekly, calling themselves Fathers Only.

When CCDC held a second parenting symposium a year later, this time for men only, the Fathers Only group assisted during the day of workshops. As the culminating activity of that day, they officially launched their group with the new name Fathers, Incorporated and began a recruitment drive.

The group became involved in a range of activities – volunteer work in a government children's home, peer counselling training, a workshop on Violence, Self and the Young Male (1993), and provocative radio spots, defending against the blanket negative images of Jamaican fathers that prevailed. Twice, with external funding, they sponsored exchange visits: one with representatives from St. Lucia's longstanding Mothers and Fathers organisations; the second a seminar tour featuring two African ethnographers from Cameroon and Kenya, talking about fatherhood in those countries. One year they sponsored a major musical concert to mark Father's Day.

Despite keen loyalty from a core group that remains strong, Fathers, Incorporated has remained a volunteer group of primarily blue collar workers for whom earning a living has to take priority over their volunteer activities. The University's outreach arm of the Department of Sociology and Social Work has lent research assistant and student time to aid their activities, but extending the organisation nationwide has so far been beyond their energies and scope.

However, four years ago Fathers, Incorporated launched what perhaps has provided the greatest impact of the group to date: they sponsored an essay contest among schools, asking applicants to state why their fathers should be named 'Father of the Year'. Considerable media attention is given to this contest which culminates on Father's Day each year. The profiles of the responsible and caring fathers who have won each year have provided public models for the kind of fathers that young persons would desire to have, and the kind of celebration of nurturing fatherhood that helps advance these qualities as self-enhancing for men. They are optimistic that in the year of their 10th anniversary, they will find some longer-term solutions to their organisational weaknesses, so that they can continue calling for and celebrating responsible, caring fatherhood.