

AN I-KIRIBATI MAN'S GENDER VALUES

Influences Which have Shaped his Attitudes and Behaviour Toward Males and Females

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Abstract

Gender values are acquired during the first few years of human life and begin at home. Parents are often the first to introduce us to the identification of our gender, to all the tasks and/or behaviours which strengthen our values as males and females. As we grow up, other influences such as religion, school systems, and so forth, add to or reshape our values. Gender values are an unstable element of human life, vulnerable to many change factors. The following is an account of how one i-Kiribati man's gender values were shaped and reshaped as he grew up. Change factors emphasised are the influences of parents, religion, peers, the constraints of a strict school system, and the possibilities for realising more about his own capabilities, freedom, and functioning at university level. (1)

Kiribati: Background Information

Kiribati, one of the countries served by the University of the South Pacific (USP), is traditionally a sexist society. Roles and responsibilities are clearly demarcated according to gender. Women are traditionally viewed as inferior to men and as such, they were expected to be subservient to them. Women's roles are confined to the home, child rearing and supporting the male members of society. The latter enjoyed political and social dominance at the village and island levels and were responsible for the more "masculine" activities such as fishing and working on the plantations. Reaffirmed and perpetuated by indigenous forms of education, this way of life has been firmly entrenched in i-Kiribati society.

In the post European-contact period, formal education and Christianity

were introduced into the country. Today, about a century later, the effects of this formal education system and Christian teachings on the socio-cultural and economic scene can be seen. Wider and more equal access to formal education has had some significant effects on women's roles in the socio-economic sector and on the gender views of both male and female members of society.

Despite these effects, changes in the ways of life and value systems of i Kiribati people have been extremely slow to manifest themselves over the decades (McCreary & Boardman, 1968; Talu et al 1979; Mason, 1985). Old habits and traditions die hard. In a country where a formal education system exists amidst a largely conservative and traditional society, young people have had the uncomfortable experience of having to adjust to two or more different sets of expectations and ideals. It was in such a context that the following article was written by an *ED153: Education and Society* student at the USP. As part of an assignment, students were asked to plot significant points along their life-line having to do with the influences which have shaped and/or changed attitudes and behaviour toward males and females. They were then asked to write an essay that related these experiences in terms of informal, formal, and/or non-formal educational activities.

The Early Years: My Parents' Orientation to Gender Perspectives

When I was born, the concept of gender had no meaning or value to me because I could not even determine whether I was a male or a female. At that time I could not explain clearly what my values were concerning the idea of what a male or female was and what kinds of behaviour or attitudes were appropriate for each sex to follow, adopt and maintain. My parents were the first influence on me. Their influence showed me what sex I belonged to and what kinds of tasks or behaviour(s) would ensure their acceptance of me. I realised that my father spent more time with his sons than with his daughters and my mother spent more time with the daughters than with the sons.

Papalia and Olds (1992, p.220) believe that fathers play a more important role in shaping children's gender values because mothers and

fathers have different feelings about gender-typing:

Fathers seem particularly important to children's gender-role development. For one thing, they often care more about gender-typing than mothers do. Mothers are generally accepting of girls' playing with trucks and boys' playing with dolls, while this kind of cross-sex play is more likely to upset men, especially in regard to their sons.

Applying this argument to my society, this is exactly the way I grew up and learned my role as a male.

Before entering primary school I realised that I was male and as a result of my parents' - especially my father's - influence, I started behaving and doing the tasks of a male. I was often scolded by my father if I wore a skirt or a girl's pair of shorts even though my mother was willing to put them on me when I ran out of clean "boy's" shorts. I was also scolded if I played with girls and this kind of punishment showed me that I should only play with boys and never do the things considered by my father as feminine *stuff*. Also at this stage, I began to recognise the appropriate tasks for males and females, for example, when I was old enough, my father took me out fishing.

My mother even taught me how to cook, but whenever she and I were involved in such "feminine" chores, my father usually had other things for me to do, so the cooking lesson was never completed. Whatever my mother and I were doing was not important according to my father. When he needed me, he just called me.

I could not understand at first why my father usually ignored whatever I did with my mother and I thought that he was different from other fathers regarding his behaviour. Papalia and Olds (1992) have helped me to see that I was wrong. They write that "men usually accept a very active and temperamentally 'difficult' son more easily than such a daughter, but they spank sons more than daughters" (Papalia & Olds, 1992, p.220).

The spankings and enforcement of appropriate behaviour and task involvement from my father developed in me an attitude of avoiding girls in games or in discussions. I only found it enjoyable to be with male friends. I felt uncomfortable and afraid when playing with mixed groups of boys and girls. The only females I loved, probably in the whole world, were my mother and my three sisters.

Primary School: Playing with and Competing Against the Girls

When I entered primary school, my gender values were reshaped and strengthened because there were a number of factors which influenced how I felt and acted toward males and females. I was not aware of these changes then, but distanced in time and space as a grown up and in this reflective discourse I can now recall some of them.

Without my father's eyes always watching me, I started playing with girls and, moreover, I started to enjoy making friends with girls more than with the boys. I started to realise that girls are more gentle than boys and some are very kind. However, during school-time, I was proud to be a male. I also discovered the girls to be the most challenging academic opponents. My male friends and I often targeted the girls when tests or examinations were concerned. As males we did not want to be beaten by the girls so we used to work hard as a group. This seemed to work in our favour because I remember some of my male classmates usually dominated the class in tests or examinations. This gave me the idea that males are better than females. My parents used to say the same thing and this strengthened my belief.

At the same time, I was aware that female students were favoured by the teachers, especially female teachers who dominated in terms of staff numbers in my school. Female teachers have always outnumbered male teachers. The latest published figures (Ministry of Education, 1995) show that there were 371 female and 259 male teachers in primary schools in that year. Because the end result was that the boys dominated my class in academic examinations and achievement, I held the opinion that the female teachers had favoured the girls in order to encourage competition. The male teachers seemed also to be aware of

this and they encouraged us to be better than girls and to cooperate with each other as a male group.

I realised as well that all the teachers, whether males or females, seemed to enjoy teaching the girls more than the boys. Maybe this was because boys sometimes showed no respect in what we did inside or outside the classroom. This bit of rudeness was the one thing that the teachers could not tolerate. In a culture which valued tolerance, respect for and obedience to older people, it was surprising to find that boys often quarrelled with the teachers and with each other. The majority of the students who were punished for not completing their homework or for coming late to classes were the boys. I found support for this idea in Acker's (1991, p.121) argument that

schools, especially primary schools, favour girls. Schools have been accused of being feminine environments, staffed by women who respond favourably to feminine behaviour in their charges. Girls flourish, boys, at least the masculine ones, rebel and eventually abandon academic pursuits entirely.

According to my experience, in my primary school, the majority of those who abandon academic pursuits are boys.

Religious Education 'Gave Us Ideas' About Males and Females

Religious education, one of the school subjects, taught us to be obedient and to respect our elders. It also strengthened our understanding of the roles of husbands and wives. Even though we were too young to think too much about marriage, religious education gave us ideas of what to do when we were ready to get married.

Among the themes taught in religious education, several have remained in my memory and have changed my values about women. Except for my sisters and mother, I used to ignore women. But religious education told us to love one another regardless of sex, because God loves everybody, not just men or just women. The preachers said "they" love

everybody. My father was a religious believer and he often encouraged me to go to church.

One thing about religion I realise now is that it still practises sexism even though the religious teachers and preachers told us never to discriminate against the other sex and to love one another. If we look at the seating and arrangements in most churches in Kiribati, people are divided into males and females and sit in different places. For the Kiribati Protestant Church (KPC) women sit on the right while men sit on the left. From my childhood until now, the seating arrangements have remained largely intact and most people cannot determine the reason why. We just do it because everybody else does it.

Secondly, most of those who conducted Sunday services and gave religious education, were males. I could never understand why women were not allowed to be priests or religious educators. In Kiribati and the rest of the world, all Catholic priests are men and this situation is not likely to change (John Paul, 1988, 1994). Most Protestant preachers are males too. However, just recently an increasing number of females have been allowed to become pastors in the KPC.

Secondary School: 'Mixing With the Girls was Forbidden'

When I attended secondary school, my values about males and females were strengthened. In this school, males and females were considered as "different" and mixing with the girls was forbidden. Even though we shared the same classrooms for our lessons, the seating arrangement was in accordance to gender differences. Sometimes students would sit in groups but if you looked at the different groups, they were all male or all female. Mixing around was only possible if organised by the teacher or during breaks when the teachers were not around.

I attended a boarding school and sleeping quarters of boys and girls were separated by five hundred metres. Entering the boundary of the opposite sex was and still is punishable by expulsion (KGV/EBS, 1992). Eating times for males and females were also different. Separate meal times was the norm for the seven years I spent in the government high school

and continues to the present day.

The same applied to school assemblies. Teachers did not tell us to sit in these places. We just did it because we were used to doing it. When we first entered the school, we followed what the others were doing. As we became seniors of the school, the junior students followed what we were doing. The process socialised the students to observe the separate seating arrangements in the dining and assembly halls.

During lessons, the teacher-student relationships seemed normal to me. Male and female teachers gave lessons without favouring a particular sex. What I experienced at primary school in relation to sexism, especially in the teacher-student relationship, was different from what I observed and experienced in secondary school. However, I accept the fact that another student might have had an altogether different experience or observation. He or she might say that teachers in secondary or high school favoured students belonging to their sex.

Sex-Differentiation in School

Acker (1991, p.121) argues that the strict differentiation of girls' and boys' tasks, especially in schools, is one way of shaping our gender values in order to face our roles as males and females in the future: "The school's continuous reinforcement of boundaries between what is appropriately masculine and what is appropriately feminine contributes to the shaping of sex-differentiated self concepts and eventually sex-differentiated futures." I agree with this statement. Moreover, as part of the school curriculum in junior secondary forms, Industrial Arts is offered to males and Home Economics to females. These two subjects are offered supposedly as "open" electives to boys and girls alike in senior forms. However, the gender role stereotyping made it virtually impossible for boys and girls to take up Home Economics and Industrial Arts respectively at senior level.

Further to this, Acker (1991) suggests that "schools not only treat the sexes differently, but give systematic preferential treatment to boys." I believe that this is the case since the formal education system in my

country seems to favour the boys. There are more schools and institutions for boys than girls. Most educational institutions had mixed populations but boys often proved to be the majority, especially, for example, at the Tarawa Technical Institute (TTI) where students are educated in such fields as engineering, carpentry, and so forth. The Marine Training Centre (MTC) caters only for males. McLaine (1982) summarises this situation: In 1987, TTI had 10 male students and no female students. There were 76 males enrolled in MTC. Out of 15,735 males and females involved in some form of formal education in Kiribati, McLaine (1982) concluded that 7,996 were males and 7,739 were females. This is evidence that there is some "systematic preferential treatment given to boys" (Acker, 1991). This trend has been reversed and females now outnumber males in all educational institutions (Ministry of Education, 1995).

University: Presenting Challenges to My Gender Values

When I entered university, my previous values about gender which I had acquired from secondary school in particular were strongly challenged. What I experienced at the USP contradicted all the values I had learned at secondary school.

For example, mixing of males and females was not forbidden. Lecturers took little or no notice of what was going on and rules seemed less strict about the mixing of the two sexes (2). In the classroom, students sit wherever they want and males and females can and do sit anywhere in the lecture hall(s). There are no "right" or "left" places for males or females. In the dining hall, everyone can sit and eat together, males and females.

In university, I learned about equality movements - one example of this is the equalisation of the number of halls of residence. In 1995, males occupied five residential halls while the females occupied only three. There is now an equal number of halls. Everybody has equal access to everything including a "right" to speak about cases of discrimination. In my society, this is still inappropriate because women, in particular, have no say. (3)

The Influence of Peer Groups

In all my schooling, the most influential factor second in importance to my parents is the influence of my peer group. During my primary school years, I learned to smoke without the knowledge of my father, and I learned to behave quite aggressively if I wanted something.

In secondary school, I learned to break rules by running away at night to go to dances or to go out to eat. I also learned to make fun of others, especially the girls. I never disobeyed my father, but in school, we used to take the risk to show how brave we were; in fact I now realise that we were just showing off. Now, in my view, that type of bravery is nothing but a stupid idea and a sign of disobedience. My friends told me that males must always be brave to be "real men". To achieve this, we males took risks and broke every rule we could. In short, I learned to become disobedient and rebellious when I was in primary and secondary school and did things my father would never have approved of.

At the USP, a lot of temptations have distracted me from studying, but I was afraid because I had made a promise to my father that I would never drink or smoke. My friends made fun of me saying that I was "backward" and "feminine" in my attitude(s).

Gender Values Change

To sum up all the points I have discussed in this essay, I would like to say that gender values usually change as we grow up. For me it started at home, beginning with my parents as the first influence to shape my gender values. Later on, as my knowledge of the world or everybody else around me started to broaden, so my gender values were contextualised. In those first years before entering primary school, I learned about males and females and I learned the appropriate behaviours and roles each sex must perform. I learned to dislike girls because my father told me not to play with them and my friends told me that we should work hard to beat them in academic achievement. At secondary school, I continued to avoid girls because of the strict

school rules. Competition between males and females was also so great that it increased the distance between us.

However, at university, everything was subject to change thus allowing my gender values to change. Here at the USP I experienced a life where everybody was encouraged to socialise and get together without racial or gender discrimination. Peer gatherings in primary and secondary school had taught me many things, mostly negative about males and females. At university, peer gatherings taught me and others many beneficial things, through peer group discussions in tutorials and so forth. It also brought me face to face with the bad things, for instance, life at university makes it easy for people to drink or smoke but because of the promise I made to my parents I am able to withstand such pressures.

Discussion

Parental roles: Parents play an important role in shaping gender values, e.g. teaching appropriate values. In the story the boy learns appropriate behaviour and roles he has to perform as a male. His father also played a key role in influencing his values. His father told him not to play with girls and to try to beat them academically. As a result of this, he disliked girls (an attitude instilled by his father). In a patriarchal society, fathers would be expected to play a key role. Interestingly enough, the mother's attempt to teach her son how to cook is interrupted and diminished by the father. As well, the mother's dressing of her son in girls' clothes was something that was harshly received and reprimanded by the father. Here we only get the story from the son and we do not know what the consequences were for the mother.

Peer Influence: Peers play an important role in changing gender values. In secondary school, for instance, the young i-Kiribati man's friends told him that "real men" had to be brave. Because of this, he took many risks which he thought of as bravery. His peers also made fun of him at university because he did not smoke or drink which "real men" usually do, according to them.

Level of Education: Values about males and females were strengthened when he attended secondary school where males and females were considered different and where mixing among the sexes was forbidden: for example, seating according to different sexes in the classroom, separate sleeping quarters in boarding school, different eating times in boarding schools for males and females, and in the school assembly males and female were seated separately. There are both positive and negative sides to sex segregation: a positive side would be the reduction of problems, such as unwanted pregnancies. A negative side would be that there is less interaction between males and females and this might lead to less understanding between the sexes.

As one attains higher education, there are a lot of temptations and distractions which influence one's values and attitudes. At the USP, the young man develops a sense of awareness and understanding of what is appropriate behaviour for him as a male.

To sum up, a number of factors help to shape and influence gender values. These values may change as a person's environment changes and also as persons begin to value and categorise themselves, their capacities or capabilities and to work to integrate different aspects of themselves which sometimes happens at university and happened to this particular individual when he made use of a class assignment in *ED153: Education and Society* to focus on his relationship to others and to the world, in view of gender values.

Notes

- (1) This brings to mind Sen's (1995, pp.264, 266) "capability perspective", which concentrates on how "transformation possibilities vary greatly from person to person" and on "freedom to achieve in general and the capabilities to function in particular" spaces that "conflict with equality in other spaces".

- (2) There are rules, for example, see the USP Discipline Regulations (1996) which stipulate that male students cannot go to the female halls of residence and that females must leave the men's halls by midnight.
- (3) The provisions are there (e.g. the Constitution of Kiribati provides equal opportunities for all) but they are not used to the full. The author may be referring to the traditional form of decision-making.

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