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Violence Against Women and "Male Marginalisation" in the Caribbean

Caribbean newspapers are replete with the despairing accounts of the killing of women and children by men known to them. In Guadeloupe, on 6 March, a Dominican woman and her three children were stabbed to death, allegedly by a Martiniquan man whom she had refused to marry. In Trinidad and Tobago where many murders of women have been committed this year, on International Women's Day 27 year-old Polly Ramnarine was chopped to death by a male relative in the presence of her 11 year-old daughter. On 13 March, Jennifer Ram, 26 and mother of three was chopped to death by her husband of 11 years. The killing of Jennifer, in the presence of her three small children, was the culmination of an extremely abusive relationship which started when Jennifer was an unprotected child of 15. In the words of one relative "he used to beat she for every little thing". On 30 March in Tobago, a man killed his partner and her mother, this time in the presence of grown children.

These cases of femicide are the culmination of a vicious continuum that describes the lives of too many women in our region. While there is no doubt that the region has started to address gender-based violence, very few prosecutions proceed against men who perpetrate criminal acts against their intimate partners and the dominant message continues to be that crime committed against a female in a family or household setting is a private matter. Increasingly however, policy makers are debating whether mandatory prosecutions may not be necessary to communicate very unambiguously the State's commitment to the eradication of violence against women.

The understanding that violence against women is most often an expression of unequal power relations between women and men has led to an analysis of the ways in which socializing agencies (schools, families, churches, the courts) promote and maintain stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity.

In March 2001, in Trinidad and Tobago, for example, a man was sentenced to three years imprisonment for the killing of his 26 year-old wife whom he alleged had been unfaithful to him. In passing the sentence after the jury found the accused guilty, not of murder but of manslaughter, the judge reportedly stated that it was clear that the jury accepted the man's evidence that his wife had conducted herself in a manner inconsistent with the love he had for her and the family life that they shared. It turns out from subsequent reports that "family life" for the deceased woman consisted of repeated physical abuse. (The DPP has appealed the case.)

The sentence of three years has been interpreted in Trinidad as symbolic of the devaluation of the worth of women, a devaluation which finds expression most often in the treatment of women as the property of another and in the denial of protection of the integrity of the female person. The idea of female infidelity as "grave provocation" sufficient to excuse violence is firmly rooted in patriarchy, a value system which not only accepts but perpetuates the notion of woman as the property of man. These notions are life-threatening to women and diminish men.

Despite the glaring evidence of women's continuing experiences of gender based abuse and inequality, including statistics on wage disparities, higher unemployment, greater family responsibilities and limited access to power and decision-making in the public and private sectors, there is a well-spring of concern for "male marginalisation". This concern typically arises in discussions on gender equality and the advancement of women, particularly in the education sector.

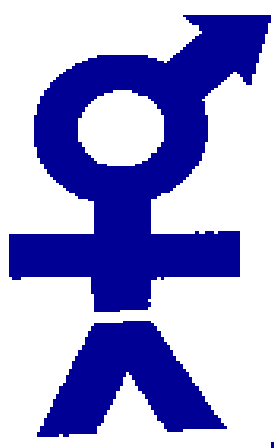
There is no doubt that we are witnessing social and economic alienation among many young men and women in the Caribbean. For young men, this alienation is revealed in a variety of public ways, from high school drop-out rates, early involvement in crime and violence, high risk behaviors such as drug use and inappropriate sexual behavior and the shirking of familial responsibility. No one can deny the tremendously negative impact this alienation is having on our societies. Indeed, arguably, because of women's primary role as the carers of families and communities, they are the first to feel the full negative effects of boys who no longer share the norms of their societies.

However, analyses of the causes of such alienation must address not only the gender-based origins of male alienation but also the ways in which socio-economic deprivations and inequalities contribute to the desolation of many Caribbean boys and men.

The United Nations human rights system, based as it is on the idea of the indivisibility of all rights (political, social and economic), provides a framework within which discussions can take place on the meaning of citizenship and on ways to advance a commitment to respect for all. To suggest (either explicitly or impliedly) that women's continuing quest for gender equality and personal autonomy is to blame for destructive and dysfunctional behaviour in boys and men is to perpetuate an ideological acceptance for gender inequality. It is this acceptance at the end of the day which feeds all forms of violence against women.

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Women to participate in the Constitutional Reform Process in Antigua and Barbuda

In November 2000, the Directorate of Gender Affairs was presented with the opportunity to access technical assistance from UNDP to mobilize women to effectively participate in the Constitutional Reform process. The Directorate seized the opportunity and conducted its first meeting with Mrs. Ingalill Colbro, Senior Policy Adviser/Civil Society in November 2000.

Ms Colbro emphasized the importance of participating and highlighted the need for women to mobilize and work together in an organized manner so that they could effectively impact the process. At that meeting it became evident that participants lacked an appreciation of how the constitution could promote the cause of democratic governance. Participants agreed that in order to proceed they would need to increase their understanding of the Constitution of Antigua and Barbuda.

Constitutional Workshop for Women

A constitutional workshop for women was held in January 2001. The aims of the workshop were three-fold:

- To explain in simple language the meaning of the Constitution of Antigua and Barbuda;
- To persuade participants that knowledge of how the Constitution works is a source of empowerment for civil society to participate in the reconstruction of a democratic society; and
- To prepare a list of issues on which to make submissions before the Constitutional Reform Commission (CRC).

The workshop took the form of a lecture on the Constitution of Antigua and Barbuda, followed by an identification of issues. It was then decided that the issues discussed would be put before a larger group of women for further consideration and a request for a special hearing for women with the CRC.

Women's Constitutional Conference

As a follow up to the Constitutional workshop, a Women's Constitution Conference was held on 8 March 2001, International Women's Day. The theme of the Conference was "*Gender Equality under the Constitution*".

The Conference was organized as part of the process to ensure that women were adequately educated to effectively contribute to the current Constitutional debate. It aimed to raise awareness of gender issues for proposal to the CRC and to develop strategies for future action.

The conference attracted over 200 women from various governmental, NGOs, church groups, service organizations and associations. Participants discussed the following aspects of the Constitutions and agreed on the issues for submission to the CRC:

- a. The preamble;
- b. Electoral reform;
- c. Mechanisms for ensuring gender equality; and
- d. Social and economic rights for women.

Special hearing for women with the CRC

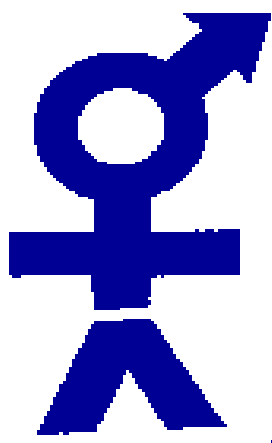
At a special hearing for women with the CRC on 20 March, representatives from various women's organizations attended. Submissions were made to address gender equality in the following areas:

- (a) Public service and public life;
- (b) Electoral reform;
- (c) Women's social and economic rights;
- (d) The Ombudsman;
- (e) Gender Equality Commission;
- (f) International conventions such as CRC and CEDAW; and
- (g) Other issues such as the Rights for minority groups, the disabled and the elderly.

As part of the ongoing process of review the group reserved the right to return to the Commission with other views in the near future. The coming together of groups was to submit the initial thoughts and the group will be presenting at a later date the full written proposal.

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Human Rights - the Context for Women's Rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly on 10 December, 1948 defines and codifies human rights standards and sets forth the essential principle of equality and non-discrimination. Beyond the general provisions on non-discrimination found in the major human rights instruments, the United Nations has addressed the pervasive and structural nature of violation of women's human rights through the formulation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (the Women's Convention).

The goal of the Women's Convention is to redress inequities in a comprehensive manner through the elimination of direct and indirect causes of discrimination. Discrimination is understood as:

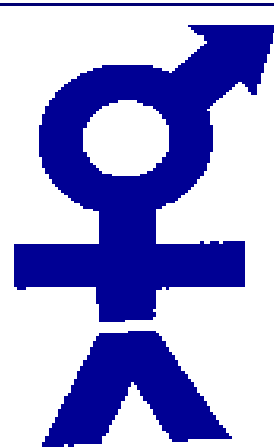
"any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field."

The Convention, which has been signed by all independent Caribbean countries, contains provisions addressing political and civil rights as well as economic and social rights. The bringing together of these rights was based on an understanding of the mutually reinforcing relationship between women's economic dependency and their lack of political and civil autonomy.

The enforcement of women's human's rights was further advanced by the development of an Optional Protocol to the Women's Convention. The Protocol, which came into force on 22 December 2000, provides two procedures for the bringing of complaints to the attention of the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW) alleging violations of the Convention: a communications procedure allowing individual women, or groups of women, to submit claims of violations of rights to the CEDAW Committee and an inquiry procedure enabling the Committee, upon the receipt of "reliable information" to initiate inquiries into situations of grave and systematic violations of women's rights.

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Commentary: Male Marginalisation or Gender Justice?

by Michelle Rowley

Having read the summary of Dr. Eudine Barriteau's work on male marginalisation (July, 2000/No.1) as well as her expanded Working Paper entitled "Examining the Issues of Men, Male Marginalisation and Masculinity in the Caribbean: Policy Implication," I want to enter the ongoing discussion on male marginalisation.

The point of departure taken by Riley in his response "*Males and females are victims of marginalization*" (December 2000) does not adequately capture Barriteau's thesis. Therefore his subsequent analysis, while relevant, misses the broader complexities of her argument. Riley reads Barriteau's work to conclude that it is 'absurd' to think of male marginality because of the prevalence of an ideology of male dominance and privilege (patriarchy) in society. While Barriteau does highlight the pervasive nature of patriarchy as a mechanism that influences our thoughts, norms and values (i.e. ideological) and our levels of access, rewards and privilege in society (i.e. material); she does not conclude that thinking about male marginality is absurd.

What she does is ask that we be more careful about how we use the term marginality because the concept has been subject to a number of different meanings and agendas in the development of Caribbean Sociology. Barriteau then directs the reader to rein in the use of the term 'male marginality' by locating it *first* in the context of gender justice. Gender justice, challenges us to question the systems and structures that create levels of inequity among men and women in society. Achieving gender justice, therefore, requires us to consistently and constantly work to resolve those inequities that hinder a leveling of the economic, political, educational and social playing field.

She ends by bringing these two strands of her argument together, that is, the need for gender justice *in the context of societies with a patriarchal bias* and concludes that "A policy that is shaped by a commitment to gender justice and gender equity will not discriminate nor tolerate conditions of discrimination for either sex." Therefore, male marginality is very possible in Barriteau's schema, however, she suggests that we should not assume that this automatically exists.

Riley expresses his concern about the dualism (i.e. male/female dichotomy) in Barriteau's writing. Without being apologetic, we need to contextualise Barriteau's work as a response to a very dualistic theory in which Miller (1994) has himself instituted a dichotomy of male and female puppets being manipulated by the hidden hand of expatriate capital. However, if we bear in mind that the philosophical context of her work is that of gender justice then we see that she goes beyond this dualism and opens the parameters of the debate to ask questions about how all subordinate gender identities are impacted by the absence of a 'gender-just' society. This she does via a range of questions that ask us to consider:

1. What are the policies, legislations, prejudices, practices that **penalize or reward** men?
2. What are the deeply entrenched, policies of the State and its institutions that marginalize men?
3. What part do (gender ideologies) play in expressions of masculinity that are viewed as problematic?

These are not tongue in cheek questions, but rather a genuine attempt by the author requesting that we be more circumspect about the readiness with which we employ the term marginality.

By way of conclusion I want to highlight a very important point made by Riley. He observes that "In our homophobic societies, we see how males of alternative sexual orientation are marginalized. In our pluralistic societies, we see how physically challenged males are marginalized." This is an important assertion that I approach first by way of caution, to say that these categories of men are discriminated against not by virtue of their maleness but by virtue of intersecting/or multiple levels of discriminations that marginalizes the physically challenged and those who have chosen alternative sexual locations. Both a man and woman in a wheelchair will be exasperated by the difficulty it takes to get into most buildings in the Caribbean.

However, Riley does highlight a point that I think needs to be strengthened in Barriteau's work. It is the impact of hegemonic masculinity on men who choose alternative sexual locations. When Barriteau establishes her policy and future research agenda in her expanded Working Paper, she investigates masculinity primarily in the context of men as fathers, heterosexual spouses, boyfriends, partners and further she repositions the lens on the gender differentials in educational performance. However, glaringly absent from the work is the question of male homosexuality as part of her research or policy agenda.

Nonetheless, I see the work as a very sobering and valuable contribution to our discussions of male marginalisation in the Caribbean.

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Sexual and Reproductive Rights of Caribbean Adolescents

by Dr. Jacqueline Sharpe

The Caribbean Youth Summit, October 1996, found that existing programmes do not adequately address the needs and have little or no input from young people themselves. The participants called for a systematic and comprehensive policy on adolescent reproductive health and rights, in line with the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and for legally protected rights to social and medical services.

The young people called for guidance and help in making positive choices about sexual activity, including abstinence; and for their recognition as equal, active and responsible partners in the efforts to bring reproductive health services to young people. They also called for the recognition of the right of adolescent girls who get pregnant to return to school in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child [CRC] and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW].

The data presented in the sidebars and the statements of young people themselves should lead us to examine from a rights-based perspective, the Caribbean's status in regard to supporting the sexual and reproductive rights of young people. The International Conference on Population and Development, in 1994, adopted a rights-based approach to population and development. This right's-based approach was re-affirmed at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and at ICPD+5 and Beijing+5, and built on existing international human rights agreements. The main components of this approach are gender equity and equality, sexual and reproductive rights and a client-centred approach to health care, as well as the recognition of adolescents' rights to confidentiality, informed consent and services and parental guidance.

Sexual and reproductive rights as they relate to adolescents include the rights to information and services, privacy, confidentiality, respect and informed consent in conformity with the Convention on the Rights of the Child [CRC] and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW].

The countries of the Caribbean were in the forefront of many of the negotiations that resulted in the final documents of these international agreements. Caribbean countries have worked at the country and regional levels on the implementation of many aspects of the ICPD and ICPD+5, the FWCW and Beijing+5 and the region has had some successes.

Steps have been taken, for example, to reorient and expand services to better meet clients' need for sexual and reproductive health service; and activities to advance gender equity and equality, and to promote sexual and reproductive rights are taking place. However much more needs to be done if the intents of the rights-based approach are to be fulfilled. Specifically in the Caribbean, the issues of adolescent sexual and reproductive health cannot be ignored when the unmet needs, some of which are illustrated above are so many.

The Caribbean region is becoming aware and beginning to respond to the sexual and reproductive health needs of its young people. There are individual projects in various countries that have begun to address the issue but much more needs to be done. Financial constraints have impacted on the coming to fruition of creative programmes for providing adolescent services. The international donor commitments of funding falls far short of the agreed upon levels pledged at Cairo, and the Caribbean is finding it more and more difficult to compete for the dwindling funds. In many instances it is the non-governmental organizations [NGOs] that have taken the lead in providing services for adolescents. NGOs can take risks, explore and prepare the way, and often move more agilely than governments can.

Clearly the way forward must be to reaffirm the rights-based approach to reproductive health, and it must be based on strong and smart partnerships between government and civil society and between the actors in civil society themselves.

Special points of interest:

- 34.1% of in-school Caribbean adolescents have had sexual intercourse
- 50% of boys and 25% of girls state that 1st sexual intercourse was at 10 years or younger
- 66% had sexual intercourse before 13.
- 36.1 % were worried a lot about HIV/AIDS

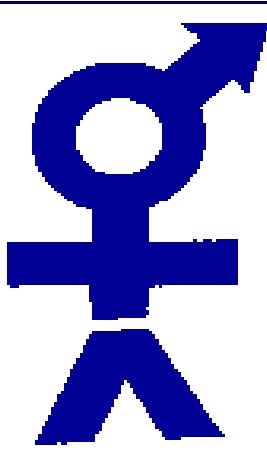
(Data from PAHO/WHO study on adolescent health in the Caribbean)

Special points of interest:

- Average age for first sexual intercourse is 14
- 25% of the youth had sex by age 12
- 6.5 % had first sexual experience by age 10
- 75% had intercourse by age 16

(Data from the Sexual Health Needs of Youth in Tobago study)

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Issues Affecting Indigenous Women in Guyana

A report on "Indigenous Women: Issue Paper" commissioned by the National Commission on Women in Guyana reveals that Amerindian women are among the most economically, socially, politically and culturally marginalized groups in Guyana. The reason for this is because they are both indigenous and women.

The Amerindians in Guyana live primarily in the hinterland of the country and engage in a subsistence lifestyle consisting of slash and burn agriculture and the utilization of forest products for craft production. A 1994 World Bank publication ranks Amerindians as the poorest of Guyanese people. According to the report, 88% of households headed by Amerindians live below the poverty line.

The culture of the Amerindian people is very traditional and women remain central to agricultural practices and the processing of food, in addition to their traditional roles of mothers and wives. Many Amerindian women display characteristics that are associated with a subsistence lifestyle. These include signs of fatigue, overwork, poor nutrition and generally impoverished conditions. Male absenteeism, due to men going outside of their communities to look for work, domestic violence associated with alcohol consumption, and early, unplanned pregnancies worsen the social conditions of Amerindian women.

In recent times, Amerindians have begun to seek different forms of employment in order to increase their access to economic resources and improved livelihoods. This is made more possible because of the increase in economic activity taking place in the hinterland. For men, one alternative is to become involved in logging and mining. There is also a growing trend to employ some Amerindian women in these activities. As a rule however, women, have more limited alternatives for employment, for example craft production, which brings in small and irregular sums of money. In addition, Amerindian women who leave their villages in search of work, sometimes as far as Georgetown, have been subject to exploitation. The increased activities in the hinterland have also brought with them social, economic, cultural and environmental changes, some of which are seen as definite threats to the Amerindian people and their way of life and which often leads to further exploitation of Amerindian women. This issue of exploitation was raised at the level of National Parliament and the Ministry of Labour was asked to look into reports of withholding of salaries, ill treatment and sexual exploitation, including rape.

In the area of education, most Amerindian women have not gone beyond primary school level. Illiteracy rates among Amerindians are generally very high and figures from the household income and expenditure survey (1993) show illiteracy among Amerindian women to be higher than that of men, 56.2 per cent versus 43.8 per cent. Other problems in Amerindian communities in the area of education include truancy, fewer examination passes and fewer opportunities to pursue schooling. Although there are some opportunities for children in Amerindian communities to obtain education outside of their communities in coastal institutions, under the Interior Scholarship Programme, the numbers of Amerindians able to receive these scholarships are relatively small compared to those in need of quality, formal schooling. It is believed that adult education programmes can help to fill the void that presently exists in the area of education. The Distance Education Programme run by the University of Guyana has also been operating in some of the regions with significant Amerindian populations.

Although efforts have been made to improve health conditions in the Amerindian communities, there is much that needs to be done in this area. A lack of effective public health education programmes designed to sensitize and create awareness in the communities, as well as limited health services and poor communication and transportation facilities are all factors that tend to exacerbate the poor health conditions in Amerindian communities. The health status of Amerindian women and children, as outlined by the Draft National Health Plan in 1997, is often characterized by malaria, diarrhea-related diseases, acute respiratory illness, a high level of teen pregnancy, poor child spacing and a decline in breast feeding. Other reports also speak of the rise in the incidence of tuberculosis, typhoid and dental caries as aspects of morbidity among the Amerindian population. Pregnant Amerindian women also generally tend to suffer from anemia.

Amerindian women continue to be under-represented in Guyanese politics. This is so at the levels of village captain and the village council, which is the first level of political representation to which Amerindian women can aspire. Amerindian women are also underrepresented in the Regional Democratic Council and within the National Assembly, with only two women having served as Parliamentarians between 1992 to 1997. There are however four main Amerindian activist organizations which include women at all levels of their activities. These organizations are the national Amerindian Council, the Amerindian People's Association, the Guyanese Organisation of Indigenous Peoples and the Amerindian Action Movement of Guyana.

Attempts on the part of non-Amerindians to address and advance the status of Amerindian women have been made. These have helped to facilitate Amerindian women's actions to advance their status. It has been recognized however, that interventions need to take place in a sensitive manner, taking into account the traditions and beliefs of the people, especially those concerning the role of women. Women's groups have been formed in Amerindian communities, mostly in response to meeting the criteria for attracting financial support and to benefit from development programmes. This however could be a positive sign that as the women begin to be empowered, they may be able to challenge traditional cultural perceptions about women and their roles in their communities.

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