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## Toward a New Ontology of Caring

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## **AIDS/HIV Prevalence**

In a world plagued by the human suffering caused by HIV/AIDS, the needs of families, communities, and societies demand a re-thinking of the practice of care. In areas more devastated by this disease in such places

Men and boys must begin to feel invested in the process of equal sharing of responsibility. Even though it is not often the case, there are occasions, particularly when the oldest child is male, that he has to assume the responsibility of doing chores that would not normally fall to a boy. Assuming such responsibility should not happen by chance however, it should be built into the way households socialize members about its social reproduction. The socialization of equal responsibility of caring must begin early in similar fashion to the way we orient girls into a sense of social duty and responsibility, if not destiny. The reality is however, that the consistent increase in the incidence of HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean is occurring among women. It should come as no surprise therefore that the Caribbean has one of the highest rates of new cases of

highly correlated with short-term hedonism, which valorizes the notion of ‘dying like a man’ – the idea that the pay-off between risk-taking and immediate gratification is worth the effort, and that life in a Hobbesian sense is poor, nasty, brutish and short. The joint UN/World Bank report cited above also noted that many of the persons who initiate such violent actions, and those who fall prey to the same, “are young men of low social-economic status, with a low level of education and poor prospects for income generation, who have witnessed violence at close range.<sup>6</sup> We cannot assume therefore that the problem of promoting the idea of equal sharing of responsibility can take place outside of an economic and material context within which life is taking place. Violence in this sense then has to be analyzed in terms of power and economic deprivation. There are no quick fixes; change in this context has to be a comprehensive strategy, which in turn requires adjustment of both men and women to new modalities of interaction.

### **A Cautionary Note**

In focusing on involving men in assuming greater responsibility for sharing, we should be mindful not to dismiss existing efforts that men currently make in this regard. Men’s economic reproduction of households, the provision of childcare of many contemporary fathers, the willingness of some husbands to give up their jobs in the interest of better jobs for their spouses (a growing trend among professional partners), the willingness of many men to work more than one job for the sake of the family or to put children through college, taking responsibility for members of the extended family, providing moral and ethical leadership, etc. are all important aspects of sharing responsibility that are already being done by men, perhaps not in sufficient numbers. These practices should not be minimized or devalued. Rather there is a need to stress the issue of equality of effort. Men must now begin to see themselves as providing the essential care that is necessary for long-term illnesses of parents, and for those battling the disease of

with such magnanimity. The state is a site of the most intense struggle where such demands are hammered out between the government and the people. It is this type of social pressure that has to be waged in order to push governments to provide resources for the welfare needs of its people. Not only should one expect the state to finance the provision of appropriate care, but to invest in training of caregivers to render their services efficiently and effectively. The following examples should demonstrate the point at hand.

Patients suffering from HIV/AIDS and other devastating diseases, tend to suffer from severe bouts of depression, where they sometimes express little point in continuing a life lived in suffering. These occasions are stressful not only for the sick but also for the caregiver. In these circumstances the government needs to step in and provide professional counseling to such individuals. In addition, it should also consider training for caregivers on how best to cope with the depression of the sick as the first responders to this problem. Counseling for persons who have recently been diagnosed as having contracted HIV or AIDS, or those who are living with the disease, should be provided by the state as a priority. This service is not always forthcoming, and clearly factors such as underdevelopment, poverty and inadequate resources can hamstring the delivery of such services. These factors notwithstanding, Airhihenbuwa laments: "More than twenty years into the epidemic, many governments have yet to assume leadership in promoting policy that protects the human rights of persons living with HIV/AIDS in their countries".<sup>7</sup>

Though one does not expect the state to provide the sole support for these efforts, there has to be the constant pressure of citizens

people are less inclined to be willing to offer care, when so doing stigmatizes them as families, as persons, and especially as men. There is a clear case in Jamaica where homophobia and violence represent specific barriers to the delivery of care both institutionally and privately. Human Rights Watch noted that health workers often mistreated people living with HIV/AIDS; even doctors were refusing to conduct certain types of examination, and health workers tended to release confidential inform to other patients.<sup>9</sup> These practices cannot be allowed to continue. In such a cultural context, it would be more than foolhardy to think that men would be open to the idea of becoming more involved in sharing responsibility when they could be vilified, or worse, beaten for providing care for a highly discriminated group of people in society. In short, the social environment has to be cleansed of such bigotry before the idea of change of this type could be introduced.

We should therefore welcome the initiative of governments in the region to address some of these issues brought on by the spread of HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean. One such initiative is the Pan Caribbean Partnership Against HIV/AIDS (PANCAP). PANCAP was established in February 2001 at the annual Meeting of the Caribbean Community Heads of State, and was endorsed by the Nassau Declaration on Health. According to its charge it was established to advocate for HIV/AIDS issues at the governmental level, to coordinate the regional response, mobilize resources, and increase the level of resources in individual countries to deal with this problem. PANCAP has also been responsible for establishing a Caribbean Regional Strategic Framework for HIV/AIDS. These are important initiatives that should be encouraged, but we should continue to push for efforts that would facilitate greater sharing of responsibilities such as the building of daycare centers at sites that are conducive to easy access of parents who are working, or the provision of work arrangements and schedules that do not have the impact of bifurcating the relationship of work and family responsibility

Lastly, trade unions should become more involved in the process of promoting greater equality of responsibility between men and women. After all, the rationale behind trade unionism is to improve the conditions under which people work, but more specifically, to address the needs of the whole person. Issues of sharing responsibility between men and women should be central to their charge. Some unions have taken on these issues, others have not been as involved. It is incumbent on trade unions to push for the rights of migrant workers for example moving from Haiti to the Dominican Republic, or from Guyana to most of the Eastern Caribbean. The undocumented status of many of these workers simply exacerbates their vulnerabilities and opens them to myriad forms of abuse. The Caribbean trade union movement must also be in the vanguard of the struggle against discrimination at work of those persons living with HIV/AIDS. These are issues that broaden the scope of operation of some unions, and for some, there is always the temptation to get bogged down in the so-called bread and butter matters of collective bargaining. As important as terms and conditions of employment are, the other concerns mentioned in this paper, address some of the most fundamental issues of distributive justice, democratization, and the human rights that constitute the foundation of trade unionism. Caribbean trade unions must come to terms with these burning issues occasioned by the deepening process of global capitalism.

## **Conclusion**

Pushing for equal sharing of responsibility between men and women is of course not a new issue; the women's movement has been making this case for sometime now. What is perhaps new is the urgency of the matter. We cannot afford for this disparity to continue any longer. The burden of responsibility and care is simply overb