

3. Socialization Patterns and Boys' Underperformance in Seychellois Schools

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Abstract

This article is based on an empirical study conducted in 2009 that examines boys' underperformance in Seychellois schools. In addition to studying the boys at school, the research undertook a broader examination of the boys' home socialization patterns. The article establishes that while boys have more freedom to roam around, they also have very narrowly defined gender roles which places them at a disadvantage to girls, who develop more rounded personalities and closeness to their mothers. Fathers have little to do with their children's education and they fail to act as role-models to their sons. A preconceived notion held by the society that men are generally unreliable, together with a negative gender dialogue between men and women, create unfavorable conditions for men and boys to thrive. The article argues that men need to be encouraged to claim a bigger role in their sons' upbringing, and that social services need to be shaped around fathers' needs.

Key words: gender roles, gender socialization, education

Résumé

Le présent article se fonde sur étude empirique menée en 2009 sur la performance inférieure des garçons à l'école aux Seychelles. Outre l'examen des performances scolaires des garçons, l'étude s'est penchée, au sens plus large, sur les modes de socialisation des garçons. L'article démontre que, bien qu'ils aient une plus grande liberté de mouvement, les garçons, dont le rôle est très circonscrit en raison de leur genre, sont désavantagés par rapport aux filles qui, elles, ont la possibilité de développer une personnalité plus équilibrée et de se rapprocher de leur mère. Les pères n'ont pratiquement aucun rôle à jouer dans l'éducation de leurs enfants et ne réussissent pas à servir de modèle à leurs fils. L'idée reçue selon laquelle les hommes ne sont pas dignes de confiance, et le dialogue négatif entre hommes et femmes créent des conditions non favorables à la réussite des hommes et des garçons. L'article souligne que les hommes ont besoin d'être encouragés à revendiquer un rôle plus important dans l'éducation de leur fils et que les services sociaux doivent être adaptés au besoin des pères.

Mots clés : rôles des genres, socialisation des genres, éducation

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1. INTRODUCTION

In large parts of Africa, poor school attendance and performance are generally problems associated with girls rather than boys. The reasons why girls are absent from school or perform worse than boys, lie in structural and societal imbalances skewed against them. These comprise a raft of disadvantages, for example, the distance of the school from home; poverty; strict and unfair gender roles causing girls to be burdened with household chores; and social prejudices that rule that because girls marry, they need no education. All these factors individually and collectively can make school attendance and educational success difficult for girls.

The Seychelles, however, proves an exception to this pattern. Here it is the boys who experience problems in school, not because barriers to access exist but due to other, less clear-cut reasons, which relate to societal attitudes and lack of parental and school support. This article is based on a study that aims to unravel aspects of home socialization, which sometimes intervene to affect boys' performance in state schools in the Seychelles (AfDB, 2009).

The issue of boys' relative underachievement and underparticipation at both primary and secondary state schools has been noted for some years in the Seychelles. National examination results and surveys reveal that girls outperform boys at school in all subjects across the curriculum, including Mathematics and Science, and in completion rates at secondary level. Girls appear to be more adapted to schooling than boys. This happens in a country where the government provides free pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary education for all children. Why then are the boys doing so badly?

The Seychelles is a country where most of the women's basic needs have been met. Women have achieved almost full practical empowerment in the public sphere, with constitutional and equal rights to work, education, health, electoral voting, land ownership, and inheritance laws. In fact, some argue that women and girls have many advantages over men and boys. The significant difference in life expectancy at birth for women (78 years) and men (68 years) is an indication of this (National Statistics Bureau, 2010). Women appear to be highly visible in public life because of the small size of the country. In fact, women make up 62% of the Civil Service, 24% of Members of Parliament, and 28% of government ministers. While full participation in decisionmaking processes at political and administrative levels is still some way off, women in the Seychelles are considerably more empowered than in the neighboring island states of Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros, and in other regional countries.

Demographic household characteristics tell an interesting story that sheds further light on gender relations in the Seychelles: family size has steadily declined through the 1990s and stood at 3.7 in 2007. Women-headed households have always been numerous in the Seychelles, having reached 51% in 1993, and increasing to 57% in 2007 (National Statistics Bureau, 2009). In 2009, only one-third of all marriages conducted in the Seychelles were between local Seychellois, the rest being between tourists. Even more indicative is the fact that one in three Seychellois marriages ends in divorce. Perhaps not surprisingly, 80% of all births in 2009 were to unmarried parents and their fathers did not acknowledge 20% of these children (National Statistics Bureau, 2010). This pattern is not new in the Seychelles. French Chang-Him (2002), the Bishop of Seychelles, wrote in 2002 that:

In many households, the father remains on the periphery and leaves the mother to carry the full responsibility of bringing up the children. He sees nothing wrong in having other partners and children.

Older research has related the Seychelles' weak family structures to its history of slavery. This, it is claimed, served to prevent the establishment of healthy family values, while constructing a culture of irresponsible sexual attitudes and weak paternal responsibility. This theory traces the culture of casual sexual relationships to slave masters having rights over all children born to female slaves against the claims of biological fathers (Maiche, 2003; Bwana and Bwana, 1996), while it links cohabitation to rules that forbade marriage between slaves. These historical reasons are cited to explain that men had their role of husbands and fathers forcibly taken away from them (Chang-Him, 2002).

Apart from the academic underachievement of boys, the Seychelles also seems to suffer from a number of other deep-seated social problems. These include: domestic violence, which affects women and, increasingly, also men as victims (Gender Secretariat, 2008); alcoholism amongst older men; substance abuse (especially of heroin) amongst younger men, and a rising incidence of male suicides. An apparent increase in bisexuality and homosexuality in men is another new trend. Moreover, a ten-year difference in life expectancy in favor of women suggests that men tend to live unhealthy lifestyles and neglect healthcare. These factors are manifestations of what may be termed a "growing crisis of masculinity," which some readily interpret as the downside of women's social and economic emancipation.

Seychellois men have been portrayed as irresponsible fathers, living on the margins of family life and detached from the lives of their children (Benedict

and Benedict, 1982; Chang-Him, 2002). This image has fueled negative media portrayals, showing Seychellois men secondary to women in care-giving roles and in life generally. The present paper seeks to foster a greater understanding of men's apparent disempowerment in Seychellois society.

2. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATION

Boys' relative underachievement and underparticipation in state schools at both primary and secondary levels is well established. National examination results reveal that girls outperform boys at school in all subjects across the curriculum. Moreover, they participate more actively in extracurricular activities and occupy leadership positions such as prefect roles more readily than boys. In general, boys demonstrate a higher dropout rate, higher levels of truancy, and a greater incidence of discipline problems in schools (Pardiwalla, 2007, 2009). Between 2000 and 2008, the mean difference between exam marks at the end of the primary level peaked at 14.2% in 2006, from a level of 8.5% one year previously. Moreover, girls outperform boys in all subjects including Mathematics and Sciences, which in other countries tend to be subjects where boys excel. In fact, research of the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) has shown that while girls scored significantly better than boys in reading in a number of countries besides Seychelles (such as Botswana, South Africa, and Mauritius), Seychelles was the only country where girls scored significantly higher than boys in Mathematics (Pardiwalla, 2007, 2009).

This unusual pattern is repeated at the secondary level. Girls record higher rates of participation and better performance in the Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education examinations, which are held at the end of the secondary cycle (3.48 passes for girls against 2.89 for boys in 2007). The mean number of subjects in which the girls achieved principal passes is also higher than that of boys in all cases. Girls also achieved higher grades. In 2007, 30% of girls achieved principal passes in four or more subjects compared to 17% of boys. Another interesting finding of the research is that boys exhibit an overall reluctance to participate in extracurricular school activities other than football, athletics, and hockey. In 2009 in Anse Boileau Primary School, for example, girls outnumbered boys as scouts by a ratio of 2:1.

Several studies have been undertaken in order to better understand the reasons for boys' relative underachievement. In 2002, the Ministry of Education conducted a short research study in selected primary schools

to explore the issue (Ministry of Education and Youth, 2002). The study was the first of its kind in Seychelles and it revealed differential treatment of boys and girls in schools and higher expectations for girls on the part of teachers. The report suggested that girls were more frequently praised than boys, while boys were more frequently told off and punished more harshly than girls. Teachers generally were more positive toward girls because the girls were seen as behaving better and were more serious about their studies. Boys, by contrast, were described as easily distracted, lacking concentration, and constantly seeking the attention of teachers. What is more astonishing perhaps is the fact that only half the teachers surveyed agreed that gender differences might be important in explaining the apparent “natures” of boys and girls. The study concluded that: “The expectation that boys perform and behave less well than girls may account in part for the downturn in boys’ attitude” (Ministry of Education and Youth, 2002.)

In 2006, the Commonwealth Secretariat funded a similar study (Pardiwalla 2007 and 2009) designed to explore the extent of gender bias in secondary schools. The results revealed that many of the school processes and procedures, teacher attitudes and expectations were heavily gendered and were seen to be working against the interests generally of boys, affecting their participation and educational outcomes. Girls were the preferred gender at school and teachers held high expectations for them, while boys were labeled as lazy, irresponsible, and lacking in motivation. Boys were also clustered in the low-ability classes because of ability-streaming practices. Secondary schools, it would appear, reinforced gender stereotyping instead of actively challenging the status quo.

An action research project which formed part of the study (Pardiwalla 2007 and 2009) aimed at reducing some of the disparities noted and creating more gender-friendly school and classroom environments; and this met with some encouraging results. Some of the strategies included more gender-responsive teaching and learning, a more boy-friendly school ethos, and mentoring programs for boys. Attempts were also made to engage parents in the project but the interventions remain limited because teachers lacked the time and knowledge to help parents. Teachers tended to blame the home and family for boys’ problems. In cases where individual teachers had enlisted the help of parents and the family in raising a boy’s performance, the results proved to be very encouraging. Although the study was restricted to in-school factors, students reported that parents tended to be more protective toward girls, and girls received more supervision and help with homework. Boys appeared to have more freedom, did less work at home, and had a more lenient and unstructured environment.

Girls described themselves using a wide range of attributes, while the boys appeared to be more limited in their choice of acceptable male roles. Surprisingly, boys very much believed in conventional gender roles, seeing themselves as breadwinners and the dominant partner. The findings regarding home socialization patterns increased interest in a new study that would look at the agency of homes in defining gender roles more closely.

3. THE STUDY ON GENDER SOCIALIZATION IN THE HOME

3.1 Methods

This 2009 study, undertaken by the African Development Bank in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Social Development, aimed to complement the earlier Commonwealth Secretariat study. Rather than listening to children talk about their home, the practices and attitudes of parents were investigated separately to complete the picture. The study sampled the parents of the same students in the two primary and secondary schools that had constituted the subject of the Commonwealth Secretariat study (Pardiwalla, 2007). All four schools in the study recognized the issue of boys' underachievement and their development plans included strategies to address the problem.

Research methods included the administration of a questionnaire, focus group discussions, and interviews with key informants. The study was largely qualitative in nature but the parent questionnaire, which targeted all parents of students in the first grades of the primary and secondary cycles in the four schools, and the students' performance records, provided quantitative data. Prior to the research, a workshop was organized to inform stakeholders about the goals of the study, to gather information on challenges faced by parents, to explore their understanding of problems related to boys' underachievement, and to assess how research findings could best engage their interests.

Household Data Forms to gather background information on the students were completed by class teachers. The main aim of these forms was to determine students' distribution in terms of gender, their family structure and member composition, and the type of homes they lived in. The forms also elicited information regarding the parents, whether or not they were living with their child, and information on their employment status. Data obtained were used as a basis for sampling the parents who were to complete the questionnaire. The majority of the students' parents in this study were

employed or self-employed. While 56% of the students in the study were living with both biological parents, 33% lived with their mother only. The proportion of students living with both parents was higher in the sample than indicated by national statistics.

A questionnaire to capture some aspects of gender socialization was sent out to all parents of the students in the selected grades and schools. The 27 questions that made up the questionnaire sought the parents' views on: choice of suitable toys; recreational, social and sporting activities; distribution of household chores; desirable career opportunities for their child; and patterns of punishments and rewards they employed. Altogether, 367 parents answered the questionnaire, 47% of whom were fathers, who represented slightly more daughters than sons.

To obtain a broader picture of gender socialization in the home, focus group discussions sought to discover parents' conceptions of parenthood and perceptions of boys and girls, the roles they ascribed to the mother and father in the home, their wishes and fears for their children, and suggestions for improving parenting programs. Focus groups included fathers and mothers as separate groups, and mixed groups. Guided interviews with key informants included 19 persons, 10 of whom were male, from a variety of different backgrounds, including political and church leaders, members of government agencies and departments, NGOs, and fathers' associations.

3.2 Survey results

The results of the survey regarding different gender roles attributed to the children revealed that strict divisions do exist (Table 1). The majority of both girls and boys participate in various household chores. Some 59% of respondents indicated that their child was highly involved in chores. Only 6 children did not perform any household work at all. However, girls carried out a significantly larger proportion of the household chores (6.8 mean for girls vs. 5.9 mean for boys). A comparison of the distribution of chores suggests that the most common chores for girls and boys was sweeping. Girls did the major dusting and cleaning tasks as well as taking on care-giving roles. Boys looked after animals, while girls did the laundry for the family. Boys and girls participated more equally in chores like going to the shops and cooking.

Table 1: Distribution of chores by gender (proportion)

| Chores | Male | Female |
|---|------|--------|
| Sweep inside the house | 0.88 | 0.94 |
| Sweep outside the house | 0.88 | 0.87 |
| Dust the furniture | 0.67 | 0.87 |
| Clean the windows & louvers | 0.52 | 0.71 |
| Look after the younger kids | 0.40 | 0.59 |
| Go to the shop | 0.80 | 0.76 |
| Take care of animals | 0.64 | 0.47 |
| Wash own clothes | 0.32 | 0.59 |
| Wash clothes for the others in the family | 0.07 | 0.29 |
| Look after an elderly person | 0.16 | 0.27 |
| Help with the cooking | 0.59 | 0.64 |

Questions about different types of toys used by boys and girls suggests that books (97%), balls (93%), and Lego (88%), appeared to be the most popular toys in the home for both boys and girls (Table 2). However, dolls were considered highly gender-specific and strictly offered to girls only. Only 16% of respondents said their sons possessed a doll and just 0.5% indicated that their girls had never had a doll. None of the other toys was considered the exclusive domain of boys or girls, even though videogames and mp3 players were more popular with boys.

Table 2: Popularity of toys by gender (%)

| Toys | Male | Female |
|--------------------|------|--------|
| Ball game | 93 | 93 |
| Doll | 16 | 99 |
| Toy car | 98 | 60 |
| Video/IPOD/CD | 63 | 43 |
| Set of books | 96 | 99 |
| Bicycle | 68 | 54 |
| Lego | 86 | 90 |
| Musical instrument | 71 | 66 |

Surprisingly, it was found that restrictions did not significantly apply to girls, because 60% of parents said their girls possessed a toy car. Books, Lego, musical instruments, and bicycles appeared to be popular with both boys and girls.

As Table 3 indicates, afterschool activities appeared to place girls more firmly in the domestic domain. The most frequently reported afterschool activities were doing homework and watching television for both girls and boys. Boys went out to meet friends more often than girls, and more boys were involved in sports activities. Girls also spent more time doing school-related activities, such as homework and private lessons than the boys. Generally, the survey showed that more boys than girls were involved in leisure activities (2.7% compared to 2.3%).

Table 3: Involvement in afterschool activities by gender (%)

| Afterschool activities | Male | Female |
|-------------------------------------|------|--------|
| Watch television | 93 | 90 |
| Do homework | 85 | 94 |
| Play alone or with friends | 92 | 77 |
| Go to a friend's home to play | 44 | 31 |
| Do household chores | 57 | 56 |
| Go to a teacher for private lessons | 4 | 15 |
| Do community work | 6 | 6 |
| Participate in sports activities | 36 | 29 |
| Talk to friends on mobile | 12 | 12 |

The survey results suggest that girls have a wider range of options available to them to define their gender role than the boys. Girls worked in and outside the house and they played with all manner of toys, including those normally ascribed to boys, while boys were more restricted in their activities and choices and they tended to be more active outside the house. Boys also appeared to have a less structured home environment, playing and hanging out with friends more.

Results regarding extracurricular activities corroborate these findings (Table 4). The large majority of parents seemed favorable to both girls and boys participating in sports (92%) and cultural activities (84%) at school level.

They were also not averse to children joining social (63%) and religious groups (83%) in the community. Fewer parents, however, were in favor of allowing their children to participate in sports (47%) and cultural activities (43%) at district level. This would suggest that they are more protective of girls.

Table 4: Percentage of parents agreeing to children's participation in activities

| Type of activity | Male child | Female child |
|---------------------------------------|------------|--------------|
| Sports activities at school | 95 | 89 |
| Cultural activities at school | 89 | 81 |
| Religious activities in the community | 84 | 84 |
| Sports activities in the district | 54 | 42 |
| Cultural activities in the district | 45 | 41 |
| Social groups/movements | 67 | 59 |
| Religious groups/movements | 85 | 79 |

Parents' career choices for their children reflected stereotypical attitudes about appropriate jobs for men and women. Over 80% of parents were strongly opposed to girls taking up careers in engineering and construction. Careers in fishing, sailing, and laboring and being a captain or pilot were also judged to be undesirable for girls. The majority of parents agreed that care-giving jobs were appropriate career choices for their daughters, while over 65% of parents voiced an objection to the idea of their sons becoming nurses or primary school teachers.

The questions related to styles of praise and punishment showed little difference between boys and girls (Table 5). Both boys and girls received verbal praise, hugs, financial rewards, and they had special wishes fulfilled. Rewarding styles did however differ between fathers and mothers, with mothers being more involved. The same seems to be the case with punishments. Parents tended to be somewhat harsher with boys – applying banning of TV, grounding, confiscating valuables such as phones, shouting and slapping more. As Table 6 indicates, women appear to be the main disciplinarians in the home.

Table 5: Parents' use of reward styles (%)

| Rewards | Both parents | Fathers | Mothers |
|------------------------|--------------|---------|---------|
| Verbal praise | 70 | 4 | 16 |
| Hug or caress | 71 | 8 | 18 |
| Financial reward | 48 | 11 | 7 |
| Buying gift or present | 76 | 3 | 17 |
| Fulfil a wish | 77 | 3 | 13 |

Table 6: Parents' use of punishment styles (%)

| Punishment | Both parents | Fathers | Mothers |
|---------------------------------|--------------|---------|---------|
| Verbal reprimand | 53 | 10 | 16 |
| Ban a TV | 29 | 10 | 21 |
| Grounding | 33 | 9 | 14 |
| Locking up in room | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| Confiscating something valuable | 10 | 3 | 8 |
| Discontinue pocket money | 6 | 3 | 6 |
| Shouting | 32 | 10 | 25 |
| Slapping/beating | 30 | 4 | 22 |
| Giving extra work | 12 | 5 | 15 |

When asked to what degree they would be disappointed if their child did not achieve a number of life goals, parents appeared to have greater ambitions for their sons than their daughters. The survey revealed that parents would be more disappointed if a son (rather than a daughter) failed to continue with university studies, get a career of his choice, or have a family (Table 7). There was slightly more disappointment articulated, however, at the idea of a girl failing to get married. These results may be interpreted in two ways. Parents may be more ambitious for their boys and consider university studies and careers to be less important for girls, since they prefer to have the girls close to them, helping them at home. Alternatively, they may feel that since

girls are more goal-oriented and hardworking than boys, they need to be more worried for their boys, knowing that the girls will do well in any case.

Table 7: Parents' level of disappointment if a child were to fail to achieve certain life goals

| Life goal | Variable mean | |
|------------------------------|---------------|-------|
| | Boys | Girls |
| Get a career of their choice | 2.37 | 2.33 |
| Earn a lot of money | 2.59 | 2.49 |
| Live a life of luxury | 1.79 | 1.78 |
| Get married | 1.65 | 1.74 |
| Have a family | 1.95 | 1.91 |
| Do university studies | 2.34 | 2.12 |

Parents were asked a series of questions on whether boys and girls should receive the same punishments and rewards, follow the same rules, do the same chores, and later in life do the same work. An "egalitarian views" index was composed from five items (Table 8) below and the mean variable obtained. Results show that both parents claim to be rather progressive in their views with mean scores of 3.75 for fathers and 3.83 for mothers. Fathers are generally more conservative than mothers. Parents have more reservations about boys and girls doing the same work and being punished in the same way. They are more in agreement with boys and girls doing the same chores, following the same rules, and being rewarded in the same manner.

Table 8: Mean variable for egalitarian scores

| Equality scores (based on 5 items) | Fathers | Mothers |
|------------------------------------|---------|---------|
| <i>Mean</i> | 3.75 | 3.83 |
| Same chores | 0.78 | 0.76 |
| Same work | 0.62 | 0.72 |
| Punishment | 0.63 | 0.70 |
| Reward | 0.80 | 0.74 |
| Same rule | 0.91 | 0.89 |

Next, the impact of different dimensions of gender socialization in the home on boys' school achievement was explored in the survey. Parents, we suggested, have an important impact on their children's gender role identity. The specific gender socialization processes related to boys' achievement are: a) parents' egalitarian views, b) participation in outside activities, c) involvement of the children in a variety of household chores and d) parents' setting the example by participating in a variety of household chores. First, it is important to take note of the type of family structure where the boys tend to perform better.

Table 9: Comparison of students' performance by family structure

| Family structure | Secondary 1 | Primary 1 | |
|------------------|-------------|-----------|----------|
| | Achievement | Academic | Attitude |
| Two-parent | 571 | 3.54 | 4.09 |
| Single parent | 536 | 3.47 | 3.76 |
| Step-parents | 500 | 3.17 | 3.94 |

Table 9 shows that the students' performance both at primary and secondary level is better in families where both biological parents are present (two-parent model). This observation is supported by the examination records, which also indicate that boys in two-parent families apply themselves better and get the support of both parents.

Table 10: Comparison of boys' performance by parents' level of education

| Parents' level of education | Secondary 1 | Primary 1 | |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-----------|----------|
| | Achievement | Academic | Attitude |
| Primary | 246 | 3.0 | 3.7 |
| Secondary | 489 | 3.5 | 4.0 |
| Post Secondary | 577 | 3.5 | 3.9 |
| University | 749 | 3.8 | 4.2 |

Boys' performance at school also improves in line with the parents' level of education. This implies that to some extent better educated parents provide additional inputs into their children's education. Tables 11 and 12 show

that egalitarian views and knowledge of boys also have a positive effect on boys' achievement at secondary level.

Table 11: Comparison of boys' level of achievement by parents' egalitarian scores

| Scores | Mean achievements |
|--------|-------------------|
| 2 | 361 |
| 3 | 501 |
| 4 | 521 |
| 5 | 592 |

Table 12: Comparison of boys' level of achievement by parents' knowledge of them

| Scores | Mean achievements |
|--------|-------------------|
| 1 | 481 |
| 2 | 519 |
| 3 | 543 |
| 4 | 611 |

Seychellois parents do not seem to show preference for one sex over the other; rather both boys and girls are appreciated for their different attributes. Parents appreciate the company of children generally, and feel a great sense of pride when their children grow up to be respectable citizens. But boys are appreciated for their physical strength and independence, and girls for their family bonding and caring attitudes. The qualities admired in children are the traditional ones of obedience, respect, responsibility, and hard work. Progressive values such as assertiveness, autonomy, and critical thinking do not feature as desirable qualities.

Both fathers and mothers have very stereotypical expectations of boys and girls. Boys are admired for a limited range of qualities connected to their physical strength, while girls are described using a wider range of qualities. With the exception of career choices, which disadvantage girls, boys appear to be subjected to more limitations and taboos in their upbringing and to less attention by parents. On the other hand, girls are more protected and provided with greater opportunities to develop their potential. Boys

have more restrictions imposed on them in their choice of toys, household chores, and in the display of emotions. Such gendered values systems can subconsciously influence parents' attitude and treatment of boys and girls at home. Girls have an advantage over boys with regard to the quantity and choice of toys available to them, and opportunities to develop more rounded personalities.

The survey results show clear correlations between the achievements of boys and family structure, the parents' educational level, their ideas of equality, and their knowledge of boys and their environment. This suggests that if parents were to treat boys in the same way as they treat girls, the boys would perform better in school.

The results of the survey were tested and further elaborated in focus group discussions and key informant interviews. These revealed that parents valued both boys and girls and they wanted both to do well. Girls were said to be responsible and tended to stay at home acting as "substitute" mothers. Girls were also held to be more sensitive, obedient and hard-working than boys. By contrast, both fathers and mothers valued boys because they can "help with hard physical work, like lifting heavy loads" and do "repair work on the roof." They were active and adventurous and could fend for themselves. They could stay with friends until late unsupervised, because – so the parents felt – nothing bad could happen to them, while girls could fall pregnant or be otherwise corrupted. Boys' independence went hand in hand with a laid-back attitude to work and a lack of responsibility. The values and gender roles ascribed to girls reflect the fact that in this matrifocal society, girls will stay much longer close to their mothers, forming lifelong bonds with the maternal side of the family. In the absence of supportive husbands, daughters also support their elderly mothers later in life.

It is perhaps not surprising that girls are more protected and counseled by their mothers, and are encouraged to stay home and study rather than go out and play. Girls are not overly restricted to particular gender roles and the close association with their mothers opens opportunities for emotionally balanced character development. By contrast, already at the age of five, boys are discouraged by their mothers from hanging around the house and hiding in their "zip" (skirts). As one informant put it:

"Homes are not boy friendly since they are cluttered with frilly stuff and ornaments. Boys are not allowed to touch them in case they break them. Not enough attention is given to boys' personal hygiene and therefore mothers don't allow boys to sit in the sitting room. There is no space for boys – they

are pushed out into the street. They are not allowed to bring friends home because of 'bad influences'. Parents are glad to have them out of the way. They get rid of the boys. There is no supervision."

Seychellois boys appear to be confined within the parameters of a narrow stereotypical image of toughness, roughness, irresponsibility, independence, and laziness. The only fear parents frequently expressed about their sons were homophobic in nature, reconfirming overly stereotyped gender role ascriptions to boys as belonging outside the home, and thereby outside the place where emotions and sensitivity are learned and attachments are formed. It appears that contrary to the common adage that boys fail in school because they have too much freedom, the study suggests that a narrow definition of masculinity might be to blame in the Seychelles.

Similar processes have been reported from the Caribbean, where the social fabric resembles that of the Seychelles and where the "constant social policing of masculinity becomes a straitjacket for young men who are caught in a narrow space of authorized masculinity, while simultaneously being cut off from vast fields of social life" (Plummer, 2006). When narrow models of masculinity go hand in hand with a severe misrepresentation of reality, as is the case in the Seychelles, the effect can be even more damaging.

4. THE LINK BETWEEN PARENTING, GENDER ROLES, AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

The narrow notion of acceptable masculinity, which is ascribed to boys, is linked to their lack of interest in school work. Fathers suggest that school achievement does not matter to boys because they can find jobs loading and unloading ships in the harbor regardless of school performance. Moreover, in the view of the parents, boys cannot be disciplined: "If you cannot change them, just leave them." This thinking has affected both parents' and teachers' relationships with boys.

However, many respondents agreed that part of the boys' problem was that their mothers kept boys at arm's length and their fathers were absent or insufficiently involved in family life and fathering. What then are the images of the ideal father and mother? Despite the high percentage of households headed by women, both male and female informants defined the men as financial providers and as guides who maintained order and discipline in the family, while the mother's role was described as solving problems and keeping a happy home.

According to the respondents, fathers have the final say in domestic matters since they are the only ones able to lead the household. Fathers refer to themselves as the “pillar of the house” and “the strength behind the family” to provide for all its needs. They oversee the operations of the home while the mother takes care of the day-to-day running. Mothers fill the house, “*remplir lakaz,*” thus playing an important but subordinated supportive role. Mothers, men believed, only took on fathering roles when the fathers themselves were absent. Women, by contrast, were naturally capable while fathers had to learn the qualities of fatherhood: “*They have a maternal instinct which fathers do not have – they have responsibility for the children and the family.*” Respondents also suggested that because children spend more time with their mothers, mothers are better able to discuss their problems with them. Fathers were aware of their importance in their children’s lives but were unable to translate this into real presence and involvement. They aspired to be good fathers but many lacked the tools to do this at the personal level.

The survey asked questions about fathers’ knowledge of their children and tested men’s willingness to assume new gender roles within the household. The survey posed four questions to determine whether parents knew their child’s teacher, friends, school curriculum and the contents of the Personal and Social Education Program (PSE), which deals with relational issues, life skills, and sex education. A comparative mean and an index of parents’ knowledge of the child were compiled from the four items.

Table 13: Parents’ knowledge about their child’s teacher, friends and school curriculum (%)

| Knowledge of child | Fathers | Mothers |
|--|----------------|----------------|
| Do you know your child’s teacher? | 80 | 92 |
| Are you familiar with your child’s school program? | 78 | 80 |
| Do you know the contents of the PSE program? | 48 | 54 |
| Do you know your child’s friends? | 69 | 78 |

Table 13 above suggests that the mothers in the study sample were significantly better informed about their child and about the school curriculum than were the fathers. Only 48% and 54% of fathers and mothers respectively were aware of the contents of the PSE program and only 69% of fathers knew who their child’s friends were. The survey also asked parents about their involvement in household chores. Table 14 below shows that the mothers

were considerably more involved in household chores (P-value < 0.05). Boys appeared to reproduce the patterns established by fathers in the home.

Table 14: Parents' involvement in household chores

| Parents | N | Mean |
|---------|-----|------|
| Father | 164 | 13.7 |
| Mother | 181 | 17.1 |

Fathers were also conspicuously absent from a number of important activities in the child's life, such as doing household chores with the child, helping the child with personal hygiene, and talking to the child about school performance. They were more involved in activities such as visiting the school on open days, giving permission for outings, and playing with the child.

Table 15: Parents' shared activities with their child (%)

| Activity | Both parents | Only father | Only mother |
|--|--------------|-------------|-------------|
| Help with homework | 64.0 | 3.7 | 24.8 |
| Visit school on open days | 49.8 | 6.9 | 41.0 |
| Discuss child's performance with the teacher | 47.0 | 7.8 | 42.4 |
| Talk with child about sex education | 29.7 | 2.4 | 32.1 |
| Talk about life issues | 71.8 | 2.3 | 21.8 |
| Give permission for outings | 68.7 | 6.9 | 13.8 |
| Accompany child to the doctor | 58.9 | 2.7 | 37.9 |
| Comfort the child | 73.9 | 3.2 | 19.7 |
| Advise child on his or her future | 79.6 | 3.2 | 13.9 |
| Talk to child about school performance | 80.7 | 0.9 | 17.4 |
| Go on outing with child | 80.7 | 1.8 | 15.6 |
| Play with child | 72.9 | 6.5 | 10.3 |
| Do household chores with child | 62.8 | 0.5 | 27.1 |
| Help child with his or her personal hygiene | 60.4 | 0.9 | 35.5 |

In interviews with key informants, the lack of alternative fathering models was further elaborated. Respondents suggested that in families where boys/siblings have what amounts to different fathers, competition for the attention of mothers prejudiced the relationship between sons and fathers. Peer pressure to conform to deeply entrenched hegemonic views of masculinity, which dictated that men must drink, be irresponsible and have multiple partners, stood in the way of alternative fathering models taking hold.

Men's disengagement from the family was interpreted as a backlash against this public portrayal of men as inadequate and irresponsible, as shown in comments by respondents such as: "*Men have given up, they have been given the message of being ineffective as fathers,*" and "*Women have taken over, they want to be in the driver's seat, let them be, we stay out.*" Men admitted to feeling incapacitated and disorientated because both government and society emphasize the rights for women and children, interpreted as an erosion of men's authority. Men felt that women were taking over as providers and that "*they don't need men anymore.*"

Social services agencies, the "family tribunal," and NGOs were also accused of discrimination against men by respondents. Attempts to make claims before these bodies were described as "*cases lost in advance,*" since those decisionmakers hold a preconceived idea of men as losers. Some men felt that women had created new – and reverse – inequalities by abusing the legal and social resources made available to them. NGOs were seen to provide support to women only and the one existing fathers' association remained largely invisible. Men used such arguments to sanction domestic violence as men's retaliation for perceived injustices. Men also felt that mothers did not allow them to take care of their children, and that instead they threw men out of the house, humiliating and ridiculing them in the process.

Fathers felt similarly marginalized and ridiculed by parenting programs, which are offered by schools and other government departments, churches and NGOs in an attempt to challenge outdated fathering concepts and instill new ideas. For fathers, the idea of "parenting" was inherently problematic, since they closely link the term to motherhood and to women. The classroom setting chosen for the courses and the predominance of women among facilitators and audiences discouraged fathers further: "*We have a feeling of not being understood by woman at home and then having to face more women in parenting sessions can be a put-off*". Some fathers were afraid of being labeled "bad fathers." They also feared peer pressure and expressed the view that "*only weak men admit to needing help with parenting.*" Moreover, many courses take place during working hours, which makes

it difficult for working men to attend. Men also felt that employers were more considerate toward women and granted them permission to attend family and child-related activities more readily. Employers, men felt, were not father-friendly enough.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study suggests that in the Seychelles, distinct spaces and expectations exist for men and women and that family life is fluid in the extreme. Our study and anecdotal evidence suggest that the discourse between men and women is often charged with accusation, disappointment, and prejudice. Government support for women's rights has been successful: women are prominent in public and social life and they are economically empowered. Many women have chosen not to marry and they raise their children, often from different fathers, largely alone. Many Seychellois women do not have much good to say about fathers, while many fathers have little say in the lives of their children and are not encouraged to take much interest in the family beyond trying to contribute financially.

Education in the home and in schools up to secondary level is firmly in the hands of the Seychellois women: mothers and teachers alike. They bring negative notions of masculinity to bear on their and other women's sons: boys, like men, are considered difficult, irresponsible, unmotivated, and inadequate. In schools, boys are sidelined by teachers and fellow female students, while at home they are not made to feel as welcome as girls. Attention and support are directed at girls, who are expected to remain with their mothers and to look after them in old age, since in the Seychelles' matrifocal society, daughters assume the roles that husbands and sons hold in other societies.

Stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity, which condition socialization and attitude, have negative effects on all. For their part, some women express anger and disappointment at having to shoulder the major burden of the responsibilities at home on top of earning the money. On the other hand, many men feel ridiculed and marginalized in family life. Peculiarly, both men and women continue to cling to outdated gender roles, which assign men the lead and women a supporting role. Yet, women's role has broadened their responsibilities, causing them to view the world with more openness, while the men's world seems to have contracted. Girls have a wider span of gender roles to choose from, while men are stuck in

a narrow definition of negatively loaded masculinity, which denies them emotionally balanced lives.

Men's and boys' banishment from family life hinders their ability to reinvent a notion of masculinity that is better adjusted to realities. The Commonwealth Secretariat's pilot project in Seychellois schools clearly showed that encouragement of boys to learn and to participate in a broader range of social activities would lead to better adjusted and performing boys, and perhaps later to better adjusted husbands and fathers. Such support will have to be grounded in a serious and critical reassessment of gender ascriptions and should involve fathers on their own terms. Perhaps appropriate support of fathers, which needs to be defined by men for men and not be overburdened by prejudice and negativity, will lead to similarly positive results, empowering them to be worthwhile role models for their sons, valued members of their families, and trailblazers in defining new and more adjusted ways to be Seychellois men, husbands, and fathers.

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