

## The Difference Gender Makes

By Cedriann J Martin

**M**ARY and Jane don't know why they feel like women though they were born boys. Jane proffer's the obviously wrong explanation that it's because they have an extra chromosome. But even the experts aren't certain about what causes gender identity disorder.

The most current (but still mysterious) explanation is that something happens to the part of the Central Nervous System responsible for gender identity in the womb. Theories that transsexuality is a mental illness or related to upbringing, social interactions and sexual

experiences have largely been debunked.

Sex, the biological construct, is straightforward. Penis: boy. Vagina: girl. Gender and sexuality, on the other hand, can be confusing. And for those who fall outside patriarchal expectations of how men and women should behave, the gender journey can be difficult.

It's at the root of why James the Jamaican can sell sex to women without fear of violence while his gay Guyanese peer cannot.

It's the reason Mary and Jane find that sex work is their only option although they are both bright and educated.

Executive Director of Caribbean Vulnerable Communities (CVC), Dr. Robert Carr explained why the strain of wrangling with their sexual identity in a hostile space leads some transgenders to sex work.

"It is often driven by socioeconomic reality," he said. "Some of these people who feel they are women in men's bodies find that there is no space for them in the Caribbean's social order and workplace. A lot of the men who need to live as women for their mental harmony end up in sex work because there is nowhere else for them to work. The sex industry is one of the few places in the economy where they can find work as they are."

Discrimination and its effect on people's esteem directly fuel both sex work and violence. Carr says that internalising society's negativity makes the most marginalised gays and transgenders emotionally vulnerable.

"They are much more susceptible to feeling bad about themselves and much more likely to get involved with people who are confused about their desire. Internal conflict creates greater potential for abuse in either a romantic or transactional relationship," Carr said.

That explains clients who access services from gay or transgender sex workers then assault them. It might also be the source of some homophobic dancehall lyrics. Who knows how many chi chi man tirades may be an expression of conflict or an attempt at cover-up?

The Caribbean Sex Worker Coalition (CSWC) advocates for increased emphasis on reaching populations that fall outside the sex work stereotype. Carr explained the importance of regional HIV and human rights programs acknowledging the diversity of the Caribbean sex work scene.

"If you see a homogenous group you don't see sex workers. You might work with the piece you see or the piece you give yourself permission to see, but it might not be the piece that needs help most. As long as you have the impression that only women in bars and men on beaches sell sex you are not engaging the sex work industry and you've cut off your legs going in."

