

# Gender inequality: male underachievement



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Worldwide, women are achieving higher representation and success. At the post-secondary level women are earning most of the degrees awarded.

Where did our males disappear to? Gender inequality is an extensive, complex and often vague concept. Simply it is defined as the ranking of a particular gender, whether male or female, over the other and how they are treated based on their gender. Gender inequality and the result of male underperformance in schools have become major issues in the Caribbean, and affect the individuals involved and the society on a whole.

Boys' underachievement therefore should not be ignored and an analysis of this subject is necessary for a start to a solution. Male underachievement exists in Caribbean countries such as Barbados, Jamaica, Grenada and Trinidad and Tobago among others. Three main causes of male underperformance in Caribbean schools are improper gender socialisation, unequal opportunity for educational attainment and changing societies and lifestyles. The way in which males are socialized by family and secondarily, members of society, greatly influences their personality and behaviour including their outlook on the need for educational attainment.

This results in the general perception of male underachievement in school. Plummer (2010) identifies gender division in attendance of school and household chores by the family as the source of the issue. However, Figueroa (2004) focuses on how historical privileges of male marginalization results in male underachievement. In the case of the Caribbean society, it is evident that socialization has a lot more to do with the characteristics of male personality than privileges males might have had in the past.

Figueroa (2004) suggests that gender socialisation leaves boys deficient in skills needed to survive the educational system. Such skills include time management and self-discipline. Whereas females are socialized to remain inside the home to help out with household chores and care for siblings, boys are usually allowed the freedom to roam ‘ the streets’.

Having a home-to-school routine with time in between for household activities or leisure activities such as reading, girls have developed a set of skills demanded by schools, e. g. they are more able to sit still for long hours than boys, which is necessary in an everyday classroom setting, and have a higher level of respect for authority. Plummer (2010) states that apart from the family, peers being another primary agent of socialisation, become greatly influential in a male’s life during gender identity. Sometimes bad peer influences can result in gang-activity and crime, especially if the boy was not socialised morally by the family and churches. He also argues that taboos associated with Caribbean males during gender identity influence male delinquent behaviour.

Caribbean men hold a masculine status which is one of “ risk-taking, aggression, sexual prowess, physical toughness and dominance”. Young males have now come to associate education with femininity and homophobic taboos, so getting an education is no longer in their interest as they maintain their reputation. Thus, neither the family, school, society nor the media should be held completely responsible for culturing male underachievement as they are all contributory factors. Gender division is another factor existing in schools as well as in the family.

Division, (The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2000) argue, occurs when there is an unequal chance of obtaining education between males and females. Girls are usually chosen over boys when it comes to the unavoidable selection of one child, either male or female, to attend school. Hence, there exists a larger count of female attendants than males in educational institutions. Equal opportunity to educational attainment is necessary for the development of the child and society.

A lack of this has several social effects on the individual, such as isolation and non-participation and social exclusion later on in life. Delinquent behaviours may also develop, such as crime when males find other ways of surviving in providing for themselves and their families. Society, on the other hand, is economically affected by the reduction in the workforce. Less people working in an economy, results in a decline in levels of production. Unemployed persons may also put a strain on the countries' resources.

This is the current state of Jamaica's economy. As society progresses and changes, the roles of males and females continue to change. Historically, Caribbean men were known to take part in manual work or attend schools, as academic excellence was seen as a male domain, while females did domestic work. Men were also given better paying jobs, while females had to work twice as hard to be qualified for those same jobs. In contemporary Caribbean society, the roles have interchanged and it appears that men are lagging in education as well as in job placements.

Due to the history of the socialisation of males, it is evident in today's society that they are more likely to survive after not attending school than females, whose only other option is domestic labour. This is so because males are hardened to find other ways of making a living. (Chevannes, 1999) Figueroa (2004) identifies other minor factors which influence male underperformance such as: the absence of motivational factors, a decline in male interest in academic pursuits, lost respect for academic pursuit and gender bias in the education system which is the unfair treatment of males in schools.

It is seen in many Caribbean schools that girls receive special attention and preference from educators. Miller (1998) discloses that the cause could be that women gravitate more to education than males. However the reverse could be true as well. Measures need to be taken to reduce and eventually resolve these issues. Figueroa (2004) states the need to highlight the issue as a difference in gender performance instead of male marginality. 'Male marginality' and 'female discrimination' are terms that are debatable and should not be identified as absolute issues.

However there is definitely differential gender performance in Caribbean schools. Other measures put forward by Plummer (2010) include suggestions that we take a more strategic approach to promoting boys' achievements and de-link girls' successes from boys' difficulties. Blaming one situation as the cause of another is not necessary, especially if the situation is a good one and is beneficial to the economy. Our society also needs to counterbalance hard, physical, narrow masculinities with well-rounded male role models.

Most importantly it is our responsibility to re-associate masculinity with education and academic prowess so males' interests can be redirected into educational achievement. All these can be accomplished with the support of conferences, policies and organisations such as the Regional Caribbean Initiative on Keeping Boys Out of Risk with members from fifteen (15) World Bank and Commonwealth Caribbean countries including Belize, Dominica and St. Lucia.

It is evident that through factors such as improper gender socialisation and unequal opportunities provided for males to educational attainment, their underachievement in schools is inevitable. Along with those are historical factors such as the change in Caribbean societies. It is the families' and society's responsibility to incorporate measures to reduce male underperformance as it affects the individuals as well as the society on a whole. Gender inequality in the education system can be stopped with the commitment and determination of the entire Caribbean population.