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Gender Tension and Change in the Contemporary Caribbean

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Gender and the Workplace

Gender tension is pervasive in the contemporary Caribbean region at a number of levels. Nowhere is it more pronounced than in the economic sphere of the workplace. The workplace has long been a site of the construction of gender identity and meaning for men and women. Men perhaps more so than women, have tended to define their masculinity in part, through work. However, the workplace is a context in which the social dynamics of the male/female relationship also has to be disciplined in the interest of organizational and operational efficiency. Since for the most part, men monopolize this realm of the public sphere, they have to impose limits on themselves and their behavior that they are often too closely tied to, to be able to assess clearly and objectively. Into this context therefore one must situate the impact of global capitalist economic restructuring, with attendant lay offs and unemployment. This process of economic restructuring has had a tendency in the region to exacerbate existing tensions between men and women.

The Caribbean workplace, though characterized by important industrial advances resulting from strong trade union representation, has not always been as outstanding with respect to gender equality or gender transformation. It is true that some women have been able to transcend patriarchal obstacles but areas of important concern to democratizing the workplace have largely been ignored. The issue of sexual harassment is a case in point. While there has been some discussion of the topic recently, only the Bahamas and Belize within the Caribbean Economic Community (Caricom), have established specific sexual harassment legislation. Most Caricom countries have or are in the process of revising their sexual offenses legislation. The failure however, to demonstrate legal initiative in this area is not entirely surprising.

For the most part, sexual harassment is widespread in the region. Many men in the Caribbean fail to recognize the import of this problem. Indeed, many do not view it as a problem at all. Though some men would stop short of sexual battery, they see no harm in engaging in sexual banter in the workplace or creating an uncomfortable environment for women, lesbians and gay men. It is reasonable to argue that in the Caribbean as a whole, sexual harassment represents behavior which is largely normalized. The patriarchal culture of the region nurtures this type of behavior. Sexual harassment is an extension of behavior associated with public harassment of women and gay men. Hegemonic men in the region retain the right to shout remarks at women in public spaces. These remarks are sometimes complimentary, often sexually suggestive, and other times very insulting, humiliating and embarrassing to women in public. Subordinate men do not escape such public taunting. Often these disparaging remarks directed to gay men are accompanied by the threat of violence or backed up with actual violence. Ironically, men who raise the issue of sexual or public harassment are seen as strange or confused or are believed to have lost their way socially.

Recommendation

One of the ways to address this workplace issue to create more gender equality is to have more countries in the region adopt sexual harassment laws. Some men in the region will only begin to take the issue seriously when the laws are on the books and they realize that their behavior has serious consequences. At the moment, women have to rely on using sexual battery and sexual assault laws to deal with problems of the workplace environment. Many of these laws are inadequate to address issues such as a poisoned work environment or sexually offensive speech. Beginning with boys, and addressing the problem at the adult level, there needs to be a massive process of re-socialization in order to combat the attitudes which make some men believe that their behavior is not offensive to others. In this regard, progressive men, young and old, have to be prepared to counsel their peers about appropriate and inappropriate behavior. The more men in trade unions, NGOs, Governments, etc. begin condemning the practice of sexual harassment, the more likely others would think more carefully before offending other people in the workplace..

There is also a need to establish a new economy of exchange between men and women. Men and women are living in different and more challenging times and must learn to negotiate relations with each other that are based on mutual respect. Such interactions may begin to reduce the tensions between genders and lay the foundation for a new way of interacting with each other.

What Does Change Imply

Reconfiguring power and patriarchy is a collective endeavor. Both men and women participate in patriarchal ways of thinking about the issue of power. However, since more men get to exercise power, at different levels of society, they must also lead the way in creating opportunities for change. This type of change is no easy task to achieve; after all, as Pierre Bourdieu has taught us, hegemonic men often dispense with the need for justification. We need however to address this issue honestly, and honesty dictates that men be made aware that gender equality means a loss of power in some areas. We can affirm nevertheless, that giving up unequal power is a noble and humane gesture, and that if we are as committed to genuine democracy, then giving up power is the right thing to do. The idea that needs to be communicated very carefully is that to give up unequal power, is not to have that power replaced by the power of women, but to usher in a new society based on equality and gender justice. In short, the reconfiguration of power is not one to be taken lightly. It involves serious planning and preparation and considerable dialogue between men and women of different classes, races, religions, and sexual orientations.

The Viral Economy

Jean Baudrillard recently described what he termed the viral economy, a space where we experience sudden intercontinental ravages, and where contagion is not merely active within each system but between systems. It is in the habitat of this new viral economy that HIV/AIDS resides. The concern is not only the disease itself but, the method of its transmission globally. In the Caribbean, where the mainstay of most countries is that of tourism, this viral economy poses some invidious problems for the region, of which particular types of men, those who participate in the sex tourism industry are the most

vulnerable. However, it is not only within the context of sex tourism that problems for men exist, they operate in the wider society as well. The issue of HIV/AIDS and masculinity is still not fully on the agenda in the Caribbean. There is still a need to mount a campaign to offset the obstacles imposed by a very masculine culture, to the issue of AIDS prevention. If some men in the Caribbean measure their sexuality in terms of their ability to father children, then such sexual encounters are in direct conflict with a program of prevention. In addition, the machismo pose and attitude in the region also have the capacity to stymie efforts at change in a region that has too serious a problem to tolerate such types of behavior. There is a need for more dialogue between HIV/AIDS affected survivors and non-infected men and women, on the devastation of this disease, and the many basic ways in which prevention is eminently possible.

The Feminist Backlash

Perhaps one of the indications of the success of feminist activism and struggle in the Caribbean is a growing backlash over what has been described as the marginalization of men. The real impact of unemployment of men in the region, the scholastic achievements of girls and women, and the prominence of some women in certain professional categories of work in the region, have led to tensions and much public debate over the role of men and the future of boys in the Caribbean. Rather than seeing these developments as positive, some men have taken a rather negative view of such changes. There has been a growing chorus of criticism of such developments, and much attention has been drawn to what some believe is the emasculation of men and the jeopardizing of the future of boys in the region. Women have been blamed for these developments in terms of placing careers ahead of parental responsibilities, for being over-represented in the teaching profession, thereby not allowing for sufficient role models for boys, and their independence has become very threatening to some men. The result is an increase in violence against women, as indicated in all of the major reports on gender in the region in the last six or more years. The tension is manifest all the down to the relationships between teenage boys and girls.

A number of men's organizations, of varying ideological persuasions, have sprung up in the region purporting to address some of these issues. For example, in Barbados, there has is a small group of Promise Keepers, who have now either been replaced by or have metamorphosed into a Men's Educational Support Association. In Trinidad there are two groups, The Association for the Reorientation and Transformation of Masculinity and the Male Support Committee. There is also a very active group called Men Against Violence Against Women. In Jamaica there is also Father's Inc. All of these groups have in one way or another, tended to increase the dialogue and heighten interests around issues affecting men in the region. To date, a particular concern for many women who have been involved in the struggle for equality in the Caribbean is the apparent zeal with which some governments have indicated their concern for the status of men in the region. Understandably, these women are concerned that this new interest that some governments have expressed with the so-called plight of men, will derail support for issues that have long plagued women.

The region is essentially at the crossroads, and active, and creative new approaches must be engaged to deal with the new terrain in which men and women must navigate. So far, changes have caused tensions, and therefore such new developments must be addressed carefully if continual changes are not to be disruptive.

References

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