

Rhoda Reddock

*Reflections on Gender and  
Democracy in the Anglophone  
Caribbean: Historical and  
Contemporary Considerations*

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# REFLECTIONS ON GENDER AND DEMOCRACY IN THE ANGLOPHONE CARIBBEAN: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONSIDERATIONS<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

As colonial and colonized entities the struggles for democratization in the post-emancipation Caribbean has been one encompassing concerns of race, colour, class as well as sex. In the Caribbean case, forms of extreme authoritarianism and patriarchal control as existed in slave and indentured plantations, continue to influence political, quasi-political and inter-personal relations in these societies.<sup>2</sup> The struggle for more and greater democracy, therefore is one which has been consistent throughout this region's modern history.

Issues of nation and citizenship have also been uppermost, as colonizing and colonized groups entered the Caribbean space with extreme differences of power resulting in the latter's struggle for greater autonomy and recognition as full citizens. Over this historic period, the struggles for citizenship have taken many forms, and have often occurred in relation to groups perceived as controlling or as privileged. While democracy is often perceived in political terms, this paper suggests that struggles for democratization in the Caribbean have taken place in diverse arenas including the workplace, political systems at local and state level, in community spaces, and more recently the family.

As noted by Rita Abrahamsen:

Democracy is one of the most contested and controversial concepts in political theory, and despite the global spread of democracy it remains an ambiguous concept, open to diverse interpretations, uses and abuses – so much so that democracy can be classified as an essentially contested concept, in the sense that any neutral definition is impossible as rival definitions embody

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of an earlier paper prepared for 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference of the Latin American Studies Institute of Stockholm University, October 2001. It has been substantially revised.

<sup>2</sup> As we speak there are calls for the whip, the symbol of the plantation to be re-introduced in schools, while the cutlass or machete, another plantation implement, continues to be a popular weapon in domestic violence.

different and indeterminate social and political allegiances and operate within a particular moral and political perspective. Democracy is thus one of those concepts that inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users (Abrahamsen, 2000: 67).

While the original meaning of the word *democracy* emerging from its Greek roots, was simply “rule by the people” (McLean, 1996: 129) for many decades it was used primarily in a political sense to refer to political systems claiming to represent the “will of the people” either through political party electoral systems (usually liberal-democratic) or “collective” one-party systems in the past associated with communist systems. In the case of the former British colonies as noted by Eudine Barriteau:

One of the legacies of British colonialism in the Caribbean is a political and economic system derived from the enlightenment philosophy of Liberalism. The Enlightenment legacy remained unchallenged when the political status of Caribbean countries changed from British colonies to independent nations. ...The connections between contemporary gender relations in the Caribbean and the legacy of Enlightenment thought have not been sufficiently explored in analyzing gender relations for women (Barriteau, 1998: 441).

In studying democracy therefore, scholars have usually examined liberal democracy and issues related to the franchise, self-determination and independence in colonial situations. More recently feminist and post-modernist scholars in a context of identity movements among Third World peoples and people of colour, have echoed earlier concerns with citizenship and the nation-state in relation to political democratization. Feminists in particular have also expanded notions of democracy beyond state and political systems to the interpersonal, community and household level as noted earlier. According to Vivienne Taylor, the family was in the past seen as a legitimate sub-state entity, with special status protected by several state constitutions and the UN Declaration of Human Rights. A consequence of this she argues is that while the state reserves for itself the monopoly on the instruments of coercion, it turned a blind eye to domestic violence and

the inequalities which existed within families (Taylor, 2000: 19-20). Similarly the notion of politics itself has been expanded beyond its liberal meanings to encompass much more than national and local government and decision-making. This paper will focus primarily on the process of political democratization with special reference to the efforts of the women's movement to create political spaces for women and to challenge the male-defined political space within the region.

FEMINIST THEORY – LIBERALISM, PATRIARCHY, DEMOCRACY

Whereas the struggle for greater democracy in the Caribbean as elsewhere has not been limited to women and women's movements, feminist theory introduces new issues into the discourse on democracy and citizenship. Feminist scholars raise new issues in the discussions of freedom, power and government and highlight the patriarchal contract (Pateman, 1989) which has been central to liberal democracy and indeed all political systems claiming to be democratic. According to Pateman:

Feminist Theory is distinctive because it has raised a new problem; or more precisely, feminist theorists insist that a repressed problem lies at the heart of modern political theory – the problem of patriarchal power or the government of women by men (Pateman, 1989: 2).

Liberal ideology, in various manifestations has characterized the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century history of the Anglophone Caribbean. In most instances what is described as the Westminster system, has been the dominant form. Because of its pervasiveness, the assumptions underlying this ideology have been accepted as given until recently when Caribbean scholars have begun to interrogate them. In this regard, Eudine Barriteau identifies four foundational assumptions of liberalism:

- (1) The belief that rationality is the mechanism or means by which individuals achieve autonomy;
- (2) The idea that an individual and citizen is a male household head;

- (3) The separation and differentiation of society into the private and the public; the world of dependence, the family, and the world of freedom, the state and work;
- (4) The gendering of that differentiation so that women are posed in opposition to civil society, to civilisation (Barriteau, 1998: 442).

These assumptions often contrasted with the reality of the majority of women's (and men's) lives in the Caribbean. In that alternative notions of rationality always existed although they may have not been hegemonic. These were due to the experiences of enslavement and indentureship as well as the competing cultural and ideological world views deriving from indigenous and non-Western religious and other cosmologies and belief systems. Similarly, the idea of the male as household head, although enshrined in family, social security, employment and other forms of legislation contrasted with the reality of women heads of households and other forms of non-nuclear/conjugal household systems.

The separation into private and public has also been a contentious one, for whereas women have always been and continue to be primarily responsible for domestic life and work, women, especially working-class women of African descent have always been visible in public life and public space. It is notable that women from the major Caribbean populations entered the region as workers on plantations and not as housewives. The process of domestication or "housewifization" (Mies, 1989) therefore has taken place largely over the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Already during slavery, for example, the numbers of women inhabiting urban centres in Trinidad and to a lesser extent Tobago exceeded that of men and this continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as noted in an earlier publication:

In their struggle for survival in situations of extreme poverty, the independence of spirit and lifestyle of urban women was resented by the ruling classes who strove to bring it under control.... For most women the street was their arena of activity. They worked there, were entertained, quarrelled, fought and even ate there. The Victorian adage that women should be seen and not heard was not applicable here, and the strict division between public and private



life was not yet instituted among the working classes (Reddock, 1994: 79-80).

In the colonial and post-colonial context of the Caribbean as well, the liberal notions of “free competition” could not be seriously introduced. Notions of class, colour, race and nationality privilege were rampant and strong determinants of economic, political and social power and position. The struggle for full citizenship, defined as “the status [and rights] bestowed on all who are full members of a community” (Lister, 1996: 1) therefore, took place within all these parameters, including the struggles of ex-slave and bonded labourers for the vote and for greater participation generally in decision-making related to their lives as citizens.

This was reflected in the experiences of early women’s movement activists in the region where struggles for women’s rights could not be separated from these other realities as in this early plea for citizenship made by Catherine McKenzie of the Pan-Africanist organisation The Peoples Convention of Jamaica in 1901:

Under the disadvantages of her sex, and of the peculiar social circumstances surrounding her, she makes the same hard fight for her support which a man makes, and just as much is expected of her as of a man. She must provide for her household, train and educate her children, and respond to the calls of duty in every direction. She must bear and discharge a citizen’s responsibility to the State. She must pay her taxes, and the heavy “surcharges” on the tax bills.... She is regarded as (and she really is) a distinct individual, an accountable entity. Her house tax and water rates are not remitted on account of her sex, and she is required to conform more strictly than man to the standard of conventional respectability. What is expected of man is expected of her, with her it is either all this, or moral and social ruin.... On what principle of justice then, is she called upon to obey laws which she has no part in making, and to which she has never given her consent, either in person, or by her chosen representatives? Is it not clear that the denial to her of the social and political rights accorded to man, under the same circumstances, is a flagrant denial of the principle that “taxation without representation is tyranny” and that “governments derive their just powers from the

consent of the governed.” This is an argument to which there is no answer... (in Vassell, 1993: 19).

Feminist scholars of modern (western-derived) political systems have sought to explain their male-dominant character. Chowdhury and Nelson (1994), describe this “maleness” of politics as having two aspects. First there is the traditional fatherly characteristic (father of the nation) which sets up patron-client relationships which in turn reproduce the dependent relationship between father and son within patriarchal family structures. Such a system bestows much material reward on “sons” but in return requires economic obligation and reciprocity.

The second characteristic which they identify is rooted in “fraternalism” that is the solidarity of brothers. They state:

To some extent all formal representative governments are descendants (through colonialism, reinvention or imitation) of British Parliamentary experiments with shared power and of the French Revolution’s initial parliamentary impulses. Both of these political systems emphasized the brotherhood of men. In the British Parliamentary experience, the king grudgingly shared his exclusive power first with a brotherly band of powerful landowners and later with rich commercial entrepreneurs. In the French experience the power of the king – and the king himself were swept away in a tide of what comes to be understood as the fraternity of male citizenship (Choudhury and Nelson, 1994: 16).

Following Carole Pateman (1988) this distinction between the patriarchal and the fraternal is highlighted by the authors who note that although as a political concept, “fraternity” is held to be a metaphor for universal bonds of humankind, the not so hidden sub-text so to speak, is its source in the solidarity and exclusivity among the brothers, the masculine right which surpasses the division between father and son (Choudhury and Nelson, 1994: 16). In other words, in the end the patriarchal authority held by fathers over sons can be overcome as after all they are both men and “brothers”. What these authors did not address however is how this fraternity or brotherhood may be mediated by ethnicity and/or class. Also, while they could never ever be part of the male fraternity of the party, it would be interesting to see the

extent to which in this case, women benefited from this patron-client nexus and supported or challenged the fraternity of the brotherhood.

Throughout the post-colonial world, the large-scale participation of women in nationalist movements has been well chronicled (Jayawardena, 1982; Mba, 1982); Many of the male nationalist leaders of the post-war era recognized the importance of mobilizing women for the cause of Independence. Writing on Ghana, Kamene Okonjo noted the following:

Kwame Nkrumah realized from the very start of the nationalist movement that women if effectively mobilized could constitute an enormous power bloc for his party – The Convention Peoples Party founded in 1949. He made every effort to secure their support especially as he found that women were useful in the fight against colonialism. Women were already organised into market women’s associations, singing bands, dance societies and various other voluntary units (Okonjo, 1994: 288).

In the Caribbean, nationalist political leaders such as Eric Williams himself learned much from this experience and on occasion spoke publicly of the role of “market women” in Ghana in bringing Nkrumah to power and of the women generally in the success of the Peoples’ National Party of Jamaica.

Other scholars highlight the independent anti-colonial action of women outside of male mobilization using traditional sanctions against men, for example in sub-Saharan Africa. The examples of the Aba Women’s Riots of Nigeria in the 1920s and the 1958 *anlu* by Kom women in the Bamenda Grassfields of the British Cameroons is sometimes used. Some scholars however cast serious doubt over the autochthonous character of these events suggesting instead that in these actions as in most cases, women were used as the frontline for the political advancement of men (Konde, 1990: 1, 3).

Nini Emma Mba in her study *Nigerian Women Mobilized*, noted that in the Nigerian political parties the women of the women’s organisations tended to be much more loyal to their leadership than the men to theirs (Mba, 1982: 293). She noted that in their separate women’s organisations women had much more

autonomy and women leaders commanded the allegiance and support of their members. When these leaders became part of political parties, their community support disintegrated and their support was limited to women members of their own party (Mba, 1982: 293). In both colonial and pre-colonial Nigeria, Mba argued, women's approach to "politics" and "public office" took on a specific character because of their perception of themselves as "pacifiers" and "purifiers" who:

...were expected to concern themselves with the moral character and economic well-being of their families and communities and protect their interests, but they were not expected to be "political" – that is, for public office, or positions of authority. Rather they were to defend those who were then in authority, provided their own interests were being protected. Hence their political actions were limited to protecting their communities from what they saw as political, economic or moral threats – from whatever quarter, including government. When governments or parties were perceived to be advancing their communities interests, women were their most loyal supporters (Mba, 1982: 299).

Similar trends can be identified for the Anglophone Caribbean, where women's loyalty to male leadership has proved to be much more reliable than that of males who, more often than women, see themselves as successors to the political leadership. In an earlier paper I noted that Eric Williams as patriarch of the Peoples National Movement in Trinidad and Tobago derived much loyalty and support from grassroots women, to an extent never received from male members. These women saw it as their duty to be loyal and saw party patronage in terms of short-term jobs for themselves and their children as their just rewards. At the same time because of their sex and class they knew they could never be members of the fraternity but never seriously sought to challenge this (Reddock, 1998: 44).

#### LIBERALISM, MASCULINITY AND INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICT

Yet situations of inter-ethnic conflict, as in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, often present contexts for major conflict among

competing masculinities. As noted by Jibrim Ibrahim (1998) for South Africa and Africa:

At some point, a threshold, a turning point, a moment arrives, when complex, multi-textured identities are reduced to two and the politics of identity is directed at the elimination of the other. For Rwanda, it was 1959, for Sri Lanka, 1983 was the turning point, for Bombay, 1992 was the threshold. The binary categories that emerged include Sikh/Hindu and Muslim/Hindu in India, Pathan/Muhaji in Pakistan, Tutsi/Tamil in Sri Lanka, Hausa/Igbo in Nigeria (Ibrahim 1998: 43).

So it is in Trinidad, and Guyana in the Caribbean, the discourse has concentrated on the African/Indian dichotomy in spite of the existence of other minority ethnic groupings. According to Patricia Mohammed the roots of this competitive context could be identified as early as 1917, where she posits the existence of three competing masculinities in Trinidad at the end of the indenture-ship period. These she delineates as the dominant white patriarchy, which controlled state power as it existed then; a 'creole' patriarchy comprising the Africans and a mixed group which was emerging and finally an Indian patriarchy seeking to construct itself out of some aspects of the cultural baggage brought from India in the context of the systems functioning in Trinidad at this time (Mohammed, 1994).

This context she noted was one of competition among males of different ethnic groups for social status and economic, political and other sorts of power, all of this "in the face of a hegemonic control by the white group and another kind of dominance by the creole group." She saw this as contestation over the definition of masculinity as well as a struggle for Indian men to retrieve a "ruptured patriarchy from the ravages of indentureship and thus be better placed to compete in this patriarchal race" (Mohammed 1994: 32).

The fragility of these post-colonial masculinities came to the fore in the period after the 1995 general election, where through a coalition arrangement, a predominantly Indo-Trinidadian political party, the United National Congress (UNC), came to power for the first time. The contestations between these two masculinities, as I argued in an earlier publication, are based not only on struggles

for political power experienced as ethnic adulthood and manhood, but also on different approaches to the use of power, deriving from different historical experiences and cultural traditions. For Indian politicians, the need to establish a strong and hard masculine presence as a clear contrast to what is subconsciously perceived as years of feminization – i.e. lack of political power, can be suggested as part of the political project of contemporary cultural nationalist Indo-Caribbean political elites (Reddock, 1998), while the need to retain political power in a context of Indian economic and other kinds of ascendancy, the project of the Afro-Trinidadian/Creole cultural nationalist elites.<sup>3</sup>

More recently, feminist scholars, have explored in detail the ways in which ethnicity and nationalism generally, have been gendered and how women and women's bodies have been used in the construction of nationalist and ethnic boundaries and as symbols of the race and the nation (Bhattacharjee, 1992; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992). In this construction according to Catherine Hall, while the nation is conceptualised as female, the citizen is seen as male and the state as definitely masculine (Hall, 1993 cited in Pettman, 1996).

#### DEFINING THE CARIBBEAN

Defining the Caribbean has always been a problem for scholars. Definitions have usually been guided by insights from geography, history and language and culture and may vary depending on the issue, the historical period or the persons doing the defining. In general however the term Caribbean usually includes the islands of the Caribbean archipelago, the Guianas on the north east coast of South America; the islands north of Venezuela and Belize in Central America. What unites these countries in addition to their geography and proximity to the Caribbean Sea, is the history of conquest of indigenous populations, plantation slavery and other forced labour systems and the forced importation and eventual settlement of African and Asian peoples.

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this see my other articles, e.g. "Jahaji Bhai: The Emergence of a Dougla poetics in Trinidad and Tobago", in *Identities*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1999, pp. 569-601.

This history we know, has been marked by violence; beginning with the enslavement and near complete decimation of the native populations throughout the region, with important communities still in Dominica and Guyana, slave labour systems using Africans for sugar plantations and the indentureship or bonded labour of various other immigrant ethnic groups, Chinese, Portuguese, and particularly Indians (South Asians), in the post-emancipation period, under conditions which bore close resemblance to those of slavery. This slave-based production system consisted of individual plantations, exercising almost total control over all aspects of life within their boundaries and acting as independent trading entities with European markets, creating what Beckford (1972: 12) termed the plantation economy. Governed from Europe, and tied economically, these plantation economies in the Caribbean, were the historical driving force behind the development of European capitalism. Eric Williams (1964) has convincingly argued that many aspects of capitalism including industry, banking, shipping and insurance developed through the triangular trade in sugar and slaves.

#### DIVERSITY IN THE REGION

There are important differences among Caribbean territories which are rooted in our historical development. For example, whether the colonizing nation was English, French, Spanish, Dutch, etc., the extent of the slave period, demography, economic diversity, the influence of the U.S.A. and the experience of indentureship are some factors which might distinguish one Caribbean society from another. Indian immigrant indentureship in the Southern Caribbean: Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam for example, has resulted in much more ethnically diverse societies with consequences for political and social conflict and cultural expressions and contestations.

Indeed the diversity of the Caribbean is remarkable. Just about any political system has been experienced in the region, from autocracies to democratic socialism, socialism, British style parliamentary systems, United States presidential ones, overseas

departments of European countries and still a few colonies. A variety of languages, dialects and patois' (creoles) are spoken often unintelligible to many within the region. This paper however, will concentrate primarily on the experience in the Anglophone Caribbean.<sup>4</sup>

All major world religions can be found as well as various sects. In addition to the various strands of Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, African, Afro-Christian, and other indigenous religions exist throughout the region especially among the rural agricultural and urban working class communities. Women are central to these traditions, often having positions and status not afforded them in mainstream Christian, Islamic or Hindu religions.

Many territories are dependent on tourism, while others struggle with mono-crop agriculture with small holder as well as vestiges of the plantation economy. The current context of free markets, globalization and structural adjustment has all but destroyed export agriculture, the mainstay of Caribbean economies since slavery, resulting in extremely tenuous economies dependent on remittances from abroad and tourism. There are industrialized economies and even some mineral-based ones. Natural resources are limited in the region, but some territories have aluminium and iron ore deposits, others have gold, oil, bitumen and natural gas. But most have nothing more than a rich ecosystem, including beautiful beaches, diverse flora and fauna and peaceful surroundings, which have proved attractive to the tourist industry.

#### SYSTEMS OF GOVERNANCE

The fundamental organizing principles of the plantation economy were "race" and profit. Each group's relationship with the plantation determined its place in the structure of the society. According

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<sup>4</sup> This usually includes the following countries although all will not be dealt with in similar detail. 10 independent countries – Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago; and 4 British Dependencies with limited self-government – Anguilla, The British Virgin Islands, The Turks and Caicos Islands and Montserrat; 2 full dependencies – Bermuda and The Cayman Islands.



to Brereton, “one of the most important legacies of slavery was the three-tiered social structure” (Brereton, 1989). This structure is usually illustrated by a triangle with the apex representing the white elite, the middle section, the coloured middle class and the base, the Afro-Caribbean masses. This of course is a simple representation and is not a true depiction of modern Caribbean societies, the structure of which is much more dynamic, allowing for social and economic mobility. Further, the political landscape is no longer dominated by Europeans but by persons of African descent or Afro-Creoles and more recently in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, persons of Indian descent. Additionally new and old minorities continue to be politically and economically significant.

Systems of governance, if we use this term during the colonial period, ranged from Crown colony systems to so-called “representative systems”. Brian Moore (1998) described the two ideologies underlying the doctrine of Crown Colony government as imperialism and racism, while the use of the term “representative” to describe these early forms in the region could at best be called a travesty. Whereas Crown colony systems as instituted in Trinidad and Guyana after emancipation, facilitated direct rule through the Colonial government and Colonial Office, in Tobago where a representative assembly elected by white landowners was established in 1763, the situation could be described as follows:

A small impoverished island supported nine privy councilors, seven members of the legislative council (the nominated “Upper House”) and sixteen elected representatives in the assembly. But the electorate was a minute fraction of the population; in 1857 it only numbered 102 people; after franchise reform in 1860 the grand total of 215 was reached. Exactly ninety-one people voted in the 1860 elections and two representatives (for St. John and Plymouth) were returned by one voter each. Clearly, the old representative system was a farce in a society like Tobago (Brereton, 1981: 154)

Systems of local government differed according to colonial histories. In Barbados for example, British for all of its colonial history, the vestry system was introduced and adapted by early settlers as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Duncan and O’Brien, 1983:

9). In other countries the former colonial influences – Spanish, French or Dutch, may have influenced the operations of local government systems. The twentieth century saw movements for home rule, self government and greater and more democracy on all levels. Movements to expand the franchise, for eligibility to stand as candidates, and generally for systems of governance to be more inclusive were carried out by ethnic, religious, economic, gender and other groups. Indeed, early struggles for women’s political rights would often take place within and in collaboration with Pan-Africanist organisations, labour organisations and other social movements at particular moments in time.

THE EARLY WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS AND THE  
STRUGGLE FOR POLITICAL RIGHTS

Regional studies have revealed a rich history of struggle and organisation by women both in women’s movements and other social movements such as nationalist and labour organisations.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the majority of people, women and men of African and Asian descent and indigenous peoples did not have the franchise and could not compete for political office. In 1891 electoral reforms in Guyana lowered property and income qualifications and diversified the “racio-ethnic” composition of the still limited electorate but women were still excluded until well into the 1920s. The granting of the vote to women in Britain after World War I, gave an added impetus to women in the British colonies. Although rejected by conservative politicians, it did gain the support of liberals and black nationalists, male reformers who wished to be on the side of progress. In Jamaica in July 1919, the franchise was extended to women over twenty-five who earned income of £50 or paid taxes of over £2 per year. Men could vote at the age of twenty-one if their annual income was £40 per year. Women still could not be candidates (French and Fordsmith, 1984).

In Crown Colony Trinidad and Tobago in 1924, a new constitution introduced elected officials to the Legislative Council for the first time. The franchise was extended to men over twenty-one

who understood spoken English.<sup>5</sup> Property, income and residence qualifications also existed. With this change only six (6)% of the population became eligible to vote in the first elections after 128 years of British colonial rule. Women still could not be candidates (Brereton, 1981: 166).

To a greater extent than their male counterparts, women were denied the franchise through unattainable voting requirements. In some colonies, the age at which women could vote was higher than that of men and in others, women were barred from seeking elected office in the Legislative Council until as late as the 1950s (Senior, 1991: 152). The experience is varied though, for in St. Vincent, women received the same voting rights as men as late as 1951. In Trinidad, universal adult suffrage was obtained in 1946, but women could not be candidates until 1951.

Not surprisingly, the struggle for political rights was a major focus of the early women's movement in the region. This had its embryonic form in many of the women's self-help societies of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century beginning with the Lady Musgrave Self-Help Society of Jamaica comprising primarily "white" and "highly coloured" ladies. Although the membership of these organisations came from the upper and upper-middle classes, one of their primary aims was to provide economic support to "gentlewomen who had fallen on reduced circumstances". By the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, these were followed by middle-strata women's clubs and coteries of primarily "Black" and "coloured" women, which campaigned for women's political rights, girls' education and early legal reforms (see French and Fordsmith, 1985; Peake, 1993; Reddock, 1994).

In Jamaica, as early as 1901, Ms Catherine McKenzie, member of Robert Love's People's Convention, a member of the Pan Africanist movement founded by Trinidadian Henry Sylvester Williams at the turn of the century, spoke on the subject of women's rights at the Peoples' Convention Congress of that year. According to Honor Fordsmith, "She argued for equal rights for women

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<sup>5</sup> This was an obvious effort to exclude a small number of Indian property owners who were just emerging.

and for women's access to education and the professions. She attacked laws which discriminated against women and urged them to join the fight to change them" in her own words:

...the rights accorded to women have left much to be desired. Just why woman has been denied all the rights which are accorded to man is one of the unexplained relations of life except that it is man alone who has made laws denying her such rights (Fordsmith, 1987: 161).

Both Love and his mentor, Sylvester Williams were strong advocates of women's rights and agitated especially for the education of Black women. Love also condemned what we now call sexual harassment of working-class women and supported universal adult suffrage (Fordsmith, 1987: 161). Catherine McKenzie was one of a group of Afro-Caribbean women who during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century championed the rights of women within a context of Pan Africanism. Others include Amy Ashwood Garvey the first wife of Marcus Garvey. She worked with Marcus in establishing the early UNIA in Jamaica. She was its first secretary and member of the Board of Management. She was involved in planning the inaugural meeting in Collegiate Hall in Kingston, helped organise the weekly elocution meetings and fund-raising activities. She also started the Ladies Division which later developed into the Black Cross Nurses Arm of the organisation and was involved in early plans to establish an Industrial School. Much of the later activism of Amy Ashwood outside of the UNIA took place in England. In England she was heavily involved in Pan-Africanist activities as well as feminist activities through her friendship with Sylvia Pankhurst, Ethiopianist and feminist.

One of her earliest activities was the collaboration with Nigerian law student Ladipo Solanke in the formation of the Nigerian Students Union (NPU). On 17 July 1924, The NPU was formed with thirteen students. At the inaugural meeting, Amy Adeyola Ashwood was given the Yoruba title of "Iyalode" (Mother has arrived) "in appreciation of her love, interest and services for the Union as its organiser and in view of her position and future activities on behalf of the Union." From very early she shared her vision for a

educational policy for Nigeria<sup>6</sup> which she felt was a necessary pre-requisite for political emancipation. According to Adi, the aims and objects of the NPU reflected Garveyite ideas on self-reliance and self-help although he noted these were also popular ideas in West Africa (Adi, n.d.: 5-6).<sup>7</sup> After five months however, Amy left Britain for the United States via Jamaica. In an interview in Jamaica she gave notice of her new independent status:

I am working on my own lines now, and I am concerned particularly with Nigeria. I have started an association in London known as the NPU, and it is intended for the well-being of Nigerian students in England and the Continent. There is already a large membership and it is growing. We intend to build a hostel in London. We have some funds towards it already. And I am not working single-handed. ...They want education – politics (cited in Adi...6)

In 1937, she along with George Padmore, C.L.R. James and others formed the International African Service Bureau (IASB), a follow up on the International African Friends of Abyssinia (IAFA),<sup>8</sup> later IAFE (changed to Ethiopia) formed in 1935 in response to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (Yelvington, 1999: 215).

Similarly, Jamaican Una Marson while in London in the early 1930s, became the unpaid secretary of the League of Coloured Peoples and eventually its secretary when it became more established. This provided her with opportunities for involvement in pan-Africanist activities; to meet West Indian and African students and activists and to make public speeches and talks at conferences and meetings. Her commitment to Africa however was strengthened with her meeting with African king Sir Nana Ofori Atta Omahene of Akyem Abuakwa in Northern Ghana in July 1934.

<sup>6</sup> She had earlier been given the name Adeyola after Solanke's sister (Hakim Adi ...4).

<sup>7</sup> Adi notes that Henry Carr a former Resident of Nigeria and supporter of the NPU wrote DuBois in the US to ask him to help the NPU's fund-raising efforts.

<sup>8</sup> Members of the IAFA included CLR James (founder), Jomo Kenyatta, ITA Wallace-Johnson, George Padmore and Amy Ashwood Garvey (Martin, 1983: 25).

In 1935, after a very successful visit to Turkey, representing the Women's Social Service Club of Jamaica, Una proceeded to Geneva to take up a League of Nations fellowship. This coincided with the Abyssinian War with which she became heavily involved. While in Geneva she could only observe the international manoeuvres, diplomatic moves and lobbying by activists such as Sylvia Pankhurst, but on her return to Britain, she became secretary to the Abyssinian minister in London. For the duration of the war she gave the Abyssinian Legation her all as its secretary and was extremely disappointed at the outcome (Jarret-Macauley, 1999).

Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, the early women's organisations of the Anglophone Caribbean combined their concern for women's status with actions related to charity and social work. The ability and opportunity to act in the interest of others, through charity and social welfare work, brought much prestige to its practitioners at that time and for Black and "coloured" women, this improved the status of their race. Additionally it was an area of activity which was not seen as selfish or challenging to the status quo. While to some extent it may have truly represented women's concern with the plight of others, it was also a legitimate cover for action for women's rights. In 1936, therefore the First Conference of British West Indian and British Guianese Women Social Workers was held in Port of Spain under the patronage of the Coterie of Social Workers led by Audrey Jeffers. One of the immediate results of this conference was the nomination of two women members for positions in the Port of Spain Municipal Council (Reddock, 1994).

Working-class women were the presumed beneficiaries of many of the activities of these organisations but they were seldom seen as active participants. Indeed the word "charity" and not "sisterhood" best described the relation between middle-class Black women and women of these different classes. But working-class women were also active in their own organisations, in lodges, friendly societies, church groups, nationalist organisations such as the Garvey Movement and most importantly in workers and trade union organisations and movements. These women participated in large numbers in protest action over conditions of

work, and demonstrations and labour riots for improved working conditions. Some working-class women even founded their own worker or feminist organisations.

Middle strata women's activists like Audrey Jeffers in Trinidad and Amy Bailey and Una Marson in Jamaica often combined a feminist consciousness with a concern with improving the condition of their race. Many were influenced by various strands of African nationalism and Garveyism.

#### TRANSITION TO INDEPENDENCE

In the era of transition to self-government and independence, from the 1950s to the 1970s, the women's movement in the Caribbean was influenced by nationalist ideologies and new political positionings. In 1956, on British insistence, a short-lived British West Indian federation was established and in April that year, a Caribbean Women's Conference was held in Port of Spain, on the instigation of Audrey Jeffers, aimed at forming a Caribbean Women's Association (CWA) as a counterpart organisation to the Federation.

Among the stated aims of this organisation was: to provide the women of the Caribbean with a representative national organization dedicated to the principle that women must play a vital role in the development and life of the Caribbean community; to encourage women's active participation in all aspects of social, economic and political life in the Caribbean and to work for the removal of the disabilities affecting women, whether legal, economic or social. In 1958, the first Biennial conference of the CWA was held in the then British Guiana and the second in May 1960, in Barbados (Comma-Maynard, 1971: 89).

Notably at this time was the emergence of women's arms of the major political parties in the region, women were important members of the new nationalist political parties which were emerging in this era, providing a solid block of loyal support which however, was seldom translated into political office or power (Reddock, 1998). In the 1970s, women were also involved in the radical challenge to these nationalist governments such as

the Black Power movements of the 1970s and the socialist and New Left movements which accompanied or followed in its wake. What was clear at that time just as much as now is that the women activists were up to date with developments in the international movement and were keenly interested in these developments.

THE NEW WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND THE  
EMERGENCE OF "WOMEN" AS A POLITICAL CONSTITUENCY

The emergence of second-wave feminism internationally also had its impact in the Caribbean region. On the one hand it caused older women activists of the 1950s, many now aligned with nationalist political parties to once more become concerned with feminist issues; it also stimulated a new generation of women activists, many coming out of critiques of the New left and socialist movements of the 1970s, while through the influence of the United Nations Women and Development programmes, governments and quasi-governmental organisations at national and regional level were encouraged to establish "national machineries for women."

The new feminists of the 1970s and 1980s sought to move beyond the earlier liberal and nationalist concerns of their predecessors who basically sought to improve the lot of their race and sex through improving rights to education, citizenship and political participation. These concerns remained, but the new feminists claimed a larger vision which sought to come to terms with both their womanness and their Caribbeanness through a more fundamental challenge to existing socio-cultural and economic and political structures. Writing in the introduction to the poetry collection *Creation Fire* two founding members of the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) had this to say:

For a start, the incorporation of the word "feminist" in our name claimed for Caribbean and other Third World women the right to focus on all the strategic issues facing women in our societies; issues which span the range of social, economic, political, cultural, political and sexual. In addition, for Caribbean feminism as we sought to develop it, the emancipation of women and the



transformation of exploitative social and environmental relations necessitated a clear challenge to the dominant world economic system and the development policies emanating from it (Baksh-Soodeen and Reddock, 1989: ii).

In the late 1970s and 1980s, a number of feminist-oriented organisations emerged throughout the region. Examples include – SISTREN Women’s Theatre Collective in Jamaica in 1977; Concerned Women for Progress in Trinidad, 1980; the Belize Organisation for Women and Development (BOWAND); the Committee for the Development of Women in St. Vincent and the Grenadines (CDW); Women Working for Social Progress, Trinidad; Sisi No Dada in St. Kitts, 1986; the Barbados Women’s Forum among others. Additionally women’s groups aligned to the labour movement and socialist political groups were also active in the movement of the 1970s and 1980s including – Concerned Women for Progress in Jamaica and the working-class organisation – National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE)<sup>9</sup> in Trinidad and Tobago. The concerns of these groups went way beyond questions of political rights, although these were not forgotten, to larger issues of egalitarianism in social and intimate relations, sexuality and sexual autonomy, social and economic valuing of women’s work – waged and unwaged, the critique of development and unequal terms of trade and most importantly sexual and gender-based violence.

#### THE EMERGENCE OF STATE MACHINERY FOR WOMEN’S AFFAIRS AND GENDER ISSUES

One of the important contributions of this phase of the women’s movement has been the development of a distinct new area of policy intervention related specifically to transforming gender relations. Programme and policy initiatives on Women in/and development were significantly supported by the work of the United Nations and the declaration of 1975 as International Women’s Year and the decade 1976-1985 as the Decade of Women. In this process Caribbean

<sup>9</sup> Between 1980-81, this organisation became affiliated to the International Wages for Housework Campaign and successfully lobbied for the recognition of unwaged work in satellite national statistics in Trinidad and Tobago.

women were important contributors both through their grassroots activism as well as at national and international policy levels.

One of the first of such attempts can be found in Jamaica with the appointment of an Adviser of Women's Affairs in 1974 and the establishment of a Women's Bureau in 1975, one of the earliest such efforts in the world. Thus Jamaica was one of the few countries to attend the 1975 First World Conference on Women in Mexico City, with an already existing national machinery on Women's Affairs. Similarly, in 1975 there was the establishment of special Commissions on the Status of Women in Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana. The revolutionary government of Grenada was the first to establish Women's Affairs as a ministerial portfolio followed by St. Kitts/Nevis. The establishment of the National Women's Organisation in Grenada, from which special attention was given to women, youth, farmers and workers, was also an integral part of the revolutionary activity of the New Jewel Movement in 1979 (Antrobus, 1988: 39).

Popular mobilization led by the women's movement along with the generally more favourable international climate resulted in a number of new possibilities for women, these included improved legislation, e.g. Maternity Leave Act 1979 of Jamaica and the Domestic Violence Bill, Trinidad and Tobago, 1991, 1999. It also facilitated increasing regional collaboration through such regional and international institutions as the CARICOM Women's Desk, the Women and Development Programme of UN/ECLAC and the Women and Youth Programme of the Commonwealth Secretariat. National government support for these programmes and offices has always been limited both financially and in terms of the influence these agencies have had on overall government policy. This was reinforced time and again in studies carried out by the Commonwealth Secretariat and a more recent study carried out by the CARICOM Secretariat in 1994.<sup>10</sup> This 1995 study

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<sup>10</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat (1984), *Ladies in Limbo: The Fate of Women's Bureaux: Six Case Studies from the Caribbean*; Commonwealth Secretariat (1986), *Ladies in Limbo Revisited*; Dorianne Rowan-Campbell (1994), *Study on the Functioning of National Machineries*, prepared for the CARICOM Secretariat and presented to a preparatory regional meeting in Antigua, 1994.

carried out by Dorianne Rowan-Campbell found that national machineries had limited government allocations and depended primarily on overseas project funding;<sup>11</sup> there was little mainstreaming of gender issues; staff was not trained in gender policy and analysis; inter-ministerial committees and other focal points were relatively ineffective; policy statements had no strategic priorities or measurable outcomes; there was a tendency to focus on women's practical needs, i.e. needs associated with their positioning in the sexual division of labour and limited implementation of policy objectives (Rowan-Campbell in Mondesire & Dunn, 1995: 36). This however is beginning to change in some parts of the region but national and regional policy initiatives still appear to be strongly resistant to efforts to integrate gender concerns into policy-making and planning. Hence success in "mainstreaming" has been limited.

These resistances cannot be removed from the reality that policy-makers and planners are themselves human beings, struggling with the painful processes of change in gender relations in their own personal lives and relationships. These resistances point to that important early slogan of the radical feminists "the personal is political". The tension between the personal and the political or policy-oriented has been a major divide in programming on women and development and later gender and development.<sup>12</sup> Indeed efforts to make "gender issues" more palatable to public administrative discourse has served in many instances to remove from them as noted earlier, their more political and "personal" aspects. This of course is a major contradiction.

One central characteristic of feminist politics has been to challenge this divide and to emphasize the symbiotic interconnection of all aspects of our lives. What has passed for "gender and development" policy has too often sought to transform policy without

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<sup>11</sup> Jamaica recorded the highest allocation of US\$60,600 per annum, followed by St. Lucia (US\$53,000), Grenada (US\$14,815), St. Kitts/Nevis (US\$9,259) and Antigua/Barbuda (US\$2,700) (Mondesire & Dunn, 1995: 34).

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed discussion on this process see Saskia Wieringa, "Women's Interests and Empowerment", *Development and Change*, Vol. 25, No. 4, October 1994.

seriously challenging the power relations affecting how women and men experience their lives, their bodies, their sexuality, their fears, their anxieties, and their gendered and ethnic identities.

The cumulative CARICOM report to the Beijing Conference in 1995, *Towards Equity in Development*, compiled from national reports facilitated by national machineries, regional feminist activists and university personnel supported earlier calls for “a gender-sensitive approach to development which recognizes the importance of gender, class, race and ethnicity”. It stressed the twin concepts of equity and empowerment as based in notions of justice for all and on peoples’ ability to take control over their lives and concluded with a call for a change in our understanding and use of power. In its own words:

An alternative concept of power is called for – an understanding of leadership as the means to facilitate, rather than to control, the process of change. This concept will also focus on creating an environment in which women, and the poorest in our societies – male and female youth, elderly, disabled and indigenous people – can participate to achieve their full potential. The alternative concept of power implies changes in the structures and processes of economic and political decision-making – in how organisations function – as well as in the structures for democratic participation at a national level (Mondesire & Dunn, 1995: 7).

In Beijing, the Caribbean delegation led the way in piloting issues with which many other regions were reluctant to be associated. These included solidarity with Cuba and Haiti; recognition of the variety and diversity of family and household forms; the rights of women of non-independent territories; women’s reproductive and sexual health; violence against women; poverty and macro-economic policies and women’s unwaged work. Through innovative and collaborative arrangements, many national delegations included representatives of women’s organisations in some instances even women associated with opposition political parties.

In the aftermath of Beijing, the region’s women’s organisations, facing the daily encroachment of social, political and economic instability and changes in international funding policies, are finding it difficult to continue the momentum. This situation is not

helped by a climate which seeks to de-legitimise the women's question, placing "male marginalisation"<sup>13</sup> as an oppositional focus. The challenge still facing the movement is to develop a context where all actors, male or female feel a vested interest in a feminist struggle and gender analysis and praxis. Where people are sensitized to see the gender implications of all interventions and are confident enough to try to transfer that awareness to others.

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE  
POST WORLD WAR II CARIBBEAN

*National Government*

In the late 1940s to 1950s, as a result of the political and labour unrest of the 1930s, the recommendations of the 1945 West India Commission Report and changes in colonial policy in the post-war period, universal adult franchise was introduced in all British Caribbean colonies. Dates and circumstances differed according to historical specificities, e.g. in Trinidad the controversy over the proposed institution of an English language test as a qualification for the franchise. The expansion of the franchise however, did not mean that women were eligible to stand as candidates in national elections. In some countries this had to wait a few years longer. Interestingly also, even prior to the introduction of full party politics, many of the first women to enter Legislative Councils, were middle and upper class women, nominated by colonial governors (Duncan and O'Brien, 1983: 18).

Analyses of the trends of political participation of women over the period suggest that women usually comprised a minority of candidates in national elections and few are successful in being elected. Some countries have had larger numbers of women candidates than others. Looking at the period 1951 to 1979 in the Leeward and Windward Islands and Barbados, Barriteau found that a total of thirty (30) women contested national elections. Grenada,

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<sup>13</sup> The male marginalisation discourse emerged from the work of Prof. Errol Miller who argued in two publications that colonial authorities sponsored the advancement of black women in order to control the progress of black men in Jamaica.

Table 1: Women's Entry to Formal Political Participation

<i>Country</i>	<i>Year Women Given Right to Vote</i>	<i>Year Women Given Right to Stand for Election</i>
Antigua and Barbuda	1951	1951
The Bahamas	1962	1962
Barbados	1951	1951
Belize	1945	1945
Dominica	1951	1951
Grenada	1951	1951
Guyana	1953	1945*
Jamaica	1944	1944
St. Kitts Nevis	1951	1951
St. Lucia	1951	1951
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	1951	1951
Trinidad and Tobago	1946	1951

Note: \* In some countries women gained the right to be members of the legislative council prior to all women being given the right to vote.

Sources: USAID, *Latin America and Caribbean Selected Economic and Social Data – Democracy Indicators: Women in Politics*, 1998. Verene Shepherd, *Women in Caribbean History*, Kingston: Ian Randle, 1999.

Barbados and Dominica tended to have comparatively larger numbers of women candidates while Antigua over that period had one (1) woman contesting national elections during that period. Of these thirty (30) women, seven (7) or 23% won their seats on the first bid for office. Two (2) of them Cynthia Gairy and Ivy Joshua were wives of charismatic male party leaders who were also premiers/prime ministers (Barriteau, 1997: 16-17). These numbers do not reflect the large female membership of political parties in the region or the significant “on the ground work” which usually characterise women party supporters.

Possibly due to their later entry into the region, greater patriarchal control, lower educational access and other factors,

Indo-Caribbean women entered the political arena much later.<sup>14</sup> In 1947, for example, the last year of a restricted franchise, The Voters Register in Guyana found that Indo-Guyanese women comprised 1.8% of all voters, 6% of all Indian voters and only 9.9% of all voters (Dwarka Nath, cited in Poynting, 1987: 236). In Trinidad, levels of education were higher especially among Christian Indians and these were the first women to emerge into public life. It would not be until the 1950s however that the first Indian women began to seek political office. In the 1990s, with the emergence of ruling parties with large Indo-Caribbean memberships, women politicians have become more visible, however their levels of political participation still tend to be more limited.

The characteristics of women's political participation are also interesting to note. During the early period, many women's work in charity and social work became the stepping stones for political office. Additionally their position, especially with the introduction of party politics in the 1950s, was often dependent on the patronage of the political leader as opposed to their own legitimate political base. Writing on the first decade of women's parliamentary practice in Barbados, Duncan and O'Brien note their largely "low key" performance. Their positions on key issues, of relevance to women and workers, with few exception, they found not to be much different from those of their conservative male counterparts. Additionally women parliamentarians were found to speak on far fewer occasions than their male counterparts. They also found that they made little contribution on financial and economic issues (Duncan and O'Brien, 1983: 30)

By the end of the Century however, the Commonwealth Caribbean was being seen as an area where significant progress has been made in political participation and representation in the world. While noting that levels of representation at parliamentary and cabinet levels were still problematic, Beilstein and Burgess (1996) found that:

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<sup>14</sup> As early as 1933, in Guyana, Alice Bhagwandi Singh, social worker, expressed concern about the small percentage of educated Indo-Guyanese women and proposed measures to increase their access (Woolford, 2000: 124).

Women in the Caribbean have attained a greater level of breadth and depth in executive bodies of government than women in the highly-touted Nordic region...Caribbean women have also made significant strides at the local government level, as councillors and mayors.... In bureaucracies and local government, Caribbean women have “broken through” the 30 per cent threshold whereby they constitute a “critical mass” (Beilstein and Burgess, 1996: 1).

The reasons why this local government success had not been translated to parliamentary level, they suggest as, 1) the liberal-democratic constitutions which include single member “winner takes all” electoral districts and, 2) the political culture of elections and parliament which is confrontational and time-consuming. Interviews with women parliamentarians and politicians suggest that while more women are entering and competing in this arena, serious conflicts exist which proscribe their ways of operating within that masculine defined space.

Table 2: Women in Commonwealth Caribbean Parliaments, 1995 and 2000

<i>Country</i>	<i>1995 % of Women</i>	<i>2000 % of Women</i>
Antigua and Barbuda	11.1	8.8
The Bahamas	10.8	19.6
Barbados	18.4	20.4
Belize	10.3	18.4
Dominica	9.4	9.7
Grenada	17.9	17.9
Guyana	20.0	1.5
Jamaica	12.3	16.0
St. Kitts/Nevis	0.0	13.3
St. Lucia	14.3	13.8
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	9.5	14.3
Trinidad and Tobago	20.6	20.9

Source: Commonwealth Parliamentary Union, *Women in Commonwealth Parliaments*, prepared for Commonwealth Workshop on Gender and Democracy, Windhoek, Namibia, February, 2000.



*Local Government*

At the local government level however, possibilities for women's political participation had started much earlier. In 1939, in Jamaica, Mary Morris Knibb, of the Jamaica Women's Liberal Club had been successful in municipal elections to the Kingston and St. Andrew Corporation. In Trinidad and Tobago, after over ten years of heated battle, the Port of Spain Municipal Council and the San Fernando Borough Council approved a motion granting women the right to be elected as candidates in local elections. This was followed by the election of Audrey Jeffers, women's activist in 1936 to the Port of Spain Municipal Council (Reddock, 1994: 174-181). In Barbados, women were not allowed to be candidates for local office until 1948 (Duncan & O'Brien, 1983: 9-10). As noted by Eudine Barriteau, local government is seen as one of the main institutions for reconstructing civil and political society, by persons committed to participatory democratic structures, yet, local government in the Caribbean has not yet realised this potential (Barriteau, 1997: 6) as central governments are reluctant to relinquish economic and political control.

Table 3: Proportion of Women in Local Councils and as Mayors (selected countries), 1994

<i>Country</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Local Councils</i>	<i>Mayors</i>
St. Lucia	1993	40.9	33.3
Guyana	1993	22.2	16.7
Trinidad and Tobago	1991	21.1	14.3
Jamaica	1994	12.8	25.0

Source: United Nations DAW, Worldwide Government Directories Inc., Bethesda, Maryland, 1995, cited in Beilstein and Burgess, 1996: 28).

THE GENDER EMPOWERMENT MEASURE IN THE CARIBBEAN

The Gender Empowerment measure was introduced in 1995 along with its counterpart – the Gender-related Development Index (GEM). These indicators, derived from the Human Development Index (HDI) were put forward as alternative measures of social

well-being to the traditional indicator – per capita gross domestic product (GDP). These indicators are useful attempts to measure changes in gender relations on a comparative basis. Like many similar indicators based on quantitative indices however, their ability to fully reflect the complexities of gender relations and human life is limited. For example the extent of violence against women or other issues related to sexuality and personal empowerment is not easily measured and reflected through such indices (Wieringa, 1996).

The GEM index, is derived from the following – the proportion of seats in parliament held by women; percentage of female legislators, senior officials and managers, percentage of female professional and technical workers and the ratio of estimated female to male earned income. This aggregated measure is supposed to show the extent of power and decision-making exercised by women in these societies. The GEM for the region are as follows:

Table 4: Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) Ranking for Selected Caribbean Countries, 2001

<i>Country</i>	<i>GEM Rank</i>	<i>GEM Value</i>	<i>% Seats in Parliament Held by Women</i>	<i>% Female Legislators, Senior Officials and Managers</i>	<i>% Female Professional &amp; Technical Workers</i>	<i>Ratio of Estimated Female to Male Earned Income</i>
Barbados	17	0.648	20.4	39	51	0.60
The Bahamas	19	0.639	19.6	30	45	0.35
Trinidad and Tobago	21	0.599	20.9	40	51	0.38
Belize	40	0.496	13.5	37	64	0.23

Source: UNDP, *Human Development Report 2001*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

The data presented above although not available for the entire region does suggest a relatively higher level of political and social participation, especially women’s “success” in climbing the bureaucratic ladder, than many other parts of the world. Beilstein

and Burgess (1996: 2) suggest the following possible reasons for this as, 1) the [relative] weakness of patriarchy, 2) the weakness of conservative forces, 3) universal education, 4) women's participation in the labour force and, 5) merit-based civil services. All of these are possibly true, but this issue would benefit from a much more comprehensive analysis than is possible in this paper.

ALTERNATIVE ORGANISING FOR POLITICAL  
PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

*Challenging the Party System*

Much has already been written on the non-woman friendly atmosphere of the Caribbean political culture. Commentators have already referred to the aggressive and confrontational style of masculine politics; the "dirty" and dishonest aspects of corruption and patronage which seem to be endemic to our system and the personal abuse and sexual and morality-related attacks to which women are often open. Indeed it can be argued that there are some women who can become very adept at this kind of politics and many of the women who do succeed become better at this kind of politics than some men. But this has always been and continues to be a minority.

At a Commonwealth conference on "Gender and Democracy" held in Namibia in February (2000) the participants came to many of these same conclusions. They also mentioned the sense of separation from their larger constituency of women felt by many of them on becoming party representatives. The existing party system in many societies acts as a device of separation rather than one of integration. Relatedly, the problem of "toeing the party line" as it is described in the Caribbean was also noted as a problem. For example:

A number of participants focused on the difficulties that could arise for women MPs through the competing claims on their loyalty. On the one hand there was the commitment to action on issues of special concern to women and, on the other, the need for party solidarity. Often the latter was given priority so that women could not always vote freely on gender-sensitive issues; there was

a discussion in this context of arrangements for “conscience voting” (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2000: 8).

The divide and rule policies of colonial regimes be they by race, ethnicity, colour, or political tribalism are often entrenched and reproduced by the party system, therefore politicians and citizens, whether they like it or not are involved in an overarching structure which forces us to act like tribal denizens during what is supposed to be a serious and rational process – national elections. In the Caribbean region the race-based political parties of Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana and the political tribalism characteristic of “garrison communities” in Jamaica are cases in point.

Thus, while Rita Abrahamsen notes that:

From Athens to nineteenth century England, democratic theory embodied a commitment to the ideals of participation, equality, tolerance and liberty, and today, these ideals are kept alive by the democratic theories of the political left (Held, 1987 and 1995; Pateman, 1970). Always situated more in the realm of the ideal and the possible rather than in the actual politics of existing democracies, these various theories regard democracy as much more than a method for selecting leaders and protecting the individual from the arbitrary power of government. Instead, participation is valued in its own right and for the benefits it brings to the individual and the community.... Through participation the individual becomes a public citizen, capable of distinguishing between her own private good and the good of the community (Abrahamsen, 2000: 69).

Yet the most significant characteristic of contemporary party political practice in the Caribbean is that of competition. This competitive context, discourages rather than encourages participation. In many parts of the region, established differences are hardened and defined creating huge lesions within societies and communities. They also provide the basis for the distribution of patronage, for political corruption and in Jamaica political violence. Women’s lack of political participation therefore is often not only the result of their exclusion but also a reflection of their disgust and repudiation of such a divisive and often violent arena. The question we need to ask therefore is – is it possible for

women to challenge this divisive structure at the same time as they become part of it?

The women's movement internationally has recognised the difficulties inherent in this process and have sought to develop non-partisan approaches towards women and party politics. In the Caribbean a number of examples have taken place such as – the Women's Political Caucus in Jamaica in the 1980s, the joint Women's Political Platform in Trinidad and Tobago just prior to the 1995 general election, The Women's Parliament Project in Suriname and the "Engendering Local Government" project of the NGO-Network during the 1999 local government elections. These were and are continuing historic and important developments in the struggle to increase women's representation in political leadership and to challenge the confrontational culture of politics, however, they still come up against the party system.

*The Women's Political Caucus – Jamaica and the Women's Parliament Project* – Suriname, were non-partisan projects of women aimed at facilitating and increasing women's political participation and representation in parliament and at forging political cooperation across party lines. In both of these programmes a training component was central. Women were trained in parliamentary procedure, drafting of legislation and motions and fielding questions to relevant authorities. The Jamaican experience is the basis of a training manual currently being developed for the region. While at one level challenging the adversarial character of "winner takes all" party politics, these attempts come up against decades of entrenched and violently maintained political divisions (in which women may also be implicated) against which their efforts may have limited impact.

In the May 2001 general elections held in Guyana, for example, the deep ethnic tensions between Indo and Afro-Guyanese and the related political parties proved so intractable that regional efforts at mediation and compromise were necessary to facilitate some level of ongoing governance. These tensions have a history going back over four decades where the struggle for political power through local influence and foreign intervention now reflects a clear racial/ethnic dimension. The Network of

NGO's for the Advancement of Women of Trinidad and Tobago was invited to work with women of Guyanese political parties in a Women's Political Forum initiative prior to the general elections, seeking to achieve the 30% level among candidates, and claimed some of the credit for the 20 women who became members of parliament. This achievement however was largely lost in the din of post-election controversy, violence and political crisis.

One positive outcome of this situation has been the painstaking work taking place by all political parties in Guyana to craft a new constitution which is less-alienating and more inclusive and in the end empowering. This process involved all interest groups, including women, party affiliated or not. In such efforts, these women activists can bring their experience of non-partisan organising to bear on this process as well as their dissatisfaction with the adversarial and violent culture and practice of politics as it has emerged. It is possible that out of the difficulties of Guyana, new more democratic and inclusive alternatives could emerge which would be useful for the rest of the region. This is left to be seen.

*The Women's Political Platform –  
Trinidad and Tobago, 1995*

Just three weeks after the experience of the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing, a snap election was called in Trinidad and Tobago 13 months before its due date. *Caribbean Women and Politics* had been the title of one of the workshops organised by CAFRA, focal point for Caribbean NGO participation at the conference. It is not surprising therefore that Trinidadian CAFRA members, fresh from this experience called a meeting which brought together a multi-ethnic, cross-class coalition of women of different organisations to form the Women's Political Platform (WPF). Organisations included on this platform included – the National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE), The Hindu Women's Organisation, Women Working for Social Progress (Working women), The NGO Network and local members of CAFRA itself.

The main achievements of the WPF was to present for the first time a non-partisan coalition of women in a context of

divisive ethnically-based party politics. A lobbying pamphlet entitled *10 Points to Power* was produced which started with a preamble and listed ten (10) demands which were to be presented to all political parties. As summarised by Diana Wells:

The pamphlet positioned the coalition in significant ways. Challenging dominant national perceptions, it stated that “all issues are women’s issues, and that women’s issues are of national importance.” The coalition called for women to “come together in solidarity” but went on to say, “We recognize our differences and reject the politics of divide and rule which have shaped and deepened ethnic tensions among the people of Trinidad and Tobago (Women’s Political Platform, 1985).

The ten points were as follows:

1. Increased participation of women in political decision-making
2. An end to the culture of violence and violence against women
3. Equality of opportunity in employment
4. The economic system must serve the people
5. Adequate health, education and public assistance
6. Support for working mothers, the aged and disabled
7. A Code of Ethics for all persons holding public office
8. Confront the drug problem
9. Promote our Caribbean cultural identity
10. Incorporate gender analysis into all policies and programmes.

This document was then disseminated in a number of ways, for example through national newspaper coverage and nightly television news analysis. Efforts were made to hold meetings with all political party leaders. This only occurred with the then leader of the opposition Mr. Basdeo Panday who subsequently became prime minister. A coffee morning was organised for women candidates of all political parties to meet with women and the Political Platform. In an effort to have free and open discussion beyond party positions, the press was not invited. In the aftermath of the elections which resulted in a 17-17-2 split, platform members saw this as an opportunity to “re-dye the cloth” and move “closer than ever before to equality in political decision-making and access to resources” (Wells, 1998: 17). This however was not meant to be.

In analysing this development, Diana Wells, based on her own gender analysis of inter-ethnic social networks among women, argued that while political leadership is clearly associated with manhood – competition, rhetoric and patronage, motherhood is an equally unifying concept. She continues:

The gender-specific role of mother as care-giver seems to be linked to cross-racial alliances and identifications that counteract racial stereotypes. First important relationships with a person of a different ethnic group for both men and women often came in the form of a mother's friend or neighbor who "cared for me like a second mother". Therefore, while male political campaigning is about ethnic campaigning, women political leaders can speak in a way that cross-cuts ethnic divisions (Wells, 1998: 19).

It is the moral authority of motherhood she argues which provides women with the opportunity to speak beyond ethnic boundaries, as the women in the Women's Political Platform were able to do.

*The Engendering Local Government Project -  
Trinidad and Tobago*

In the continuing post-Beijing efforts at increasing women's political participation, local government was identified as space for the strategic intervention of women in politics. This challenge was taken up by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Local Government Association and a workshop on Engendering Local government was held in St. Lucia in July 1997. Following on this the NGO Network of Trinidad and Tobago, developed a strategy in relation to the 1999 Local Government Elections. As a non-partisan initiative, activities included training programmes, joint publicity focusing on women candidates, lobbying political leaders to name women as candidates, and provision of small financial grants to assist with campaigning.

This programme was innovative in that for the first time, women were made a focus of local government and its significance for women and gender issues was highlighted. It was also interesting as it focussed on a non-partisan alliance of party women at a time of highly partisan confrontation. At the end of this campaign, the Network and its leader Hazel Brown claimed victory as 91



women candidates were named by the two political parties in contrast to 41 during the previous campaign. In addition more women were either elected or nominated to serve on the various regional or municipal councils (InterPress Service, *World News*, 27.9.2000).

#### CONCLUSION

What is presented above suggests that in the Anglophone Caribbean, the struggles for democratization have a long and uneven history. Movements for women's rights have always had to integrate concerns based on race/ethnicity, class, nationality and anti-colonialism/imperialism. In the current heightened context of political and economic neo-liberalism, and the resulting feelings of powerlessness within the region, the emphasis may have shifted away from transforming the system to coming to terms with the realities of the political system. The reality is that most of the change which has been effected has been the result of pressure from those outside the system rather than from pressure within it.

In a context of liberal democracy, having access to political office is a basic human right to which all women who are desirous should have access. But while this is an important aspect of the democratization process it is inadequate. The role of women's organisations, critical men's organisations, social movements and alternative strategies will continue to be important as we seek to challenge the inequitable structures in our political and economic systems, our communities and our households. In so doing, it is imperative that we seek to create new, more participatory, inclusive, empowering and enabling alternatives This struggle as you can see in the Caribbean continues.

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