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Question: The Millennium Development Goal of gender parity in primary and secondary education is often equated with girls’ education. Gender disparity in parts of South America and the Caribbean puts boys at a disadvantage. Why should world leaders be concerned about boys’ enrolment and attendance?

Barry Chevannes: *In the first place, we live in a world – I was going to say a society, but what happens in Jamaica is just a symptom of the growing problems in many parts of the world, where we’re seeing an increase in social deviance among young males in particular. We’re talking about very high rates of criminal violence and homicide. The homicide rate in several countries of the Caribbean exceeds 20 per 100,000. There are also other kinds of disparities, in education, for one, where there is what I call ‘under participation’ – some people say it’s ‘under performance’, but I say it’s really ‘under participation’--of males. This also happens in many of the so-called ‘First World’ countries, where you find this kind of disparity taking place. So males do not want to be educated, but the point is that they just don’t stay that way. They are turning to other things, other forms of deviance, which present a social problem in the society. And that’s the point. It is of great concern to the rest of society that there are such social disorders, and the root of it lies in males. So that’s one reason why leaders should be concerned about this.*

The other side is that at every level of the society males have power. You could almost call it ‘masculinity translated into power’. It’s almost like the way masculinity is defined, by power. And that power sometimes means leadership. You see it in the churches, where females are the mainstay of the churches, but they themselves will elect the males to be leaders. You see it in communities of the poor, where leadership is repositied in males. It’s not that the males simply take over leadership. Sometimes leadership is thrust on them. We’re talking about gender parity, gender equality, and then you begin to see that there are some other dynamics at work. So, it must be of concern that men in leadership positions do not have the civilizing qualities, if you will, that education – a good education – is supposed to bring, but instead what you’re having is deviance, and it really presents us with a serious problem. So this is why I think we must be concerned about the attendance and participation of boys in school. Attending is one thing, but also being active and participating in school is another.

Q: How did you get interested in the effects of gender disparity in education?

BC: *Well, it was sort of incremental. At a point in my academic career, I was invited to run a survey on male attitudes to contraceptive behavior. This arose from the fact that the Jamaica National Family Planning Board was finding that the reason given by the women to why they were not using contraceptives was that their husbands and partners didn’t want them to. So what was the men’s attitude? Well, I piggy-backed on that and asked some more general questions to try and uncover men’s attitudes to sexuality and so on. Then that now led to something else and*

to something else, and the next thing I knew, I am being invited by UNICEF to look at the problem of our males in the society. The UNICEF representative at the time was saying that the Caribbean was running in the opposite direction to the rest of the world, where it was the girls that constituted the problem, in those societies not wanting to educate girls. But in our part of the world, it was the boys who were really the main problem where education was concerned. So could you look at that? And I invited a colleague to team with me and we carried out those studies. So that is how I got involved in the gender disparity issue.

I must add as well, that I assumed during all of this a kind of activist role. At a parenting conference where there was a small group of fathers, I was asked to chair that particular workshop – the breakout workshop for the fathers only. And something happened there – I think you would say something about chemistry (chuckles) – things gelled and I invited the men to continue the discussion afterwards. And they not only said, ‘yes’, but they brought more people and the next thing you know we formed a group called ‘Fathers Incorporated’. It was a kind of – I’d say an activist group, but it really was seeking to project the positive image of fatherhood which we believed was more the norm than not, but which was buried under the stereotypes projected onto all men.

Q: Frequently the focus of Jamaica is boys’ lower school achievement. You’ve said that the dropout rate for boys is the problem and that when boys are in school their achievement is no worse than girls and, in fact, may be better. Could you explain?

BC: *This is why I say that we must be more precise in defining what we mean. We usually say, ‘Girls are outperforming boys’. Well, there is not a great deal of evidence for that. I know, yes, that there are many cases of girls outperforming boys, but generally speaking, if boys are in school, are motivated, work hard and so forth, they do excel and achieve just as well as girls. So the problem for me is their under-participation. I once had cause to look at the Caribbean Examination Council results – these are the end-of-high school examinations, which students must sit after five years in high school – and there again, you find that the boys do perform creditably. But the difference was that they tended to concentrate on certain subjects. There is a gender preference for subjects. The girls tend to go for the humanities and the boys – some of the time, not all of them – for more technical, hands-on things. I’m saying then, that we need to focus on the participation of males.*

Now, what is it that governs their under-participation? One is the socialization process which tends to favor girls over boys. How so? Well, girls are generally thought of as being in greater need of protection. Boys, in terms of their ‘maleness’, are socialized to be tough and to withstand pain and suffering and hardship. So when a family has little substance and must divide the little between a boy and a girl, what they do is take everything and put it on the girl and say, “You go to school.” And the boy then stays home and fends for himself. So as a result, you’ll find that there’s a greater dropout rate for boys than for girls and it begins, interestingly enough, from Grade One--as early as that.

When you look at the data, you will see that there are more boys than girls entering the school system. Why? Because, as you know, in any population you will find more males born than females. That’s a fact of nature. With the lowering of the infant mortality rate, more and more

boys are able to enter the school system – they survive longer. But by Grade Two, you begin to see the numbers shifting and by Grade Four, you have more girls than boys. And by Grade Six, when they leave primary school, it's definitely more girls that graduate. And the trend continues all the way through high school. So there is an economic factor.

But there's a second factor, and that is that the teaching method is a bit outmoded. The way it works, girls, with the kind of socialization that they've had at home, tend to be more prepared for the school system. It's more congenial to them – the way of learning, how teachers teach by rote, by students sitting quiet, listening to the teacher and repeating after the teacher, and being attentive. Boys do not learn that way. They learn by doing, by experimenting, by being rambunctious, whereas girls are socialized to be still, to be quiet, to listen, to be very obedient, very attentive. So what I'm saying then, is that as a result of the way boys are socialized, plus the way that the school system still works – working especially against boys, not encouraging them in their participation in school, not making school exciting for them, and so on – they come out feeling that school is girl stuff, that's what school is.

Q: The gender inequality and gender roles are often cited as causes of boys dropping out of school in the Caribbean. Could you explain?

BC: *Yes, I would add that the boys suffer far more abuse than we tend to think. In the publication that my colleague Janet Brown and I did for UNICEF, "Why Man Stay So", this is one of the points that the research found. The boys – when I say, 'child abuse', I think I don't have to explain what that is. They suffer this, you know.*

Q: In the home? In school?

BC: *In the home. And the school, too. But in the home particularly, again out of the belief that the boys must be tough and so forth. And they literally brutalize them – I mean they treat the girls far more leniently than the boys. So, I am saying that if you expose the boy to greater neglect, to fend for himself, then chances are that those gender roles will be played out in dysfunctional ways and shape the way that we attend to the needs of our children.*

Q: How would you account for the fact that pervasive gender inequality and expectations are causes for girls to be kept out of school in most parts of the developing world, but instead it leads to the marginalization of boys in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean?

BC: *This is a complex question. The dominant ethnic group in the Caribbean is African, descendants of the African people who were enslaved in a forced migration. One of the major differences is that in the rest of the developing world, the patriarchy is expressed in systems of kinship and lineage that are very strong and pervasive. They govern the shape of the family. You don't just get up and get married like that; the whole lineage is involved.*

In the Caribbean, because of those historical circumstances I refer to, what has emerged is a breaking of the hold that the lineage had on our family formation. You could say that in that respect the African-Caribbean has been post-modern long before it became fashionable in the West – that you marry and consort at will. You don't have to ask anybody's permission to

establish a conjugal bond. Well, of course, the other side of that is that you can break it at will as well. In all the rest of the developing world, you have to go through processes, the lineage gets involved, the dowry has to be repaid and all those sorts of things, right?

Now, under our conditions, women did not have the kinds of constraints that they have had in the rest of the world. For one, their numbers were in the beginning smaller than males, so they in fact could dictate. But quite apart from that, they came from Africa, also with traditions of certain kinds of autonomy that they were able to preserve right here. Women were financially autonomous of men, because of the trading they did in the markets, and so forth. They could have their own money. So, the culture of the Caribbean– the African Caribbean--is one in which the patriarchy has never been so strong as to completely stifle the development of women. I'm not saying that it didn't and doesn't exist. It would be absurd to suggest that. But it is not as strong, and as a result, therefore, people expected of their women – of their girl children – achievement, high achievement; and they never discriminated against them in terms of going to school, from the time of the Post-Emancipation Period when the government of the day made provisions for the descendants of the Africans to be educated, at least at the primary level. There was never any discrimination about girls being a part of the system of education. So, it's a very interesting question. Now when you pile on top of that the dropouts that we've been getting among the male population, then you can see why the Caribbean is the kind of society in which the reverse to what is happening in the rest of the world is taking place... I'm saying that when you add to that the historical background, which I have attempted to build, the current social problem, where males are dropping out of the system, then you can understand why the Caribbean is going in the opposite direction to the rest of the world – where it is boys who are being marginalized and not girls.

Q: Violence, crime, incarceration, irresponsible sexual behavior, dysfunctional family relations and general antisocial behavior among males have been attributed, among other things, to boys being alienated from school. Could you say more?

BC: *We should not make the school – I note that your question did say, 'among other things', but I don't want to make the schools responsible for everything. That would be wrong. The fact is that you have educated people who also are criminals – highly educated. There is such a thing as white collar crime and they are also prone to wife-beating and other kinds of violence. But having said that, there is no doubt in my mind that male alienation from the school system does contribute to all of the social problems that we have come across. To put it another way, if they were educated, I think that the negative trends that we have been emphasizing – violence and irresponsible sexual behavior and so on – would be much less.*

What do I mean by 'education' here? I'm not just dealing with the 'Three Rs' and those technical skills that they say we all need to function in the 21st Century. No, I think that the function of education is also to make people human beings. I don't think that one is born a ready-made human being. You grow to become a human being. You get socialized. You can't be a human being if you don't have a culture, for example. And you can only get culture through socialization, so that you know how to live with people. It's in other people that you find your humanity – Aristotle from so many millennia ago defined the human being as a social animal. So if we find our essence in our sociality, then the means to socialize – to make us social – is

education. That's what education is about. And when the school system is geared to enable a young man or a young child not only to learn existing knowledge, but to discover the social and creative potential that he or she has, then that is what an education is. So I see the things we call 'extra-curricular activity' as very much a part of the education system. The activities in drama, in sports, in speech, in song and dance, in book clubs – and all these other various kinds of activities that go on or are supposed to go on in our schools – are very much a part of what an education is about. What an education is not simply about is studying for an exam and passing the exam and getting good marks. It is far more above that. And it's missing from our system – or at least the emphasis on it is missing. And I think that if we put that emphasis back into the educational system, we not only will attract and keep many of the boys in the school, but they will turn out much more refined and less alienated and see the world as a stage where they can in fact achieve and perform.

Q: The term 'quality education' is often bandied about. What does quality education look like as it pertains to boys? And the second part is it different for girls?

BC: *Well let me answer the second first. No, quality education is not different for boys than for girls, at least not now. Quality education is quality education for whichever gender that you are delivering an education. But what I mean by 'quality' is the nurturing that education is supposed to give. We're talking about different levels, of course. But I think that through all the levels of education, right up to tertiary, quality education is the nurturing of human potential. That's what you're doing. You're socializing them, imbuing in them values that enhance their humanity, but also allowing them as individuals to find those little special niches and corners to express themselves and make their own contributions. That is what education is supposed to do. It's only the people who are older, who are mature, who can really do that. That's why mentoring is something that only older people can give. Peers can't mentor peers – they socialize one another; but mentoring – that is what the teacher is about. That is quality education. I'm assuming, of course, that the context of the formal instructional part of the education is sound. But generally speaking, it's that I mean when I'm talking about quality – mentoring them, giving them space so that they can learn, getting rid of the kind of learning by rote that now riddles our system, and instead allowing for their experimenting and finding themselves and their creativity – that is quality. Basically the two things I will advise: one is the learning – good quality learning, but also that thing which you cannot instruct – it's not so much trying to teach anything; it is pulling out or giving the young child or young organism space and encouragement to become – to express that self in creative ways. That is what is missing.*

Q: What changes do you suggest schools make to be more welcoming?

BC: *One is the methodology, how to teach. They would have to get rid of the rote learning. There are certain things you have to learn by rote. You have to learn your two one's two, two two's four, two three's six. And you have to learn how many continents there are, and what is the name of the capital of which country – those kinds of things – that is rote. But that is only a minimal, a 10 per cent of what a primary school child should, in fact, learn. You learn better when you experiment and arrive at the knowledge by yourself. Little did you know that it was your teacher who led you to that. But you learn it because you think you discovered it yourself,*

or that you discovered it together. That's the kind of thing that I think boys would respond to a great deal more than what is happening now.

I also think myself – I'm not an educator – but I have always questioned the wisdom of co-educational high schools. I hear the psychologists say that boys develop more slowly than girls. If it is a fact, and if there is a disparity in the level of development of the genders at a given age, then shouldn't they be treated differently? So I would be for segregated agendas, if not schools, at certain ages in their development. Bring them back together when the maturity of the male catches up with the female.

Q: What is the danger of not rectifying male gender disparity in education?

BC: *Yesterday, the Sunday paper carried a thing – 'Guns and Books'. A very odd kind of association of words, but what they're pointing to is that many boys are found carrying guns to school. Now the problem of the violence is not something that is outside the walls of the school, but very much within the school. Because these are the same children that live outside the walls that are attending school within the walls. The challenge is how do you imbue them with the values that will have them play a different role in the society and in the communities which they come from, a role that is more uplifting and away from the social deviance. That is a challenge. And there are efforts within current Jamaica to turn things around, with varied success. There's 'Change from Within', there is 'Pathways to Peace' – many others – 'Peace and Love in Society', which used to be 'Peace and Love in Schools', but they have changed 'Schools' to 'Society'. The 'Change from Within' is one that was created here at the University and has been making some very good headway. All of this is to say that there's an attempt to address this kind of – not so much the male disparity as the problem of the violence and the disorder – now, because not attending to it now, means that you still have to attend to it later and the cost is greater. So that's the danger, if we were to be complacent. But thankfully, the society is not complacent about it. It's just that the resources are lacking.*

Q: Has violence spiked recently?

BC: *Well, let's put it this way. Last year the homicide rate was 55. It mounted to 55 from about 45 the year before. This year, at the current rate for the last eight months, we're heading into the 60s. The rate of homicide is calculated per 100,000 population. If I say the rate is 45, it means for every 100,000 persons, 45 were murdered.*

Q: And what do you attribute that to?

BC: *Maybe it's all of the factors that we have spoken about, but there is also the fact that the problems of masculinity seem to be exacerbated a bit. When I say exacerbated, I'm talking about the difficulty that young men are experiencing in achieving and maintaining manhood. It really is difficult for them – I mean yes, it is true that the conception is warped, but warped or not, that is it. And yet it is very difficult. So the slightest thing can trigger a murder – the slightest thing. I mean just on the weekend here a colleague was telling me that four people were murdered – four, and what was it from? At a public standpipe one person came and shifted somebody else's pail to catch water for himself – just that. And the result was four people killed. Just like that.*

There was – a year and a half ago – another case in another community. Two men when quarrelling on a bus when one spilled orange juice on the other – the result was two people killed before they woke up to their senses and realized that they should halt this insanity. Now, what is it, I'm asking, that would cause a man – or cause men, to fly off the handle at such seemingly trivial an insult? Is throwing orange juice on you in a quarrel such a deadly insult? Or depriving you of your first space in a line and substituting myself? Do I feel so threatened – is my masculinity so insecure that I feel such insult too great to be requited by anything less than murder? These are the things – so it's the fragility of the masculinity that I think is contributing to this. Now, we're getting into all kinds of psychology here, but I think that it's a contributing factor. Let me also say this: where you also have all sorts of guns – guns are circulating and readily available, it's really quite frightening. And people just resort to their own devices.

Q: Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

BC: *I would just like to say that in all these instances of gender parity, violence and all these things, I think we have to work together – men and women. I think we're long past the day now when the issues of masculinity are a male issue. It is a female issue as well and there is a great deal that is needed now by both genders to address this issue. What I also want to say is this, that there is a crisis I think all over the world – let me qualify that and say all over the Western world. I shouldn't be so bold as to say all over the world – but certainly in the Western world, including us who are forced to be a part of the West. There is a crisis, no question about it. And it is centered on males. In the United States I believe the incarceration rate for African-American males is very high. I think it's also high among whites as well. There are the problems of education, declining standards of behavior and all these things. The crisis may be more mature in some countries, such as ours, but that there is one is impatient of debate, and it had better be addressed now.*