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POLITICIZATION OF MEN'S ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

For many years, men's issues in the Caribbean and across the globe have been forgotten or overlooked. The marginalization and alienation of men have contributed to premature deaths and mental health issues among men. In the 21st century, there has been a change as some progressive governments have sought to create separate institutions to address this shortcoming. The creation of these safe spaces for men often seems like tokenism because the problems facing men continue to persist. This is further complicated by men's groups that are feminist-oriented.

Keywords: male empowerment, Gender Affairs, Men's Bureau, feminist-oriented, marginalized, alienated



During the past decade, attempts have been made to assist men. In November 2024, the Office of the Prime Minister (Gender and Child Affairs), in Trinidad and Tobago (in the Caribbean), had the vision to establish a Men's Bureau (<https://www.ttt.live/mens-bureau-launched/>). This is certainly a vital platform for men's voices. It will complement the work of those who are championing the rights of males and helping create a better society. Indeed, the Bureau will certainly play a role in fostering a supportive environment for males who need help or feel marginalized. The Bureau must include connecting with boys and men in homes, schools, workplaces, communities, towns and villages.

The third and fourth of the Bureau's objectives require commentary: they are "To offer tailored programs that address mental health, employment, family life, and masculinity" and "To support national development goals by promoting gender equality and male empowerment."

These are noteworthy objectives, but how would these programs be assessed and funded? Furthermore, the diverse culture and family life of men would need special efforts to deal with issues of single fathers coping to raise children and fathers who have disabilities. In the fourth objective, the topic of male empowerment needs to be properly defined. How could men who are marginalized or alienated and ex-prisoners be returned to mainstream society?

The achievement of gender equality is a noble gesture. However, if men demand equality, they could be mocked. Men who demand their rights are often accused of being misogynistic or sexist. Some males who dare ask for respect of personal boundaries are often accused of trying to uphold patriarchy.

The creation of a Men's Bureau in any country has a crucial role to help develop and guide a generation of future men of substance and caliber. These positive male role models will demand justice and protect the weak and vulnerable. We need all hands-on deck to deal with the epidemic of violence, inequality, and other social problems.

In nearby Caribbean countries, there have been efforts to have an official representation of men. For instance, in Jamaica there is the Special Service Desk for Men, located at the offices of the Bureau of Gender Affairs. This special desk was established in 2016 and among its roles include "...parenting, health, education and the role of men in the elimination of violence against women, among others." Interestingly, no mention is made of the elimination of violence against men. The past achievements of this Special Desk include "hosting of school sensitization sessions, and community activities on domestic violence and other gender-related issues" (Heslop).

In Guyana, the Men Affairs Bureau was launched in 2011 to help males. Delivering the feature address at the launch was President of Guyana, Bharrat Jagdeo, who warned, "Even now, there's so much pressure on our boys and not just in school but in society. I think there's a big fear it's leading to the 'defeminization' of men.... If we don't have that



support we will succumb more and more to this process of ‘effeminization’ of men.” (Sutherland).

Progress in the Caribbean is not isolated. Nearby there is Men Engage Latin America, which has a network among twelve countries.

In the USA, there are a number of visionary and progressive groups. These include the International Council for Men and Boys based in Washington, DC. Also in the USA, there are not-for-profit groups such as the National Fatherhood Initiative that began in 1994. This group seeks to promote state or city initiatives and projects in which fathers are included.

Also making a noteworthy impact is A Coalition to Create a White House Council on Boys & Men, which addresses issues such as education, fatherlessness, emotional and physical health, and unemployment affecting males in the United States. In the United Kingdom, there are a number of men’s organizations, including the Men and Boys Coalition, that deal with issues affecting males in society. In 2024, the effectiveness of such organizations in influencing public policy is evident as Wes Streeting, the Health and Social Care Secretary in the UK, revealed plans for a men’s health strategy (Secretary of State commits to first ever men’s health strategy).

Whilst there have been successes among men’s groups in making a difference in public spaces, especially in addressing men’s issues, there are shortcomings. Firstly, in areas such as Iran and Palestine, there is no progress in dealing with men’s issues. Some of the men’s organizations are feminist-oriented. Secondly, troubling questions arise - is there an urgent need for countries to have a separate Boys’ Bureau or Special Service Desk for Boys that would focus on issues affecting boys? Or should the existing Men’s Bureau be renamed ‘Men and Boys Bureau’? And, are there sufficient financial resources in a Men’s Bureau or Men’s Department in a government agency to deal with issues affecting male teenagers?

Despite apparent shortcomings, credit must be given to the collaborations and potential of the Men’s Bureau of Trinidad and Tobago, and the work being achieved in other Caribbean countries. Organizations representing men have the potential to expand and be that catalyst to ensure governments become proactive in addressing their mental, emotional, and physical health. This self-awareness nurtured among the public, complemented with care, is important for our men to become holistic citizens capable of contributing to a better society.



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AUTHOR PROFILE



Jerome Teelucksingh is a men's rights activist from Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean. He initiated the inaugural observances of International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Men and Boys (31 January) and World Day of the Boy Child (16 May). He has published and spoken on masculinity, the men's movement and challenges facing boys.