

Peter and his baby-mothers – from left: Raquelle, Mary, Peaches – and his children. The women want, want, want all the time," he says

BABY-MOTHERS

Sandy bears the scars of an acid attack by her boyfriend's jealous baby-mother

At 19, Sandy (left) was disfigured in an acid attack – the standard revenge for taking another woman's man. Kimi Zabihiyan reports on the crisis of Jamaica's baby-mothers

Night-time and the sound systems are stacking on the streets in Southside, Kingston, Jamaica. Speakers the size of industrial containers vibrate with a high-impact mix of reggae, soul and dancehall. Young women with teased, gleaming hair line the street, parading their best outfits, price tags still in place to prove the clothes are new, not 'poopina' (second-hand). Here in the ghetto, where an average wage is £20 a week and a good meal is chicken back, never chicken meat, feeling 'hot' in a £60 Karl Kani suit makes you feel like somebody. ▷

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ZED NELSON



Poochie, aged seven, simulates sex with her dolls

‘If a woman hears a man’s checking another girl, she comes to burn you up with acid’

babymothers, holding a paint bucket full of liquid. The solution was a lethal cocktail of caustic soda, raw acid, and gunpowder. In a flash Sandy’s face and body was coated in the acid bath. She stood screaming as the flesh on her face melted beneath her clawing fingers like candle wax.

Sandy spent a year in hospital and the painful skin grafts continued over the next two years. She is resigned about her attack, accepting it as the inevitable consequence of the new ghetto morality. ‘Lucky’s baby-mother had a grudge feeling. I was the hottest girl around here. I had money, I was studying, I had body suits, shorts, Fila boots, Guess shoes...pure name-brand. And I was pregnant – maybe that’s why she did it. She didn’t want him to have to support another babymother. If a woman hears a man’s checking another girl, she comes to burn you up with acid. Acid you, to spoil your beauty.’

Everywhere in the ghettos there is evidence of matey and babymother fights – scars, machete cuts, and acid burns on faces and bodies. The women who will not fight to protect their security now openly resort to Obeah, a form of magic in which Christianity, African religions and superstition meet. Obeah women, for the required amount of money, will cast spells on a matey and give the baby-mother sweet smelling potions to keep her at bay. Alternatively, babymothers simply leave at the first sign of trouble. When Mary saw a new matey coming on the scene she moved out with her newborn child. ‘I didn’t want a war,’ she says, matter-of-factly.

Mary is 23. When she was 18 her mother remarried and her new husband no longer wanted the children around. One day Mary came home to find her possessions out on the street. She knew

that her only option was to find a man: ‘I had nobody, so me and my sister went to a dance. We were dancing to catch a man.’ The man who took them home, Peter, had a babymother, Raquelle, but he wanted another baby so Mary gave him one. Mary and Raquelle reached an agreement – ‘she even gave me clothes for my child’ – but after a while one of Peter’s mateys started to make trouble for his latest conquest. ‘She was coming to the yard and throwing stones at me. I figured she’d soon bring her family posse to war with me, to run me out, so I left.’

‘The women don’t want a trying man, a working man,’ says Peter, explaining why

Mary left for the country. ‘She was always checking for who had more money. The girls see other girls wearing new clothes, new shoes and looking hot, so they want the same thing and they pressure their men until they go crazy or go thieving. We’re thinking: well, she’s gonna run off soon as the next man with more money comes along, so you take the next girl because pretty soon this one will go.’

Raquelle, Peter’s first babymother, has one child, Poochie, now seven, and his third, Peaches, has a one-year-old son, Hakeem. Peaches is pregnant again: ‘I have two sons already,’ she says: ‘one for Peter and one for another man. I don’t want another baby to mash down my life.’

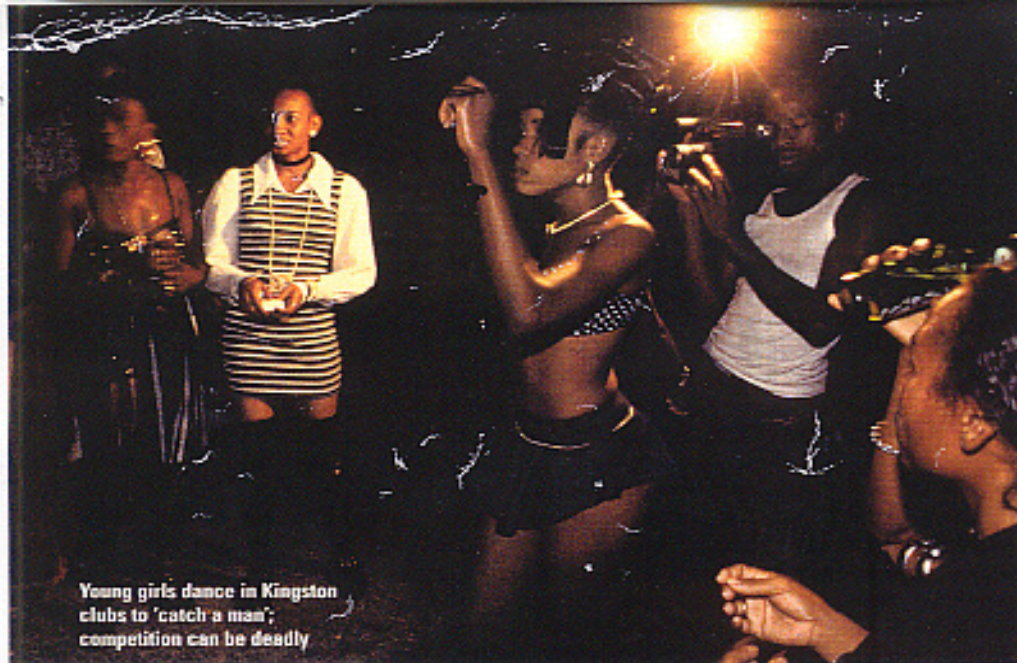
Even so, the women believe that if they try to help themselves the men will only withdraw what little support they already get. Instead, some babymothers devote their days to money-collecting, tracking their babyfather’s movements, finding him at the crucial moment when he is carrying cash, or hounding him to find some when he has none. ‘The women want, want, want all the time,’ says Peter, who cannot support the children he already has. ‘There was a young boy recently who committed suicide because of his baby-mothers. They found a note in his pocket – it read: “I’ve gone somewhere where you can’t run me down no more.”’

A matey is not as demanding as a baby-mother, so the men escape into the arms of the younger women. But before long the matey will be carrying their child: there’s another mouth to feed, and the bad feeling between the babymothers festers, waiting to erupt in violence.

Emigration in the 50s created Jamaica’s first generation of broken families and absentee fathers. In the same way,▷



Babymother Madonna with her child, and her mother Maxine



Young girls dance in Kingston clubs to 'catch a man'; competition can be deadly

assets, 'sweets', a means of escape. 'The new style is cellular phones, so the men say, "Come babylove. You want to come in my car? You want to talk on my cellular phone?" The men want women and young girls as well. They want new clothes, new hairstyles and new girls - it's like a competition.'

And they want babies. Sex and babies are the new currency of the ghetto. Abortion is taboo, and contraception rare. 'Nowadays you see plenty of young girls, 13, 14-year-olds with kids. The girls here think that if they have a baby it will hold the man,' explains Sandy. And because resources are scarce the competition for men can be deadly. 'Nowadays there's a lot of fuss over men,' says an older neighbour, Miss Millie. 'Even mothers sleeping

• The men want new clothes, new hairstyles and new girls. And they want babies •

Dancehall is the CNN of the ghetto - it gauges and raises the temperature. And when a DJ wants to push up the heat, he'll play a medley of 'wifey' and 'matey' numbers - songs about the triangle of relationships at the heart of the Jamaican ghetto experience. In the ghetto a man has girlfriends ('mateys') and he has women who have given him children ('wifey's' or 'baby-mothers'). The songs that the mateys and baby-mothers are whining and grinding to in the steaming night are high-spirited and playful, but the story behind them is one of desperation and often violence.

Here in Southside, the social structure has been eroded beyond repair. Jobs are scarce and work is only available on a sporadic, daily basis. Young men grow into old men on the street corners - exchanging news from the night before. Without work and money they have no bargaining power and no respect. Here in the ghetto, the easiest way for a man to earn respect is by getting a good-looking girl, giving her a baby and making her his baby-mother.

Marriage, monogamy and the family unit have been replaced by a loose network of temporary bonds, established by the birth of a child. As the men have lost their status as providers, so the women have lost their security, and now both sexes are motivated by their fear of being dispensable: the men fear being left for a better economic prospect and the women expect to be usurped by the young, up-and-coming mateys. The pressure to conform to the ghetto code is intense. A woman without a baby is a 'mule' because she can't breed. An ambitious girl who

wants to break away is bullied for being a 'stush' (snob). A baby-mother who doesn't hound her babyfather for money is 'a fool for letting her man use her'. And a young man without a baby-mother is harangued and called a 'battyman' (homosexual). A man is expected to have children by many baby-mothers. 'We don't unite,' says Sandy, a 22-year-old from Southside. 'We don't talk about these things and everything is hidden away. The government doesn't want to know because it looks bad for the country. Nobody wants to know.'

In the ghetto, status now comes from designer labels, 'name-brand', and 'name-brand' partners. 'Everyone wants to look good because they don't want to be poor,' says Sandy. 'Everyone wants a name-brand boy - a man to take care of them.' The women are looking for

with their daughter's man. I don't see any love down here any more.'

Sandy has stayed away from the dance. She used to be a 'hot' girl, perhaps the hottest in the neighbourhood. She was 19 and 'fit'. Her wardrobe was mailed to her by her sisters, direct from New York, pure name-brand. Before long the don of the area, Lucky, started to notice her. Lucky had five baby-mothers, he didn't need another girl, but Sandy was too hot to ignore. She liked his attentions because he was a don, because he had a 'fine body', and he bought her nice things. But Lucky's amorous advances were to prove near fatal for Sandy.

Three years ago Sandy was making a call on Southside's busy main street when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned around to face one of Lucky's >



An Obeah woman works a spell for a baby-mother to help keep the mateys at bay

Peter's relationship with his first baby-mother, Raquelle, disintegrated because of his ambition to better himself away from the ghetto and 'make it to foreign'. He stowed away but made it only as far as a Louisiana jail, and by the time he was deported, Raquelle was pregnant by another man.

Raquelle now has four children by three different baby-fathers, but she is one of the lucky ones because she lives with her mother - Miss Phyllis. As Miss Phyllis cooks a big pot of ackee and saltfish, with her grandchildren running around her feet, she explains that this is the way she wants her daughters to live from now on. 'If we have, we share, and when we don't have, we all go with-out. We live like sisters.'



Miss Millie, below, on her way to church: 'I don't see any love down here any more.' Right and below: Rosie and her daughter Pinky

boyfriend, and he splashed her with acid. She's a fool, I told her if she'd stuck with my cousin she wouldn't have that acid face. She said to me, 'Well, I'm not going to bother with no man any more.' Well, no man is gonna bother her now with that face.'

Sandy sits on the waterfront, watching kids run around barefoot looking for fathers to give them 'lunch money';



I used to believe in men as the way out, but only God can help me now

In the ghetto this kind of female support is a luxury, and no matter how much Miss Phyllis tries to shelter the family, she worries for her grandchildren's future. 'Little kids are like grown-ups now. They see and hear everything.' She gazes over at Poochie, playing in the corner of the room, humming to herself as she contorts her dolls into sexual positions.

Sexual awareness comes early in the ghetto. Children innocently sing the songs they hear on the street, with lyrics like 'stabbing the meat' and 'run the pussy red'. Young girls copy their elders doing the sexually explicit 'butterfly' dance and pre-pubescent boys watch girls whine and grind wearing 'batty riders' and sequined tops. In the ghettos of Kingston, sex is a skill to be learned and perfected; a tool to be used to get on.

Peter tells a story to illustrate the way things can be in the ghetto. 'This girl was on the point of suicide when I met her. Her babyfather hadn't been giving her any money and she'd gone home and seen him sexing another girl. So I introduced her to my cousin, a decent working man. She got on well with him; they got together, got married and had a son. But then one night he came home to find her with another man. That was it. My cousin said, "Take her, take everything," and left. Then I hear she's cheated on this new

others are clutching babies, and young boys beckon passing girls. Just 10 minutes from this ghetto, there is a different world, a world of Lexus cars and Cartier watches in the mansions owned by rich Jamaicans, high in the cool hills of Kingston. They may look down every now and again at the maze of alleys and tin shacks but the only thing that trickles down to the ghetto from uptown is their sewage.

Sandy's face is rippled with acid scars

now but she is resolute. 'I can still be the woman I wanted to be,' she says. 'Whatever you believe in, it will hold you. I used to believe in men as the way out, but no man can help me now. Only God can help me now.'

Women Inc, a women's crisis centre, is working to improve the situation of women in Kingston. Send donations to Women Inc, 18 Ripon Road, Kingston 5, Jamaica; tel (001 809) 929 2997.

