



# Engaging Men: Reflections on CariMAN and the Journey to the Gender Table

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How does one constructively engage men in discussions about masculinity, gender, human rights and equality?

Where does one start when some of them think like:

The **Angry Misogynist**: – "women have taken away what is mine/ they are to blame/ there is a price to be paid";

The **Wounded Warrior**: – "I am not being allowed to exercise my authority/ use my strength/ be a man/ save those I care about";

The **Displaced Dad**: – "I care for my child and want to contribute/my rights have been taken away/ my baby mother is using me/ the system is against fathers";

The **Righteous Reverser**: – "my God, religious beliefs, spiritual and personal identity are being challenged/ we must go back to fundamentals – the way we were/ end times are here and I must do what is right";

The **Perturbed Patriarch**: – "I am confused about our roles as men and women/ I see the problems of inequality/ I want the best for my daughter/this feels like a demotion to equality/it is too complicated/ I just try to avoid thinking about these things";

and the **Recovering Patriarch**: – "I understand that gender equality will be a win-win situation / I realize I need to change / I am trying but with some things I just don't get it right/ sometimes if I wonder if it's possible, if it's worth all this".

These profiles are really just among the many that exist and are the tips of the icebergs when considering developing interventions to change behaviour.

It is therefore necessary to consider the following: Will what works for one work for all, or are unique interventions sometimes needed? Should one even try with some of them? Is it worth the use of the resources? Do these men need spaces to allow authentic ventilation and critical discussion of their attitudes and beliefs? Who should facilitate these and who should be present? Will one be compromising ones principles and/or will one be seen as doing so if one shares spaces with the misogynists? And what will our partners in the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women think of these associations, especially if they are not always invited into the spaces? Who is "us" and who is "them"?

### **Invitations to the Gender Table: Deciding on the guest list**

Some of these conflicting positions regarding engaging men were highlighted recently during discussions generated as a result of the "Barbershop

Conference" announced by the governments of Iceland and Suriname at the recent UN General Assembly where it was proposed that "men will talk with men about gender equality". The problem was that women were to be excluded from these fora! As would be expected, this was seen by many working for gender equality and empowerment of women as being discriminatory and another example of the privileging of the patriarchal process. Should there be spaces for men alone? Is this discriminatory and merely more privileging of men?

A number of influential organizations refused to participate if women were excluded from any sessions. So women were included. But was this the most beneficial outcome?

At the launch of the Male Action Network, which later became CariMAN, (<http://www.cariman.org>), in Jamaica in 2006 we tried to pre-empt the disruption these issues could cause in what we saw as a potentially constructive process. We began with a Plenary open to all, then had a Session for Men (to discuss issues we knew they might not share in an open forum), which were then reported at a final open Plenary with a panel of women representing Feminists and Gender Equality advocates who commented on the issues coming out of the prior session.

Then the real conversations began!!

It set the stage for a model for interventions and for the partnerships with organizations of women and men that have facilitated the growth of CariMAN in the region. It seemed to us at CariMAN to be a strategic way to use these spaces to facilitate the process. We felt then, and still do now, that men do need spaces to talk among themselves and that these are sometimes the only ways that they will express themselves and share beliefs and attitudes that may not be politically correct but will serve as points of entry for therapeutic intervention.

As a psychotherapist and health promotion consultant I have learnt that, whether working with a couple, a family, a community or doing post-traumatic interventions with organizations, there are times when people need to work in separate homogeneous groups and other times when there is more power in one heterogeneous group. The expert therapist or facilitator will know when and how to make these decisions and when and how to address and mediate any corollary messages that could result. There must be a balance between the politics of philosophy and the process of behaviour change intervention.

### **Male mindsets: effective interventions**

Among the challenges we face when developing programmes to engage men as advocates for gender equality and social justice, in both private and public spheres, are first the acknowledgement and appreciation of the diversity of masculinities, the stages of the change process, as well as the design and implementation of interventions that will influence the behaviour of these men.

Interventions at the level of the state, policies, laws etc are only part of the solution. For behaviour change to take place there must be a concomitant shift in beliefs, values, and attitudes. These mindsets, motivations and missions require targeted interventions and must include promoting productive partnerships with women. This requires change for all of us already at the Gender Table as well as those we wish to influence, and ideally invite to join us.

CariMAN ,The Caribbean Male Action Network ([www.cariman.org](http://www.cariman.org)) initially focused on influencing the "mindsets" of men and boys and the creation of spaces for the collaboration necessary for more effective interventions to promote healthy lifestyles. After a decade and several partnerships with UNWomen, UNFPA, academic colleagues and others, CarMAN is now the regional representative of MenEngage, <http://menengage.org/regions/caribbean/>, which engages men and boys as advocates of Gender Equality.

CariMAN now sees itself as an agent for gender equality and social justice in the region and an advocate for the relevant issues of concern to men.

Our mission is to “engage Caribbean men in the examination of existing beliefs and norms, the promotion of respect for diversity and the development of new paradigms and competencies, thus creating opportunities to negotiate new relationships in order to achieve gender justice, social harmony and peaceful partnerships”.

Our challenge is not only to know where the men and boys we work with are "at" in terms of values, attitudes and behaviour but to find ways to meet them there and initiate constructive and therapeutic conversations. We couldn't only include in “us” men who already espoused all the principles. How would we be able to influence “them”? In any case we did not want to get trapped by that binary.

CariMAN developed interventions that could engage some of our target audiences in ways that would facilitate constructive conversations rather than adversarial confrontations. For example, men who were Righteous Reversers were invited to look at some of the ways in which their religious teachings were being misinterpreted, and to consider other passages with alternate messages. Perturbed Patriarchs were asked to describe the problematic behaviours and characteristics of the young men and women and then to identify the ways they would want them to be different. Invariably this would lead to an examination of an agreement that certain qualities normally desirable for women were also desirable for men and vice versa. All without preaching or giving a lecture on gender and gender roles and without the blame and the shame game that dis-engages so many men who venture to the gender table.

An awareness of the predictable posturing and cognitive processes has consistently allowed our interventions to move beyond the initial defensive

stance to increased awareness and willingness to explore alternate ways of understanding.

### **Us, Them: Meeting Men and Women Where They Are**

This constructive process of identification with gender equality and partnership with women also brought us face to face with some of the challenges of inclusiveness and authenticity as advocates and change agents. A diversity of gendered values, attitudes and beliefs had to be addressed among the CariMAN team even as we attempted to present a united front in our efforts at advocacy. This forced us to look more closely not only at the destination we had envisioned but also at the journey to get there and our role.

It was clear that we needed to be male role models, but the fact that the men of CariMAN are more likely to be "Recovering Patriarchs" in need of peer support and guidance along this stage of our life journey than "evolved beyond patriarchy" meant this could be an important dimension of our role as models of men trying to change. For some men this meant becoming vulnerable because espousing these views and behaving differently meant that one no longer had the support of some of one's peers and in fact would now be seen by some as a traitor and worse, an issue I discussed in a TedX talk in 2012 entitled Transforming Caribbean Masculinity,

<http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=FyVqKydor9U>

### **Balancing Acts and Backlash**

This evolving dynamic had an external and reciprocal effect on those who had a vested interest in maintaining — and those who were committed to changing — the gender *status quo*, both watching us with "jaundiced eyes".

There were those groups who automatically assumed, without evidence, that any men's organization must be driven by a patriarchal need to return men to positions of privilege and power. Some expected us to "mash up everything" if we were ever let in and allowed to sit at the gender table. We also learnt, sometimes the hard way, that even those we felt knew and understood CariMAN's position were still hyper vigilant and think of women working with men on gender equality as a high-risk endeavour. There were also, of course, valid concerns that scarce resources might become allocated to work with men and boys when so much still needed to be done for women and girls.

Of course the other lesson learned reflected the sad validity of some of these concerns. As CariMAN came to understand the landscape of individuals and organizations working with Caribbean men, we began to see just how many men and women really do hold fast to conservative and reactionary views with regard to the relative roles of men and women.

It became apparent that there were other groups of men actively, and sometimes covertly, working to promote and recruit others to support and act in accordance with these patriarchal beliefs.

### **Table Etiquette: Processes, Probation and Progress**

For some of the men of CariMAN it was a strange new world with new roles, rituals and responsibilities. To gain acceptance as partners and not provocateurs, a certain posture, a particular interpersonal stance, particular language and circumscribed topics seemed necessary to build trusting relationships. We had observed how some of our international partners negotiated these perilous areas and so were not unfamiliar with these dynamics and were willing to be mentored.

These were and continue to be challenging times as for some of us it seemed that these new rituals and *modus operandi* might preclude authenticity and genuine conversations about the issues we knew needed to be addressed,

to be on the table. Others began to understand that for change to take place existing rituals and paradigms needed to be challenged, despite the resulting discomfort of feeling, for example, as if one is on probation, or that one could lose the safety net of affiliation. So important in these challenging times.

The CariMAN team understands the need for this probationary period and, as importantly, understands the challenges to be faced in this social and economic era. What we also know is that men must work together. And we must work with women. We have to resist the trumping power of our need for affiliation and for acceptance by our male peers over our desire to facilitate gender equality and social justice . This regression to the norm of the majority of peers prevents the changes required for gender equality! When values conflict we have to work through the cognitive dissonance and mixed feelings individually and collectively if we are to find new paradigms and healthy solutions. There is power in positive peer pressure. We need to learn how to create spaces and processes to facilitate it. This we feel is important work for CariMAN and our partners.