



The University of  
the West Indies  
Centre for Gender and  
Development Studies



Issue 2 – 2008

# **Has Learning Become Taboo and is Risk-taking Compulsory for Caribbean boys? Researching the Relationship between Masculinities, Education and Risk**

*David Plummer, Arden McLean and Joel Simpson*

---

## **Abstract**

In recent years, gender dynamics in education in the English-speaking Caribbean have undergone significant shifts. On the one hand, educational access, retention and attainment by girls have improved significantly and should be celebrated. On the other hand, retention, completion and attainment by boys appear to be slipping. To explore this issue we examined the available literature which explores Caribbean masculinities along with preliminary data from our own qualitative research on Caribbean masculinities. As a result of this work new perspectives have emerged that may help to explain boys' changing educational achievements. In the past, academic excellence was largely, if not entirely, a male domain. However, with education increasingly becoming common ground, boys are left with fewer opportunities to establish their gendered identity through education; and academic achievement meets that need less readily. In contrast, fundamental biological differences mean that physicality has been preserved as a way of asserting masculine difference, and the outdoors remain boys' territory. In the Caribbean and elsewhere, outdoors physicality seems to have gained pre-eminent importance for developing a boys' identity. While this retreat to physicality may well benefit boys' participation in sporting achievements and the trades, there are also important negative consequences. Proving their gender identity through physical dominance is increasingly

driving boys towards hard, physical, risk-taking, hyper-masculine and sometimes antisocial acts including bullying, harassment, crime and violence. Meanwhile, boys who do achieve in academic pursuits are at risk of being considered “suspect” by their peers and of becoming the subject of gender taboos. These include boys who show a preference for reading, who regularly report receiving homophobic criticism, perhaps the deepest of all masculine taboos. The research discussed in this paper also sheds light on HIV risk. Through the twin mechanisms of obligation and taboo, a wide range of risks, including sexual risks, has become resiliently embedded in the social fabric and these risks are, as a result, highly resistant to change. We call this phenomenon “social embedding”. Social embedding has its impact by way of gender roles, peer group dynamics, stigma and taboo and socioeconomic factors. To address social embedding and to achieve widespread, sustainable outcomes, strategies for producing grassroots social change with embedded behavioural outcomes will be required.

---