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THE CONSTRUCTION OF CARIBBEAN MASCULINITY: TOWARDS A RESEARCH  
AGENDA - A SYMPOSIUM



"The Reconstruction of Masculinity: Breaking the Link Between Maleness and  
Violence"

by

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Link Between Maleness and Violence"

A Cross Cultural Perspective

by

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"The Reconstruction of Caribbean Masculinity : Breaking the  
Link Between Maleness and Violence"

by Ulric Johnson

Hello my name is Ulric Johnson I am a Afrotrinbagoen, born and raised in Caranage, Trinidad. In looking at masculinity, manhood, or what we define as man is a issue not only for us here in the Caribbean, but for the world. Imagine this scene involving a young boy and his father. The father arrives home from work, and demands that the boy turn off the TV., then berates him for the messiness of his room. The boy tries to explain, but the father tells him to shut up, to stop making excuses. Fueling the father's anger is the fact that he's disappointed by the boy's school report card. The father shoves the report card in his son's face and demands why he has gotten a "D" in math. The boy says he did his best. The father tells him that he is stupid. The boy protest and begins to stand up. The father shoves him down saying "Don't you dare get up in my face!" the boy is visibly upset and begins to cry, the father explodes "Now what? You little Mama's boy! You sissy! You make me sick! When are you going to grow up and start acting like a man?" This scene is one that is played out across cultures and also here in the Caribbean. It could be about grades, homework, being scared, over a sibling, between a husband and his wife, anything . The main lesson is what you need to do, and not do if you want to be consider a man. These are the lessons that are being communicated to the young boy in this story.

When we look at masculinity here in the Caribbean, the US. or any other country, we have to look at how we socialize young boys into the role we define as " Man". Maleness is a biological condition that we have no control over . What we define as masculinity in the behavioral sense is culturally determine. Culture is what defines and gives meaning to our reality, and our identity as humans. My own personal work in reconstructing my own definition of masculinity, has forced me to accept some painful realities as an adult male, husband and father of a fifteen year old male and ten year old female. I had to accept that my identity as a Caribbean man contributed to my being a recovering sexist, and my being violent to my self and others. I define violence as any time I, or anyone, does something that hurts oneself or another person, either emotionally, physically , or spiritually. I, like most of us raised in the Caribbean , were given the same lesson. that manhood meant you are in control over your woman, your children , friends, your feeling, and the list goes on. Even referring to the woman in your life as "your woman" as if you possess and own her, reflects this mindset of control and domination. It is no accident that most of the violent and criminal acts committed towards women, children, and other men is by men. We cannot denied that there is a strong link between what we define as masculinity and violence. Men who are violent and those who do not participate in violence, are not that all different. We both still participate in a systemic form of violence call sexism. It's a form of violence that a vast number of us participate in daily even if we don't know it, or want to admit it. We participate in it because we have been trained by all major institutions of our society, church, school and our own families, that one of the main characteristic of a real man is our superiority to the female sex.



There are few social or cultural sanctions against these beliefs. In fact we are rewarded economically, socially, and politically for holding onto and maintaining these beliefs. In my study of this connection between masculinity and violence across cultures, I found that most violent acts committed by men against women and children are usually classified as cultural, but acts of violence by men committed against other men is most always seen as criminal. Violence is one of most popular, culturally sanctioned tools used to keep control by more powerful countries over other countries, government and police over citizens, adults over children and the list goes on. It's even used by some women to gain power over children, and other women. However, it is male violence directed towards women and children that receives the least social sanction. The fact that a woman is more likely to be harmed or killed by her husband or partner, and that domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women speaks volumes about the severity of, and tolerance of, this problem. The term "domestic violence" itself is a euphemism for what is most commonly male violence against women. Violence is equated with what we define as masculinity, and like any other form of oppression is all about gaining and maintaining power, and as in all oppressions, violence and the threat of violence, is used to maintain that power and install fear in the oppressed. Patriarchy as the foundation of sexism has been sanctioned and accepted as the standard for male - female relationships across culture, class and country. In a patriarchal society, boys are taught to accept violence as a manly response to real or imagined threats, and get little training in negotiating intimate relationships. Many of us are trained to view difficulties in our family relationship as a threat to our manhood and we often respond with violence.

Two years ago when I was here visiting, I was asked to comment on a violent act that was committed by a man who chopped up his wife and four children while they were sleeping, and then hung himself. I stated then that he responded to his feelings of being scared, and sad in a way that we have all been taught as young boys, with anger and violence. You see, he was scared of his inability to take care of his family financially, he was sad that he was not in control, and that he had lost what he felt was his masculinity. He did not feel it was masculine to ask for help, or that it was all right not to be in control, and he felt justified in directing his violent rage and pain at his wife and children. In my work as a gang violence prevention educator and consultant, I often found young people's definition of femininity and masculinity reflect a rigid expectation of what they must live up to in order to be a "real" woman or a "real" man. Time and again I hear boys say, some as young as five years old, that they are supposed to be tough, aggressive, in control, and that they are not to express any feelings except anger, not to cry and never ask for help. And many of these same boys expect females to be dependent on them and obedient to them. (DO MAD, SAD, SCARED, GLAD). We have all been through the training of either being hit, yelled, teased and scared into not expressing our feelings, with "true" manhood being the final goal. Many of the young men in the street gangs in the US, and also here in Trinidad, I know have become convinced through this same process, that they will be violated and not be considered manly until they use force and violence to protect themselves, to get respect and maintain respect. Respect becomes the code word for masculinity. All we have to do is to look at TV shows, movies, sports, and even how young boys sometimes speak to their teachers, parents, and other adults.

In conclusion I strongly believe and recommend that we here in Trinidad and in the Caribbean, seriously look at this link between what we presently define as masculinity and the increasing level of violence between males, and towards women and children. I have shown you the consequences of this link and I hope also convinced you that we need to break this link. We also need comparative research on what happens when a young man chooses to reject the present day definition of masculinity, and accept one that is non violent. We need to look at programs like Teen Against Gang Violence a Boston based program that gives young men and women the opportunity and time to analyze how they have been socialized into roles that cause them to be destructive to themselves, and those that they love. We need to look at parenting programs that work not only with mothers, but also with fathers. We need to reexamine seriously our cultural socialization of young boys into manhood. We need to reconstruct a new definition of masculinity that is accepted, individually, institutionally, and culturally that said it is OK to cry, its OK to be sad, its OK to be sacred, its even OK to be mad, and you don't have to get violent to show it, that if and when you feel out of control, it is OK to ask for help, and that you don't always have to be in control to be a "real" man. We need a definition of manhood that does not degrade or diminish women, a definition that truly sees women as fully equal to men. Any behavior or attitude that restricts or controls women's full humanity must be rejected and that includes not only physical violence, but attitudes and behaviors that lock women into pre-defined roles, or that superficially protect or put them on a dainty pedestal but which in reality control women and offer so-called protection at a high, male defined, price. We most also admit and accept responsibility for our mis-education of our children, when it comes to their identity as men and as women.



Only then we can move ahead and begin the construction of new Caribbean man, a man that believes in justice and peace for self and others. Then, and only then, will all races, creeds, men and women find a equal place.