

# Gender differentials in Caribbean education systems

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The Dakar Framework for Action<sup>1</sup> emanating from the 2000 Education for All conference advocates that education is not only a fundamental human right, but is a requisite to meeting the demands of the 21st century. Education is necessary to maintaining sustainable development, peace and stability within and among countries. States are expected to ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to meet their basic learning needs (with regards to literacy and numeracy) in ways that are equitable and gender-sensitive; and which neither exclude nor discriminate. The Framework calls for both *formal equality*, that is, closing numerical gaps between the sexes at various levels of education (gender parity); and *substantive equality*, which refers to the quality of education in terms of equal treatment during the educational process, as well as the benefit gained from education beyond school in terms of the social currency of education to either sex.<sup>2</sup> The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) intended to 'reverse the grinding poverty, hunger and disease affecting billions of people' globally, also call for the realisation of universal primary education by 2015.

The potential of the tenets of the Dakar Framework and MDG 2 to achieve sustainable development is particularly important for the island states of the Caribbean, which are increasingly faced with sobering socio-economic and political challenges, all of which require the existence and contributions of an educated and vibrant civil society, sufficiently equipped to manage the challenges at hand.

## Equity issues in contemporary Caribbean education systems

It is not surprising, therefore, that there has been growing concern expressed over the last decade about issues of equity in the region's education systems, with particular reference to widening enrolment disparities (in favour of females) at the upper secondary and tertiary levels of Caribbean education systems; as well as on the performance of males in the system relative to females. With the exception of a few cases, however, discussions around the issue seem to be driven by a sense of an impending crisis as a consequence of the perceived and real negative socio-economic and developmental implications of the trends – not least of which is the brand of masculinity displayed by young males and their disproportionate engagement in the spiralling incidents of crime and violence in many Caribbean countries.

Generally, the discourse has centred on measuring gender differences through a comparison of average male and female performance, with the general conclusion drawn that males are underachieving compared to females. Such an approach to an understanding of the issue is deficient, for two reasons, which are outlined below.

- In the first instance, any discussion of the Caribbean's contemporary education systems must be framed within the fact that, since inception, though education systems were ostensibly designed for the purpose of the development of Caribbean society, more often than not these systems represented the conduit through which the replication and the maintenance of unequal societal norms were reproduced and maintained. Current questions around rates of male enrolment cannot, therefore, focus simply on rates of enrolment of boys in general, but must identify the specific groups of boys and, in fact, girls alienated by the Caribbean education system since its establishment. Little attention has been given to the range of personal, social and economic factors that both independently and in combination have historically determined differential access and performance between and among different groups of male and female students in the Caribbean.
- In the second instance, simply comparing male and female average performances ignores issues of substantive equality and assumes that the benefits and outcomes of education for males and females are the same. Such an assumption does not match the Caribbean reality. Despite the numerical female advantage in institutions of higher learning, women remain disproportionately under-represented in the Caribbean labour force, over-represented in the unemployed labour force, have higher job-seeking rates than males and, on average, earn less than their male colleagues at all levels of educational achievement.<sup>3</sup>

The privileging of males in the paid labour force is facilitated, in part, by the traditional sex segregation of the curriculum, which begins in high school and continues into tertiary level. Moreover, the numerical dominance of females at the higher levels of Caribbean education systems is mediated by class and gender hierarchies, which position them in the school's curriculum in ways that de-emphasise the development of leadership capabilities and fails to equip them for higher paid technology-based job opportunities.

## The reality behind the figures

Findings from the 'Gender Differentials at the Secondary and Tertiary Levels of the Education System in the Anglophone Caribbean' project<sup>4</sup> emphasised the ways in which females were often disadvantaged as a group, since males who remained in education systems were clustered in the more critical areas of the curriculum, namely the sciences and technical crafts. Additionally, counter to notions of male under-performance, male students enjoyed superior average performance to female students in four (Science, Humanities, Business and Arts) of the five subject groupings investigated in the study.



It is useful, too, in the discussion of the male underachievement 'crisis', to remember that the current enrolment trends have only been in favour of women for the last two decades, and drew no comment when they favoured men for the century or more during which time, in the Caribbean and globally, education was seen as the business of men. Moreover, men still dominate in areas still perceived as masculine and, although the disparity is not uniform throughout all disciplines, men still dominate in areas such as agriculture, natural sciences and engineering, with parity in some disciplines of the humanities. It is also useful to acknowledge that, in fact, the performance of boys who remain in the education system is on a par with their female counterparts, as is clearly demonstrated in the findings of the gender differentials project.

In addition to simply asking questions about where have the boys gone, questions of participation and performance must be reframed to focus on within-group differences rather than on between-group differences. The relationship between education and the political and economic context in which it occurs also needs careful attention.

Data derived from the Gender Differentials research project underscores this point. Statistical analysis of school-based assessments of students from thirty-nine schools across four Caribbean countries to determine factors most predictive of performance indicated that no personal attributes or demographic factors, including sex, were statistically significant to a student's performance. Conversely, it was structural factors that most significantly affected performance of both male and female students. These factors included:

1. **School type**, where students in single-sex schools enjoyed superior performance to those in co-educational schools.
2. **The socio-economic status (SES)** in which schools were located, where students attending schools in high/middle SES locations performed better than those from lower SES locations.
3. **The administration of the school**, where better performance was observed in church-run schools compared to state-run schools.
4. **School location**, where students in schools in urban areas performed better than those in rural areas.
5. **School curriculum**, where students from schools with a traditional academic curriculum did better than those in technical schools.
6. **The type of school last attended before entry to secondary school**, where students who attended preparatory schools prior to going to a secondary school did better than those who attended government primary schools.

Many of the factors had either a direct or indirect link with the SES, and most factors, if not all, although not statistically tested, would very likely be dependent on a SES factor. Students from lower socio-economic groups were therefore the lower performers and more at risk of failure and/or dropping out from the system. Lower SES assignment is, therefore, of paramount importance, affecting both males and females differentially.<sup>5</sup> The focus of concern in the

debate therefore needs to focus on which males drop out of the system, and answers need to be sought to questions related to the intersection of gender, social class assignment and race/ethnicity in the quest for understanding which boys drop out and why.

This study clearly indicates that the debate requires a shift from the focus on individual attributes and behaviours (as important as these are) to ways in which macro-level systems and processes contribute to the problem. The micro-level focus actually masks the reality of a situation that is indicative of deeper systemic societal issues best understood through the lens of gender, and its intersection with other factors such as socio-economic status and ethnicity. It is now well established that the politics of identity assigns and determines specific and distinct roles for males and females, as well as mediates position within the social, economic and political hierarchies based on sex, class and race assignment resulting in different opportunities and life chances for different individuals.

## The restrictions imposed by gendered roles

Perhaps an appropriate response to the perceived 'crisis' would be a frank examination of the gendered identities that restrict males and females from being their true and best selves but necessitates males, as a group, seeing themselves as dominant and having power over females. This coupled with the allure of quick money, a critical marker of masculine gender identity, only serves to discourage men from pursuing the route of education, which they perceive as requiring too much time and effort with too little return to satisfy the socially imposed role of bread winner and provider.

Faced with such a challenge, males are now in the process of finding other avenues for exercising the control and dominance perceived as an essential element of masculinity and maleness. The absence of males from higher education systems can possibly be explained as a deliberate withdrawal to create distance between themselves and what has come to be seen as a primarily female, and therefore, decidedly non-male, activity. It seems then, that in society's establishment of the roles of males and females in diametric opposition to each other and privileging the former over the latter, some males are now entrapped by the same hegemonic masculinity that once allowed them the privilege, at the expense of their female counterparts, of the very education they now shun.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the debate needs to bear in mind that despite challenges made to existing gender systems, increased opportunities for women must be viewed against the backdrop of the resilience of patriarchal systems, which continue to serve traditional interest and motive and which combine to maintain the status quo and ensure that the gains of men are not significantly disrupted. Unfortunately, this system works not only against women, but is also inimical to many men.

To fully understand all the factors at work in contemporary Caribbean education systems, it is therefore necessary to develop a robust research framework that considers an entire range of variables, both personal and structural. Frameworks that focus primarily on micro factors, such as the sex of an individual, have serious limitations both in terms of explaining the phenomenon as well as informing interventions. Ultimately, research must now be focused on analyses of the ways in which race, class and gender intersect and impact on all levels of the education system. The phenomenon of differential performance has to be assessed in relation to ways in which macro-level structures and systems privilege some and subordinate others, regardless of sex, with the intention of transcending traditional gender norms, and contributing to the building of a new type of society that is based on principles of full participation for males and females as equal partners in both the private and public spheres.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Dakar Framework for Action, *Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments*. Adopted by the World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal, April 2000. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121147e.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Subrahmanian, Rayma. (2003). *Gender Equality in Education: Definitions and Measurement*. Background Paper for UNESCO GMR 2003-043.

<sup>3</sup> See CARICOM, Monograph Series. *Economic Activity, Education and Training*. Submitted by Barbara Bailey with Technical Assistance from Suzanne M. Charles (Junior Research Fellow) and Research Assistance from Grace Christie, The University of the West Indies, Institute for Gender and Development Studies. [http://www.caricomstats.org/Files/Publications/Regional\\_Special\\_Topic\\_Monograph/Econ%20Activity,%20Edu%20and%20Training/inaldraft.pdf](http://www.caricomstats.org/Files/Publications/Regional_Special_Topic_Monograph/Econ%20Activity,%20Edu%20and%20Training/inaldraft.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> *Gender Differentials at the Secondary and Tertiary Levels of Anglophone Caribbean Education Systems*. Institute for Gender and Development Studies, University of the West Indies with support funding from the Caribbean Development Bank, Barbados

<sup>5</sup> Bailey, Barbara. (2010). *Understanding the Issues*. Paper presented at Regional Workshop on Gender Differentials in Caribbean Education Systems. Accra Hotel, Bridgetown, Barbados. April 2010. Mimeograph.

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