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

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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.

Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed important shifts in educational outcomes in the Commonwealth Caribbean for boys and girls. These shifts are a cause for both celebration and concern. On the positive side, educational outcomes for girls have improved significantly: girls now constitute the majority of secondary school enrolments in the region (Reddock 2004, xv) and girls' school attendance and retention rates exceed those for boys in all age cohorts (Chevannes 1999, 11).

These trends are evident at the tertiary level too. The number of women graduating each year from the University of the West Indies¹ now exceeds the number of men (Figueroa 2004, 141; Reddock 2004, xv). Not surprisingly, this has not always been the case. Between 1948 and 1972, males occupied a sizeable majority (over 60%) of places at the university (Figueroa 2004, 142–143). However, the gender balance has been undergoing change for some years now, so that by 1974 female enrolments at the Jamaican campus passed 50% for the first time and by 1982 they exceeded 50% for all campuses. This trend has continued: by late 1992, 70% of graduates from the Jamaican campus were female (Reddock 2004, xv) and in the most recent intake in 2007, 82% of new enrolments in Jamaica were female.

Of course, these changes might simply reflect a shift in the types of courses offered by the university. Mark Figueroa notes that the gender balance in registrations is not uniform over all disciplines: for example, in Jamaica 54% of law enrolments are female; this figure drops to 33% for agriculture; and 10% for engineering. (Figueroa 2004, 142–143). Nevertheless, it remains the case that subjects that once were pursued mainly by men are no longer so.

While we should rightly celebrate the achievements of Caribbean women, it is also important that we examine what is happening with men. In this regard, there is mounting evidence that the educational status of boys and of young men is not nearly as good: boys' enrolment, retention and completion rates are lower throughout the system. There is little doubt that boys' performance has declined relative to the growing successes of girls, but what remains unclear is whether the data reflect a real decline or a relative one. That is to say, do boys only appear to be slipping relative to girls because girls are now doing so much better, or are boys less likely to reach their potential in real terms when compared to the performance of boys in the past?

Methods

Recent quantitative studies have documented important trends in educational achievements, crime and HIV patterns in the Caribbean region. Of interest to us is that gender appears to lie at the heart of each of these issues — particularly young Caribbean

¹ The University of the West Indies is a keystone university which covers most of the English-speaking Caribbean. It has three main campuses — in Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad. It also has facilities in 12 other Caribbean countries and territories.

masculinities. Our research is designed to extrapolate meaning from these trends and to assist in their interpretation. To do this, we used a dual approach of (i) revisiting the existing body of work of other Caribbean researchers; (ii) undertaking our own qualitative research using interviews and observation.

The reason we chose a qualitative approach is that it is particularly well suited to identifying the meaning behind the trends, for explaining the quantitative data, and for theory building. Our strategy consisted of targeted data collection from young men using a “grounded theory” approach. Interview data from a larger project on Caribbean masculinities were examined. This project involved interviewing young men in their late teens and early twenties about their experiences of gender while they were growing up, particularly in peer groups and at school. To date we have conducted 138 interviews in eight Caribbean countries and territories: Anguilla, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago. Purposive sampling was undertaken to identify participants who were in positions that would help to shed light on the quantitative data. As such, our participants did more than simply give an account of their own experiences — they were also used as field observers of complex social systems that they interacted with and which encompass many additional participants (such as villages, communities, schools and peer groups). Thus, using a strategic approach to sampling (known as theoretical sampling) we were able to collect rich and highly relevant data that can be used to explore and map emerging social trends and to interpret those trends and make them intelligible and meaningful.

It should be noted that this paper is the first in a series of papers to come from our own research. As such, the paper primarily consists of a contextual survey of the work of other researchers in the area. However, we have also taken this opportunity to make a preliminary report of our own work in the light of the literature. Additional interviews in other countries are planned for the coming year along with more detailed analyses. Nevertheless, our findings along with cumulative evidence from other researchers is building a compelling case that academic achievement is indeed becoming taboo, at least for some Caribbean boys.

Policing masculinity

The findings confirm that achieving a gendered identity — being able to convincingly project oneself as masculine — takes centre stage for most boys as they mature. There is a sense that boys both aspire to masculine status and that their behaviour is policed to ensure that it conforms to prevailing masculine standards. Central to this policing process is the peer group, which the data reveal to be a formidable force in boys’ lives, particularly during adolescence. In Barry Chevannes’ words, the peer group exercises a “magnetic pull” in the years leading up to puberty (1999, 29). Indeed, our own research reveals that for many teenaged boys the authority of the peer group at least competes with — and frequently exceeds — the authority of any adult in the boys’ lives. In that respect the data corroborate the work of Chevannes who found that the peer group constitutes a powerful controlling force in boys’ lives which competes with and virtually replaces the authority of the boys’ parents (1999, 30).

So while it is popular to blame parents, teachers and the media for boys' adverse social outcomes, more often than not it turns out to be the peer group that exercises the most profound influence on boys' values and behaviour (a factor that we feel is widely underestimated in the research literature and the popular press). As we will see shortly, this peer-group influence has wide-ranging social ramifications for issues ranging from educational achievement through to crime and disease patterns.

Of course peer group influences are not necessarily bad — but they can be, in fact they can be very bad. Bailey and colleagues in Jamaica found that the “worst, most individualistic and predatory aspects of the street” were validated by boys' peers and became the norm for boys (Bailey, Branche, McGarrity and Stuart 1998, 82). Moreover, the authors' findings (1998, 59) corroborate our own research which found strong linkages between peer groups and gang-related activity — to such an extent that a core research question emerged: at what point does a peer group become a gang?

It seems as if in the absence of sufficient restraint, for example where there is lack of supervision or a “power vacuum”, the male peer group readily fills the void and asserts its authority. Often this occurs on the streets, where the peer group really comes into its own.

But surely these dynamics don't arise spontaneously? These peer groups must source their behaviours from somewhere? Someone must be responsible? Paradoxically, the answer to these questions is both yes and no. Yes, it is the case that the rules of masculinity are comprehensively coded into our cultures and start to impinge on boys soon after birth. Moreover, parents, teachers and adult role models, including women, contribute significantly to setting the standards that boys emulate. For example, Crichlow reports that his mother put him in a “very rigid hyper-male gender prison” (Crichlow 2004, 193), and when he then “acted out” the hard masculinities that were instilled, he won the approval of friends, parents and teachers (including women) because those masculinities demonstrated power and also showed that the young man was not a “buller, sissy or coward” (Crichlow 2004, 201). As you may be aware, the term “buller” is used in Trinidad and Barbados to denote a homosexual (roughly the equivalent of the American term “faggot” or the English term “poofter”). We will return to the significance of these terms shortly.

As for the “no” case concerning the responsibility of some external influence for peer group behaviours, the research found that young men are not simply cultural sponges: the peer groups actively create, fashion and transmit dominant masculinity. According to Chevannes (1999, 30), peers socialise one another, they transmit the group's cultural knowledge to each other and they actively manufacture their own values and meanings. This phenomenon (of transmitting peer group codes down through generations of schoolboys) is referred to elsewhere as “rolling peer pressure” (Plummer 2005, 226). Rolling peer pressure identifies a mechanism that explains how the cultures of boys and young men can be semi-autonomous and can effectively take on a life of their own. Codes and standards are continually passed down the chain from older to younger boys, frequently at arm's length from adults. As a result, peer groups have a culture-generating

role that, on reflection, is highly evident in most modern societies in fashion, music, language and so on. The transmission of codes of behaviour between peers also implies that neither parents, teachers nor the media can be held primarily responsible for social movements that emanate from youth culture, including the problems that accompany them. Simply being absent or saying nothing is enough.

Moreover, the powerful influence of peer groups should not be underestimated. Above, we saw how peer group authority can come into opposition to adult authority; to add weight to this finding we found that peer group authority can even compete with powerful Caribbean religious values. In Chevannes' words, a boy's peer group "exacts an affinity and a loyalty as sacred as the bond of kinship, as strong as the sentiment of religion" (1999, 30).

Aspiring to be bad: peer group obligations and the rise of hard masculinity

For many boys the constant social "policing" of masculinity literally becomes a straight-jacket. These young men find themselves caught in a vise, where they occupy a narrow space of authorised masculinity while simultaneously being cut off from vast fields of social life which are rendered taboo by the very masculine standards that boys are under pressure to conform to. The rhetoric of the young men who were interviewed and their descriptions of the powerful influence of peer groups provided revealing insights into the standards against which boys are judged and the penalties exacted for failing to conform. At the forefront of these standards is hard, physical, risk-taking, aggressive masculinity which, according to Bailey and colleagues, young boys "embraced in the most uncompromising way" (Bailey, Branche, McGarrity and Stuart 1998, 82).

Of course, constant surveillance is required to police "manliness" and we found that particularly intense scrutiny comes from peers. Peers are therefore positioned to judge appropriate masculinity and to punish transgressions. As a result, boys learn to choose their styles carefully and to craft an image for projection to the outside world, which partly reflects their personality but which also carefully attests to their allegiance to the prevailing standards of masculinity endorsed by their peers. Elaborate codes arise which govern acceptable clothing, the designer labels to be worn, the deployment of "bling" (jewellery acceptable to men), authorised styles of speech, striking a "cool" pose and so on. For many boys image is everything — it sustains their masculine reputation.

Of course, image is more than merely appearance, it also stems from what you do — image is very much about performance. In contemporary male culture, masculine status is enhanced greatly by displays of physical toughness, social dominance and sexual prowess. Moreover, the consequences of valorising hard and risky masculinities are far-reaching — this valorisation constitutes the very foundations of many of our most profound social problems. There is strong pressure to resist adult authority, to earn status by taking risks and to display one's masculine credentials. As Crichlow notes when describing his own adolescence in Trinidad, he attempted to secure his heterosexual masculine status not through sexual practice but by participating in events such as "stealing...breaking bottles with slingshots or stones on the street, engaging in physical fights, and 'hanging on the block' with boys until late at night" (Crichlow 2004, 200).

It is here that the links between the prevailing standards of masculinity and crime start to emerge. In effect, far from being considered anti-social, crime becomes the ultimate symbol of the types of masculinity that a society promotes — it stems from boys emulating the ways “real men” are supposed to act according to the culture they grew up in. As a result, Chevannes found the inner city don was a role model for boys not just because the don can command and dispense largesse but because he is “a living source of power — the power over life and death, the ultimate man” (Chevannes 1999, 29).

Sexual prowess and risk

It has become increasingly clear that gender roles are the engine that drives the AIDS epidemic. Men are subject to comprehensive social pressures to conform to gender roles, and the roles that relate to sexual risk-taking are directly implicated in the epidemiology of HIV.

Boys learn very early about complex codes of gender-based obligations and taboos that they are subject to. For example, Bailey and colleagues found that by the age of ten, boys had already learned that toughness, physical strength and sexual dominance were expected of them (Bailey, Branche, McGarrity and Stuart 1998, 53). Moreover, while it is commonly claimed that there are deep taboos against discussing sexuality in public, this silence does not extend to young people themselves. On the contrary their environment is saturated with sexual references and they do a great deal of sexual “learning” from listening to the age group slightly older than they are (Bailey, Branche, McGarrity and Stuart 1998, 29). Here again is an example of what we call “rolling peer pressure” — where culture is transmitted down through generations of boys and girls at arm’s length from adults. By way of contrast, parents and teachers are notable for their silence on these issues and the net result is that boys get virtually all of their sexual preparation on the street (Brown and Chevannes 1998, 23). Clearly young people are teaching themselves about sexual practice and the gender roles that should underpin that practice, largely with input from older peers and popular culture.

Against this vacuum is the reality that all societies attach paramount importance to achieving an appropriately gendered identity. The combination of adults being largely absent from sex education and of their ceding sex education to young people has important implications for this achievement. Sexuality and gender are tightly intertwined, and accomplishing a masculine (gendered) reputation is highly linked to adolescent discourses, peer group dynamics and sexual accomplishments. In this context it is notable that we found that some boys in Trinidad refer to their penis as a gun and their scrotum as a cartridge, while Chevannes reports that Jamaican youths often referred to their penis as a rifle (1999, 29). Clearly, there is a close symbolic relationship between power, risk, gender and sexuality in the minds of these young men.

According to Brown and Chevannes, Caribbean manhood is demonstrated by sexual prowess, and especially by the number of female sexual partners a young man has (1998, 23). The importance attached to having multiple sexual relationships for one’s reputation is tied to one of the Caribbean’s deepest male social taboos: homophobia. Crichlow

demonstrates this when he says that a male “who did not have as many women as the others was ‘sick’, ‘suspected of being a buller’ and not ‘the average young black male’” (Crichlow 2004, 206). Under these circumstances, where having multiple partners attests to one’s masculine status, even being faithful to a single partner can be a source of scorn and loss-of-face. For example, in Jamaica, we found that some communities derisively refer to someone who sticks to one partner as a “one burner” (corroborating the findings of Bailey, Branche, McGarrity and Stuart (1998, 65–66)). Interestingly, the stigma of being a “one burner” also relies on the (unspoken) leverage supplied by homophobia: if a male sticks to only one partner, then his masculinity is considered suspect and his “insufficient” interest in women is read as a sign that he might be gay.

Furthermore, gendered youth cultures have consequences that go far beyond sexual practice. In addition to the *quantity* of partners, a combination of masculine obligation and taboo profoundly configures the *quality* of young people’s relationships too — often adversely so. The basis for this impact stems from equating successful masculinity with physical and emotional strength and social dominance; a consequence of which is the creation of taboos around softness, tenderness and commitment. These taboos affect relationships between men and women as well as men’s interactions with each other.

Masculine taboos — enforcing ‘no-go’ zones

Almost as noticeable as the symbols of masculinity that are widely flaunted, are the human qualities that go “missing in action”. An early casualty is the ability to cry, or to be more accurate the ability to cry is not lost (the tear ducts remain functional), however crying in public is steadfastly suppressed. Most of the rest of the boy’s emotional repertoire soon falls under similar heavy restraints, particularly feelings that indicate tenderness. However, not all emotions are expunged; some — for example aggression and anger — are actively cultivated precisely because they symbolise masculine strength.

This substitution of aggressive gestures for signs of affection influences how boys interact with each other. For example, Brown and Chevannes report that boys greet each other “with clenched fists and backslaps” and often “use other forms of aggression to express their feelings” (1998, 30). Of course, there are always two sides to binary phenomena: aggression is both an expression of masculinity and a simultaneous public disavowal of tenderness. Morgan is quoted as saying that boy’s fights indicate an “overt disdain for anything that might appear soft or wet — more a taboo on tenderness than a celebration of violence” (Morgan quoted in Crichlow 2004, 200)

It becomes increasingly clear from the present research and from the cumulative findings of other Caribbean researchers that much of the “macho” acting out that is seen among boys and young men simultaneously affirms their allegiance to prevailing standards of masculinity while publicly attesting to what is being rejected: child-like, feminising, gay and castrating “failed” masculinities. The dominant culture positions toughness as the “hallmark of the real male” and physical responses are expected from boys. Boys who transgress those expectations risk being ridiculed and labelled a “sissy” by both boys and girls (Bailey, Branche and Henry-Lee 2002, 8).

Is boys' education a casualty of the rise in hard masculinity?

The combination of masculine obligation and taboo narrows boys' potential and cuts them off from large areas of social life, to their ultimate disadvantage. Embracing hard, risk-taking, often anti-social hyper-masculinities puts the lives of young men in danger: sexually, on the road, in the gang, and potentially in conflict with authority. By disenfranchising boys from activities that have been rendered taboo by their own peer group codes of masculinity, boys are denying themselves access to considerable longer-term social benefits. For example, if being safe is considered "sissy", then driving small low-powered cars at a safe speed on the highway in Trinidad potentially comes at a cost to one's reputation — and many opt to place themselves (and others) at risk in order to affirm their masculine status (on the roads and elsewhere). Likewise, if youth culture has come to equate education with their own emasculation through deep homophobic or misogynistic taboos ("only girls and bullers read"), then getting an education is no longer something that a "real man" would want to do. This is exactly what the present research has found, and these findings have been corroborated by the evidence of other Caribbean researchers.

For example, Chevannes reports interview data that show that the association built up in the minds of many boys is that school is "girl stuff" (Chevannes 1999, 26). Figueroa (2004, 152) develops this theme further when he reports that "boys actively assert their maleness by resisting school" especially when subjects are seen as feminine. He adds that male-child subculture puts peer pressure on boys to devalue certain school subjects and to be disruptive in class. To add to this picture, Crichlow (2004, 206) reports that many young Trinidadian men were of the opinion that academic subjects are for "bullers and women, while trades are for men". Finally, Odette Parry (2004, 179) finds that homophobic attitudes by staff result in the censure of attitudes and behaviours among students that are considered "effeminate", "girlish", "sissy like" and "nerdish". In turn, Parry (2000, 56; 2004, 179) found that these attitudes contribute to a masculine gender identity which rejects much of schooling as exactly that (effeminate, sissy, nerdish and so on).

Discussion

The educational achievements of Caribbean women over the last couple of decades constitute an important success story that deserves recognition and praise. Unfortunately, these successes are at risk of being overshadowed by shifts in boys' education towards consistently declining male educational achievement. Some commentators assume that these two changes are linked — that the progress made by Caribbean girls comes at the expense of Caribbean boys. The implications of such a proposition are profound and demand careful analysis.

In 1986 Errol Miller published his work *The Marginalisation of the Black Male: Insights from the Development of the Teaching Profession*. Miller's thesis — that Caribbean males were being marginalised by racialized social forces largely beyond their control — struck a chord which continues to reverberate two decades later, especially in popular

culture. Likewise, his thesis stimulated vigorous debate in academic circles and has been the subject of many academic critiques over the years.

In his analysis, Barry Chevannes (1999, 33) disagrees that males are being marginalized in the Caribbean if the main factor being considered is power. Mark Figueroa took the debate further by arguing that changes in male educational outcomes are a paradoxical effect of traditional male privilege rather than of marginalization. According to this theory, males have always enjoyed privileged access to public space which they dominated, whereas women were largely restricted to private domestic space. This male privileging of public space worked in favour of men's physical pursuits and against their academic endeavours whereas women being largely confined to the domestic sphere were inherently better placed to study.

While Figueroa's thesis reconfigures the debate from male marginalization to male privilege, it seems to perpetuate the cross-linking of girls' achievements and boys' shortcomings when he argues that boys' options will become increasingly limited as girls "take over" traditional male academic fields. He goes on to say that if this happens, ultimately there will be "little that boys can safely do without threatening their masculinity" (Figueroa 2004, 159). But in this regard, it should be noted that boys' education and men's academic pursuits in the past were privileged male domains too, and an explanation is still needed as to why boys might be vacating these particular areas of traditional privilege with apparent alacrity and not others.

Data from the present research add a further dimension to the analysis of Caribbean boys' educational achievements. The research supports previous findings that boys' affinity with public space and physicality is linked to the development of masculine identity. Moreover, in contemporary Caribbean settings, this identity seems to preferentially elevate hard, aggressive, dominant masculinity as the epitome of manhood — perhaps increasingly so in recent years. Certainly, gang culture and music laced with violent allusions have become more prominent in the Caribbean in the last couple of decades. But the present research also adds data concerning the role of masculine taboos in creating social "no-go zones" for young men, one of which increasingly seems to be education.

A surprising but important finding that has emerged from the research is the role of homophobia in stigmatizing boys who are academically inclined. This stands out in the data as a consistent and deep-seated phenomenon, not a minor diversionary issue. In the first instance, the role of homophobia seems difficult to account for, but it starts to make sense in the light of recent research that has found that homophobic abuse is primarily a device used by male peer groups to police manhood and is only secondarily concerned with sexual practice (the device works by stigmatizing "failed" masculinities' and by discrediting a boy's departures from authorised masculinity by labelling transgressors "bullers") (Plummer 2005). In this sense, as a repository for "failed manhood" and as a mechanism for policing particular forms of masculinity, homophobia is rightly seen as being a gender prejudice, one which weighs heavily on the lives of all men.

So where do these findings leave the male marginalization thesis? The conclusion from the present work is that if boys are being marginalized, then it seems likely that in fact they are actively absenting themselves. The process of developing a male identity involves adopting and displaying shared symbols of masculinity while simultaneously disavowing any hint of failed masculinity. Lately, education seems to have become increasingly associated with feminising and homophobic taboos. This may well have coincided with the progress made by girls in education, but there seems to be no reason why this has to be the case: greater access by women to education does not explain why males should necessarily have less access — unless, of course, it is taboo. In this regard, the boys' own misogynistic and homophobic taboos alienate them from large areas of social life that they would be much better off having access to.

The research raises several additional problematic issues which need to be addressed. First, given that homophobic and misogynistic taboos existed decades ago, why should they be influencing boys' education now? Unfortunately, ours is not a longitudinal study and this limits our ability to draw conclusions about historical changes. However, we do have some indication that at least two relevant changes are taking place: first, standards of masculinity are changing and second, unsupervised exposure to peer groups seems to have become much more important in the lives of young boys. There has been a shift away from more codified versions of masculinity (such as typifies cricket) towards harder risky physical masculinities. Moreover, with changing socioeconomic circumstances, due to a combination of longer working hours for parents and guardians, more households having fewer adults available for supervision, and perhaps restricted school hours because of shift schooling, a power vacuum has been created that peer groups have been able to exploit. There are now greater opportunities for young men to spend more unsupervised time with their peers. Under these circumstances, the hegemonic standards that boys aspire to are much more likely to be those standards that emanate from the competitive peer group cultures rather than older, more mature mentors. In short, boys' social spaces (the street, block, mall, school ground) are more of a jungle now than they were 30 years ago.

At this point it is appropriate to comment on the effect of class and race on these dynamics. It is generally assumed that this paper primarily reports on black working-class masculinities and that the dynamics we have observed may not apply outside of that context. In fact, with certain qualifications, we do not believe this to be the case. While there certainly were clear variations across class and race and between islands, our sampling crossed class divides and racial groups and the overarching dynamics we reported were identified across different social groupings. Variations when they appear in relation to class and race are more apparent in the finer details and the intensity of the peer-group dynamics, especially where masculinities spill over into the more intense atmosphere of the street in poorer communities, for example. There are a number of possible explanations for these dynamics being widespread, including that colonial experiences have imposed superordinate masculine codes, or that we are reporting on shared school and youth cultures that are distinct from the more nuanced cultures of the adult world.

The final issue that needs addressing concerns “victimhood”. By highlighting the role that contemporary peer-group culture plays, there is a risk of reproducing a classic “victim blaming” explanation for the problems boys face. We agree that this is an undesirable outcome and instead we would make the following points. What we are primarily attempting to do is to emphasise both the existence of, and the very significant impacts on, society that emanate from peer-based youth culture. What we have found is that these peer-based cultural forms can operate sometimes autonomously and sometimes in opposition to the wider external culture. Like most cultural forms they constantly evolve and members are able to exercise their agency. However, continuity is gained by peer-based codes being continuously passed between generations of young people often at arm’s length from adults (what we call “rolling peer pressure”). Our work leads us to conclude that these peer-based cultures are not minor artefacts but exert a powerful influence on wider society through music, fashion, linguistic styles and gendered praxis. Indeed, while it is generally thought that the wider culture sets standards for young people to emulate, in many cases the reverse happens: peer-based youth culture creates cultural trends that fundamentally change society, not least because the members carry the cultural norms with them into adulthood. Thus, rather than young men being passive victims of social change, they actively intervene in our future. And while wider society might experience the impact of peer-based youth culture adversely, those within the peer group have a more positive perspective as they work towards their aspirations of being “real men”, which on their terms means powerful, dangerous, daring and rebellious males, more like warriors than victims.

Nevertheless, the present research did find that gender roles create a trap that disadvantages both men and women. Through the twin mechanisms of obligation and taboo, a wide range of risks have become resiliently embedded in the social fabric and are highly resistant to change. We call this phenomenon “social embedding”. But there is cause for optimism: social and historical research has shown that gender roles are malleable and dominant masculinities have evolved radically over time and across cultures. The way forward, then, is to realise that victim blaming and individualistic behaviour-change interventions will inevitably have limited outcomes because of the way that risk is socially embedded (in gender roles, peer pressures and taboos). Instead, we need to look towards producing grassroots social change in gender roles. These social changes will inevitably have embedded behavioural outcomes which are much more likely to produce widespread, sustainable benefits for everyone, including our young men.

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