Black Males in the Caribbean

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Introduction

In the Caribbean today the number of rapes, armed robbery, assaults and other forms of violence committed by black males have increased significantly from three decades ago. On the other hand the ratio of female to male performance in education is at 65% to 35%. In Dominica an Eastern Caribbean state, for every five students moving on to college only one (1) is male. This 20% representation of males in higher education is similar to the statistics in the U.S. amongst blacks. Caribbean governments are concerned about this new phenomenon and are looking for solutions. Both the 1999 and 2000 regional Association of Caribbean Tertiary Institutes (ACTI) Conference featured discussions on the problem of black males on their agenda.

This presentation will seek to examine the socialization processes for males in the region, the societal expectations placed on them and their traditional roles in the family and society at large.

The term "man" is described as an adult male human being (Webster), but this simple definition is complicated by the many expectations and role that society has placed on the male species. To "man" something means to be stationed to defend, care for or operate (Webster). Men in our societies irrelevant of race worry about work, they worry about war, and they worry about their role as protectors and fear for their capacity to measure up. How they react to these many expectations and fear, and what are the influences that shape their behavior in the Caribbean will be discussed further in this paper.

In a study conducted amongst a random sample of black males in Dominica, preliminary figures revealed that only 40% of males today think that education is the "key resource that can help them to be successful." 60% on the other hand believe that money and wealth is the key to success. It would certainly seem that in countries, which are relatively poor, the notion amongst its black male that wealth accumulation and not education is the key to success presents a serious value problem for those developing countries. In addition the study indicated that 69% of respondents did not think that there was any problems with the role or behavior of males in the society.

Is something really wrong with black males? This question has been asked thousands of times by women, educators and sociologist and while a more in depth analysis is needed to determine the answer to the question, this presentation will argue that in effect, males in the Caribbean today are no different than males in previous generations and pose no threat to the Socio-Economic structure of the region. It is evident, that over the last three decades, young black males in particular seem to be manifesting behavior that are slightly different from earlier in Caribbean history. However there is also irrevocable evidence that society as a whole has undergone fundamental changes in the region. The societies' core values, expectations, sensitivity, and sharing as a community has undergone comprehensive changes, to which the black males have not been able to adjust successfully. There are three basic areas in which black males are perceived to be failing and losing ground

- Failure to recognize and uphold the nuclear family
- Failure to maintain monogamous relations
- Failure to remain on par in the area of education and employment with females

Black males in the Caribbean in general and Dominica in particular like their ancestors, have not changed their fundamental behavior and cultural characteristics since emancipation. It can be argued further that most Caribbean men today, manifest behavior that is similar if not identical to pre slavery African men.

In order to determine whether males in the Caribbean are falling apart, or are simply refusing to change their basic behavior to cope with the revolutionary sociological changes that have transformed Caribbean society an in-depth examination of the other gender of society and their own reaction to modern changes should be undertaken. Men are an integral group in any society but their behavior at any point in their own history is directly or indirectly influenced by the interaction and expectations of women of the particular community.

THE BLACK MALE: a socio-historical perspective
The available literature relating to the behavior of black males in the Caribbean is limited. In fact "Caribbean studies on men and the family proved almost non-existent, instead, stereotypes about men's attitude and behavior in relation to their families, mostly negative, have substituted for informed data." Janet Brown, (1993). Today; there is still an absence of scientific data about black male behavior in the Caribbean, however this author's own study of males in Dominica, and other limited available publications in the region, provided a peek into the thoughts, rationale and value of males.

In 1987/1988 a regional survey was conducted by the Caribbean Child Development Centre (CCDC) in which questions were administered to a total of 700 men to determine men's attitude and behavior about family life. Because family responsibility is an area in which there seems to be consensus that Caribbean males are not measuring up, it is necessary to examine the findings of these surveys. First the survey found Caribbean men traditionally have multiple offsprings. Men will generally have "outside" children (i.e. children who live with mothers with whom he had earlier relationships) and "children" (i.e. those with whom he may now reside together with a legal or common law wife). But invariably the number of children fathered will be more than one.

The prevailing question that modern women, and sociologist ask is, "Why do Caribbean men father so many children"? Inherent in that question is the suggestion that black males are generally irresponsible. The men surveyed had a different perspective. Amongst working class men, "the study indicated that "getting, having and fathering children have powerful meaning for men"...(Brown). Traditionally Caribbean men like their ancestors before them, measure their manhood by the number of women they have acquired and by the number of children that they have fathered.

In our modern societies where the concept of DINK (double income no kids) amongst the middle class is upheld as a responsible value by young professional couples, the practice of fathering multiple children with different women seem archaic, falls outside the box, and results in the labeling of the Caribbean man as irresponsible.

In the Caribbean, a man's primary obligation to his family(ies), and his role as a family man and father is that of "providing" (Brown). If providing for ones family represents the key characteristic that defines a Caribbean man, it is not difficulty to understand why in the past two decades black males appear to be falling behind as a group. High unemployment, under employment, migration, and more women in the work force, has eroded the black males foundation on which he staked his manhood.

The result of this erosion coupled with the emergence of a drug economy, western television values, and his women greed for material wealth have essentially produced a more complex and less productive black male in the Caribbean.

Behavioral Characteristics

Black male behavior within Caribbean communities has not changed significantly from the historic period of "hunters and gatherers" which existed amongst African communities prior to the period of enslavement. In addition there are cultural characteristics within that community which rightly or wrongly support, enable and perpetuate the historical position of the male as "Hunter and Provider" in today's Caribbean. If it is determined that current black male behavior or traits are no longer appropriate in the new environment of independence and nation building, and if there is a collective consensus in the region that change is necessary amongst the black male community, then it must be recognized that a corresponding comprehensive revolution amongst the female community in how they raise, socialize, and educate young males in the community must first take place.

The following characteristics represent some of the more peculiar cultural aspects of the environment in which the black males function in the Caribbean.

- Black males are not required to move out of their parents' home when they reach adulthood
- Young men at an early age are given significantly more freedom than young girls by the family (or parent) to explore their sexuality
- Mothers of males in the Caribbean relative to other western societies seem more willing to help, nurture, raise and support, the offspring of their young sons
- Caribbean women appear to be more loyal to their men and seem more likely to accept a man's infidelity or cheating behavior
- When there is conflict resulting from infidelity and love triangles involving a black male, the women involved are more likely to blame and attack each other leaving the man blameless.

It is perhaps important to note that these traits and patterns of behavior in the Caribbean community are not unique to that region of the world, and the same characteristics and culture prevail among African American and natives of the African continent. However the significance of that observation is a topic of a larger discussion on male/female relationships.

Focus group studies undertaken by this author for a larger study of black males revealed a number of significant cultural and historical values of Caribbean society. These value systems to westerners may seem counter productive to socio economic development, but in conversations with Caribbean groups, the picture is painted differently.

From our study it is fair to conclude that there is a problem with black male behavior in the Caribbean, but modification of that behavior in the future will require both men and women to come to a consensus on how best to fix the problem.

The following anecdotal cases from Dominica presents an insight on what appears to be societal norm in the Caribbean as it relates to male/female interactions.

Case 1 - Hakim

Hakim is a 30-year-old man residing in a village of 3,000 in Dominica. He is unemployed, has never held a permanent job, and has been in jail for misdemeanors, i.e. child support and smoking marijuana. Yet Hakim has two permanent "baby" mothers and 10 children. Each baby mother has 5 children each. The women know each other and live within close proximity of each other. Both women are employed and help maintain Hakim and his drug habit. Psychologist will most likely diagnose these women with co-dependency syndrome. However conversations with the individuals' reveals a lot more complicated system that co-dependency. Culture, tradition and values of the village and country shape or govern the behavior and subsequent acceptance of male

behaviors. Who is at fault? Is it the male Hakim, whose answer "I am a sweet man, one taste of me and you can't leave or Roshita who declares that "she is not about to leave Hakim for her rival."

Case 11 – The Lawyer

Michael is a 49-year-old attorney prominent in the community. He encounters a 20-year-old college educated young woman at a function. She tells him that she is planning to go to law school and is interested in doing some legal support work in an attorney's office. He says he can help, invites her to his "home office" where his computer is located. The young lady arrives for the appointment. He talks to her about some fabricated non-existent job and proceeds to back her up against a wall, showering kisses on her neck. She pushes him away and runs out of the house. No charges are filed. Reporting the incident would be detrimental to the young woman.
The question still remains, "Would you want your daughter married to one?"

Education

Educating girls worldwide has long been a top priority for governments and agencies...but one consequence of that policy objective is that men are being left behind in some regions (the Futurist Unesco paper, September-October 1997 v31 n5.)

The Caribbean is now one such region: literacy is significantly higher amongst females than males. Nearly a third of men are illiterate in the Caribbean compared with 19% of women. Errol Miller head of the Education Department at the University of the West Indies (UWI) states that 63% of students enrolled at that institution are women and more women graduate annually than men.
As indicated by this author earlier, Miller believes that "Caribbean girls and women are outpacing their male counterparts in education attainment largely because their activities are more restricted by society. Boys are freer, while girls must stay home where they are more closely disciplined. And, because most teachers are women (90% in early education and 75% at senior secondary level), boys have fewer male role models in educational settings."

The decline in the number of men seeking education presents the small region of the Caribbean with other issues related to the future development of these nation states. Educated women complain that they are unable to find men who are equally educated to raise families. Businesses have to rely primarily on women to strengthen their work force, and the society at large is looking for answers to the apparent male problem. The options available for rectifying this potentially serious sociological problem appears to be limited; however, a change in the way boys are socialized in those societies, providing incentives for boys to achieve excellence in Education, and a change in women's willingness to accept some unreasonable behavior from their male counterparts, can eventually stem the tide of a declining strong and educated male force in the community and prevent the chaos that in the future could sweep the Caribbean like a hurricane.

Summary

Black males globally, appear to be in crisis. In Africa civil were in Rwanda, Zaire Liberia and other West African states are destroying the very lives of young men. In the U.S. there are 491,000 young black males in prison, while only 473,000 black students in college (Dept. of Labor figures 1998). The Caribbean also is experiencing its share of male under achievement as indicated above, however all is not lost. The Caribbean population is smaller than the other black centers of the world, therefore the region is more able to modify current male behavior through education and societal value changes. The task may take a while but if the issue is brought into the forefront of discourse, in the end, positive change and compromise will prevail.

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