

# An Historical and Contemporary Overview of Gendered Caribbean Relations

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper presents a broad overview of historical and contemporary gender and social class relations in the British, French, and Spanish Caribbean islands focusing primarily on Afro-Caribbean people. It begins with a discussion of gendered relations during slavery and then investigates gender roles post emancipation. Next, multiple aspects of contemporary West Indian family life are addressed including the prevalence of matrifocal households and child shifting. The important roles played by Caribbean female household heads are discussed in the context of patriarchy. Highlights include the significance of the maternal role over the marital, socializing youth, particular negative expectations each sex holds of the other, customary sexual behavior, as well as common relationship types. Varying aspects of women's behavior according to social class is touched upon followed by a brief synopsis of the status of Caribbean women on measures of educational and work force participation rates; finally, a summary of the dearth of active women's movements in the region is addressed. The paper provides an introduction to the intimate and working lives of Caribbean women and men.*

**Key words:** Gender, Caribbean, women, sexuality, social class

## 1. Introduction

This paper presents an overview of historical and contemporary gender relations in the West Indies focusing primarily on working class Afro-Caribbean people of the English, French and Spanish-speaking islands. It opens with a discussion of the ethnic heritage of the region before describing the jobs and intimate lives of slaves during the plantation era. Post emancipation, new educational and occupational opportunities arose for former slaves, yet were restricted according to a slave's gender and age. The ability of the West Indian female to economically and socially support her family is emphasized in the paper as many working-class Caribbean men are either absent from family life or are underrepresented. The remainder of the discussion broadly addresses the domestic and public lives of working class Afro-Caribbean men and women, with some attention paid to those of other ethnic backgrounds and social classes.

### 1.1 Gender and Slavery

Gender in the Caribbean has been shaped by the region's cultural diversity. The majority of the region's people today descended from enslaved Africans. Traces of African beliefs and customs, combined with European mores, and family forms that existed under slavery, have all contributed to what it means to be a man or woman in the Caribbean today. These mixtures have been further enriched by the heritage of indigenous Amerindian populations and the influence of immigrants from the Middle East and Asia.

From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century African men and women were forcibly brought to the Caribbean to work as slaves (Rogozinski 1992). When a sugar plantation system developed in the French colony of Martinique and the English colony of Barbados beginning in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, the exploitation of enslaved people reached a new level of precision and rigor, with particular tasks assigned by age and sex (Mintz 1985). Boys and girls as young as four years old collected vines on plantations. By the age of eight, children began hoeing and weeding the fields.

Certain jobs were available to either sex on plantations, while other tasks were sex specific. Adults of both sexes labored in field gangs on sugar plantations, in the master's house as domestic slaves, and as petty traders. Only male slaves could hold elite, skilled positions as field commanders or as artisans. Slave women mainly worked as

domestics, hucksters, petty traders, and as unskilled laborers. In French and English colonies, female slaves made up more than half of sugar estate field hands. Slave men and women maintained small gardens on plots of plantation land and either consumed these crops or sold their produce at weekend slave markets or to the master (Brown-Glaude 2011). Throughout slavery, men and women participated in resistance movements and in direct acts of rebellion against slave owners (Gmelch and Gmelch 2012).

White men in the Caribbean frequently used female slaves as their sexual concubines. They married white women but often had affairs with mixed race or black women. If a slave became pregnant by her master, he would often free his mixed race child. Children were considered to be the property of their mother's owner.

Slaves did not often have exclusive sexual relations with one person, but instead had children by different partners (Gmelch and Gmelch 2012; Senior 1991). Yet, child bearing was discouraged under slavery as it reduced the time a woman could work in the fields. Some pregnant slaves would try to abort their fetuses or commit infanticide to avoid raising their children as slaves. If a slave woman gave birth, she might have an older female slave look after her baby while she worked in the fields or she might simply work with her infant tied to her back under the scorching Caribbean sun.

Some scholars argue that enslaved men's lack of power over their families has affected male family roles in the Caribbean today (Senior 1991). Families existed under slavery, but ultimate power over the household rested in the hands of slave owners. Slave mothers were the sole recognized parent; paternity was not considered to matter unless the father of the child was the slave master.

In the British Caribbean colonies a loosening of restrictions against slave marriages at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century did not increase marriage rates. In the Spanish and French Caribbean colonies, slaves were already allowed to have church weddings and when British colonial masters instituted a similar policy, they also encouraged slaves to have children. However no noticeable reduction in slaves having children or sexual unions outside of marriage occurred once the ban on slave marriage was lifted.

### **1.2 Gender Roles After Emancipation**

After the abolition of slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Caribbean societies became very stratified and sexual inequality increased. Many male laborers migrated from British West Indian colonies either permanently or in search of seasonal work, leaving women to run homes and support their families (Momsen 1993; Safa 1986). Concurrently, women were excluded from elite political or economic roles; instead many worked as maids, as higglers, and as dressmakers. Women also continued to work alongside men in the fields as plantation laborers.

In Cuba, women generally, but women of color especially, enjoyed few political, civil, or educational rights in the years after emancipation. Racial and gender ideologies restricted their occupational choices. White Cuban women mainly worked in gender-specific professions such as teaching or did not work, whereas black and mixed race Cuban women filled low-status jobs in agriculture or as domestic servants. Urban women had higher rates of employment than did rural women, but men were employed at much higher rates than women overall. Some poor, unskilled rural women concentrated outside of cities such as Havana to work as prostitutes. Immigrant Spanish men began replacing Cuban women as domestic servants, which had been women's primary means of employment at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Pérez 1995).

### **1.3 Family Life and Matrifocality**

The Afro-Caribbean family is characterized by low rates of legal marriage, high rates of illegitimate children, and the centrality of the mother-child bond rather than the husband-wife bond (Mohammed and Perkins 1999; Senior 1991). In the Eastern Caribbean, almost 70 percent of children are born into non-nuclear families.

Socioeconomic class shapes family life considerably. Elite Haitian women with the necessary means have upscale Catholic weddings in large churches. Upper class West Indians on the English and Spanish-speaking islands aspire to do the same (Sobo 1993).

In Haiti, the tradition known as *plasaj* is the most common marital relationship type among peasants and the urban lower class (Mintz and Davenport 1961). *Plasaj* is defined by an economic and sexual arrangement in which the man is required to cultivate a plot of land for his wife and to provide her with a house. Although the government does not recognize such unions as legitimate, those who engage in this practice consider it normal.

Throughout the Caribbean, women often raise children that are not their biological offspring to help other families cope with challenging economic circumstances. This practice is known as child shifting or informal adoption, among other names. It occurs so that children may enjoy better living conditions than they would in their birth home. If a mother cannot support some or all of her children, she may send them to a female relative or even to well-off strangers to be raised (Safa 1995; Senior 1991; Sobo 1993). This is a business arrangement through which disadvantaged children are fed, schooled, and clothed by their new caregiver. The children are sometimes forced to take on a servant role in their new family, including doing errands or housework. In Haiti, children who are forced into servitude are known as *restaveks*. In adulthood, West Indians are obligated to support those who have raised them.

The matrifocal family is common throughout the Caribbean. The term originally described the domestic organization of Guyanese coastal villages in the early 1950s (Smith 1996). In a matrifocal household, the mother is the center of the domestic sphere and men tend to be marginalized. Mothers and their children form the basis of the family unit. Women are the main economic providers and decision makers regarding the emotional and subsistence needs of household members. Men may live in the home, but sometimes are entirely absent. Women rely on female family members, such as their siblings or their mothers, to help care for the family. In matrifocal households, economic circumstances vary. In some households women may have complete control over their income and spending money, whereas in others they are the primary but not the only household money earners. Although women form the center of these households, it is not a matriarchal system. If a man is present in the home, women often defer to his authority.

Scholars debate the causes of the prevalence of matrifocal households in the modern Caribbean. Some point to cultural traits retained from Africa, while others underline high rates of male migration and male unemployment or underemployment in the region. Still others argue these patterns are the long-term results of slavery and poverty (Barrow 1988, 1996; Cole 1997).

#### **1.4 Household Heads**

The household head is the final decision maker about the affairs of the house. Household headship in the Caribbean is determined by a number of variables, such as who owns the family house or who supports the people who reside in it. Nevertheless, gender plays an important role. Men are generally considered to be the head of the household in the Caribbean; women are only considered to be household head if a male is absent from the home (Chevannes 1998). Often, if an adult male lives in the house, such as a woman's brother, father, or cousin, he is considered the household head.

The Caribbean has a long history of female-headed households. West Indian women have been economically contributing to their households since the slavery period and male unemployment in the region is widespread and recurring. Women head between 30 to 50 percent of all Caribbean households (Senior 1991). Female household heads have the highest labor force participation rate of any West Indian group (Safa 1986). Poor women in charge of households often support multiple generations.

The majority of Caribbean female household heads are over 45 years old. Many are poor women who have never married, attended primary school only, hold low paying jobs in the service sector, and have low social status (Ellis 2003; Senior 1991). Many households of this type include children by different fathers who do not provide adequate financial support for their offspring. Women supporting these families use a variety of economic strategies such as taking odd jobs, depending on friends and neighbors for material goods, and allocating their resources carefully.

Female household headship has been increasing in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico since the 1960s (Safa 1995). This increase in the rate of female headship in the Spanish-speaking islands has been attributed to various factors such as high teenage pregnancy rates, an increase in divorce rates, and the persistence of common-law unions in which men and women live together but are not legally joined. A woman's ability to earn as much as a man of her socioeconomic class has also contributed to the regional increase in female household heads.

### **1.5 Workforce Participation and Power Relations**

Despite these patterns of strong female involvement in family life, Caribbean societies generally remain patriarchal and male-dominated (Ellis 2003). Many Caribbean people cite the Bible to justify their belief that men rather than women should hold political and religious power (Chevannes 1998). Yet, a struggle exists between the sexes as men are slowly losing some of their privileged positions in Caribbean society. Overall Caribbean women hold fewer positions at the highest levels of political, economic, and religious decision making than do men (Senior 1991). Although many women are in the workforce, they hold fewer positions, particularly in the formal economic sector, than do men.

In Haiti especially, women tend to be less well educated than men. Teenage boys in Haiti are more likely to attend secondary school than girls their age and Haitian working class men are more likely to be literate than Haitian women at the same social level. Legally, women are treated as second-class citizens with certain legal codes dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century still in use. Rates of violence against women are high in Haiti, especially in urban areas such as Port-au-Prince.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the growth of offshore industry and export-processing zones in the Caribbean created job opportunities in countries such as Barbados, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. Women's labor force participation rates rose, as they began working in low-paid garment factory jobs producing clothes for the United States. In the Dominican Republic, women's labor force participation rates rose from only nine percent in 1963 to 38 percent in 1990; rates were highest for urban women. Female employees tended to be older women who lacked formal education. Women began replacing men as the principle breadwinners in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic (Safa 1986). Prior to the Cuban Revolution, only 13 percent of Cuban women worked outside of the household but since the 1970s, they have entered the work force in increasing numbers. In 1986, women composed 38 percent of the Cuban labor force, although they earn significantly less than male workers. In English-speaking Trinidad and Tobago approximately 45 percent of women participated in the labor force in 1995 in comparison to 76 percent of men.

Women also make up a large percentage of the work force in the informal economy, where they are employed as petty traders, hucksters, hairdressers, seamstresses, traders, and day care center and restaurant owners (Brown-Glaude 2011). In Barbados and Grenada more women are employed in the informal than the formal economic sector.

The erosion of traditional male power in the Caribbean is due to more than economic shifts. Global forces such as the international women's movement and exposure to foreign media have contributed to a growing power struggle between men and women.

These changes have led scholars of the region to suggest that West Indian masculine identity is in crisis (Safa 2001). Cultural norms enforce patriarchy and male authority. Yet a man's authority in black and mixed race Caribbean households is mainly dependent on his earning capacity and this is threatened by the independence women gain through earning their own income. Sociologists see some men responding to the erosion in their power through acts of domestic violence, high rates of alcoholism and/or drug abuse, spending time away from their families in rum shops, or by having sexual partnerships outside of their primary relationship (Ellis 1986; Mondesire and Dublin 1996; Senior 1991).

### **1.6 Motherhood**

Sociologists and anthropologists report that throughout the Caribbean, the maternal role is more valued than the marital role (Barrow 1996; Rubenstein 1987; Senior 1991). Approximately 75 percent of Caribbean women have children. In many of these societies, having children is necessary in order to be considered a woman (Mohammed and Perkins 1999). Children are highly valued for the comfort and company they provide, and childbearing is associated with companionship, femininity, and receiving emotional support. Children's accomplishments increase their mother's social status. Here as in other parts of the world, the lower and working classes have traditionally seen children as a key to economic security when they can no longer work, since children are expected to support their aging parents.

Rates of teenage pregnancy are high in the Caribbean. Teenage mothers often have their mothers or other older female relatives care for their children while they continue their education or work. Some scholars estimate that 75 to 80 percent of children in the West Indies are born to unmarried parents. Middle and upper class Caribbean

people tend to marry before having children. The same is not true among the lower classes, though informal traditions, like the Haitian practice of *plasaj*, can support enduring family relationships.

### **1.7 Socialization**

Throughout the Caribbean, young girls are treated more strictly than are boys in order to prepare them to take charge of a household. Studies in the English-speaking Caribbean, for example, show that before the age of five, boys and girls play together. At around five years, girls begin to do domestic tasks under their mother's guidance. Boys continue to play, but help with certain outdoor tasks such as fetching water and firewood or caring for animals (Birth 1993; Brown and Chevannes 1998; Senior 1991). While girls are kept closer to home, boys move more freely in public space (Brown and Chevannes 1998; Fog Olwig 1993; Rubenstein 1987). During childhood, girls are taught that their proper position in life is to serve a man (Senior 1991); boys learn that their proper place is outside of the home. While girls help with household chores, boys may socialize outdoors by playing sports such as cricket or basketball or chatting on street corners. Girls' outdoor activities often occur at school and on the playground before it gets dark.

These studies show that West Indian girls are socialized to be independent, competitive, resourceful and aggressive. Obedience and good manners are important for both sexes, but girls' behavior is more closely monitored. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely than girls to receive corporal punishment, which has traditionally been believed to strengthen boys in their development toward adulthood (Mondesire and Dublin 1996).

Studies show that adults in the English-speaking Caribbean think of their mothers as more loving and understanding than are fathers. In their role as fathers, men spend a lot of time correcting their children's behavior and asserting their authority. Caribbean men appear to have a hard time openly expressing love toward their children (Chevannes 2001; Clarke 1957). Men do not have many role models of male affectionate behavior and are not socialized to be openly affectionate.

The social science literature on the English-speaking Caribbean suggests that in many households, fathers are absent, children are strictly raised, and mothers act as both satisfiers and deprivers of children's needs (Senior 1991). Mothers often coddle their sons and do not socialize them to be independent (Ellis 1986). Additionally, many boys lack a male role model in the home. Boys are often highly dependent on their mothers, and later their girlfriends and wives, for taking care of household chores because they are not taught necessary skills (Brown and Chevannes 1998; Sobo 1993). Mothers are both the main sources of emotional support as well as punishment and behavior correction for their sons.

Attitude studies in the English-speaking Caribbean show that many people believe sexuality is innate and uncontrollable. It is expected that boys will want to have sex; if they do not, they are considered to be abnormal. Boys have sexual freedom and are generally encouraged to experiment sexually, whereas girls may be beaten if they are suspected of pursuing sex.

### **1.8 Views and Expectations Each Sex Holds of the Other; Gender Roles**

Throughout the Caribbean, men are perceived as irresponsible in their roles as husbands and as fathers, among the lower and middle classes. In the Dutch Antilles, West Indian women describe men as irresponsible, domineering, and constantly pursuing new sexual conquests. Women throughout the English-speaking Caribbean report that men are unreliable, unfaithful, physically violent, mentally cruel, and financially irresponsible (Senior 1991). In St. Kitts, women complain about male behavior and not receiving deserved financial support. In Jamaica, women describe men as financially irresponsible (Douglass 1992). In Antigua, women describe men as undependable and irresponsible, particularly when it comes to providing for their children (Aymer 1997). Women tend to be cynical, yet resigned toward male behavior. Since women rarely reject men or male behavior, females often appear to be weak in intimate relationships.

Caribbean men perceive Caribbean women to be avaricious, materialistic, and calculating (Barrow 1986). Jamaican men describe women as greedy, sexually insatiable individuals who trade sex for economic support. Men believe that women want to marry solely for financial support (Sobo 1993).

Calypso lyrics, a popular form of musical expression in the English-speaking Caribbean, depict relationships between men and women as uneasy. According to Senior (1991), while men are portrayed as having large sexual appetites, women are represented as being untrustworthy, manipulative tricksters who victimize men by taking their money.

Studies of gender attitudes in the English-speaking Caribbean show that men expect their female partners to cook and clean, to be respectful toward them in public, to practice monogamy, to raise their children, to contribute toward and manage the household finances, and to treat their friends well. Women generally accept these standards. West Indian women expect men to provide money for the household and their children, to treat the children well, to be affectionate, to not be physically abusive, and to not spend money on other women or gambling (Brown and Chevannes 1998).

This scholarship suggests that an important aspect of Caribbean manhood is being perceived as sexually skilled (Smith 1996). Such skills are primarily measured by the number of lovers a man has and by the number of children. A man's reputation and power increase in relation to the number of sexual partners he has (Sobo 1993). Throughout the region it is common for married and unmarried men to have multiple sexual partners (Chevannes 1998; Mohammed and Perkins 1999; Smith 1988). This is often described as being due to men's "biological" nature (Ellis 2003). Religious beliefs and doctrines are also used to reinforce such gender stereotypes. Men often have concurrent multiple sexual partners; women engage in this practice much less frequently. If Caribbean women have multiple concurrent sexual relationships, they are punished through negative moral judgment and gossip; such behavior is not viewed as acceptable for women by either sex (Lazarus-Black 1994; Senior 1991).

### **1.9 Visiting Relationships, Common-Law Unions, and Marriage**

Perhaps because of the negative gender stereotypes described above, unions requiring the least amount of commitment are the most prevalent in the region. Marriage is the least common form of partnership in the English-speaking West Indies, followed by common-law unions, and visiting relationships, which are the most common union types (Lange and Rodman 1992).

Visiting relationships are recognized as the first stage in preparing for a more permanent relationship in the West Indies. About one-fourth of women in the Anglophone Caribbean, most of whom are in their teens to mid-twenties, engage in this type of union, which is broadly similar to the Haitian tradition of *plasaj* (Senior 1991). In a visiting relationship, the man and woman retain separate residences but spend time together occasionally. Female partners often continue to live in their childhood home, although some women establish their own households. If couples in visiting unions have children, the man is expected to contribute financially to the maintenance of his children and their home. Women in visiting relationships are not provided with any legal protection, but claim to prefer this union type above common-law or legal marriage, due to the freedom and independence it provides (Moses 1981). Women maintain complete control over their finances and may be involved in sequential visiting relationships to help increase support for their families.

Poor women in their mid-twenties to their mid-forties are often in common-law relationships. In this union type, a man and woman live together without having undergone a legal ceremony. Most of these households are under the control of the male partner. In daily life, little difference between a common-law union and a legal marriage exists. Men are expected to support their families economically, while women are responsible for taking care of the home, their husbands, and their children. Women and their children are not granted the legal protection they would receive if married and either partner can end the arrangement at any time. Women often accept outside economic support from family members to supplement their household income (Senior 1991).

Legal marriage is the third type of union found in the Caribbean. It is the most desired union type among Caribbean women. Yet, the rate of marriage among working class English-speaking West Indians is low because it is quite difficult to achieve economic stability. Love is not considered to be a prerequisite for marriage. Marriage is symbolic of upward mobility among lower-class Jamaicans (Barrow 1996; Clarke 1957; Sobo 1993); in Antigua, it is associated with living a Christian life (Lazarus-Black 1994). In Haiti and in many other Caribbean island nations, the desire to be married is prevalent among all social classes.

In the Anglophone Caribbean, working class women often marry after their reproductive period has ended and their partners have achieved economic stability (Gardner 1974). In order to marry, a man should be able to provide his wife with a home and support her and their children. Once married, women rely on their husbands,

not their kin group, for economic support. In the same countries, middle-class women rarely have children by different men, nor do they frequently engage in common law relationships, as is common among lower class West Indian women. They tend to marry earlier in life than lower class women and remain married. They often work outside of the home, which provides their family with a double income. For middle-class Caribbean men, marriage often means renouncing having multiple sexual relationships.

A strong division of labor exists in Caribbean marriages. Women engage in light domestic tasks whereas men do heavy outside labor. Caribbean men report they marry women for sexual satisfaction and for tending to their domestic needs; women state they look for men to economically support them and their children (Barrow 1986; Prior 1987).

### **1.10 Socioeconomic Class**

As marriage practices and attitudes suggest, gender roles in most Caribbean societies are quite class-specific. Traditionally, middle-class women have been financially supported by their husbands and are expected to act like “ladies” by being sweet, patient, well groomed, light-skinned, and sexually monogamous. Their use of language is expected to reflect their social and educational level; this includes avoiding using Creole and swears words. Stereotypically, poor women enjoy more freedom in their movements and demeanor. They often speak loudly, wear bright colors, use patois, live independently from men, act aggressively, and are generally darker-skinned than middle class women (Douglass 1992).

The behavior of upper-class Caribbean men is often more varied and better tolerated than is women’s. They tend to be more involved with family life than are lower class men. Yet, upper-class male public behavior often parallels that of lower-class men in that both upper- and lower-class men enjoy drinking alcohol, playing dominoes, gambling, and entertaining an audience by telling stories and jokes.

### **1.11 Global Status of Caribbean Women**

In comparison to other world regions, most Caribbean countries have a relatively high per capita income. Children have full access to primary and secondary schools and women form a large part of the labor force. Yet many Caribbean countries lack decent childcare or continuing education facilities that could assist women in becoming empowered. More girls than boys attend secondary school in the Caribbean, and in the region’s English-speaking countries girls often outperform boys on high school exams. Yet fewer girls than boys take higher-level A-level exams that are a prerequisite for entrance into the English university system. Currently boys’ performance at school is falling below that of girls at all grade levels.

Women participate in the labor force at lower rates than do Caribbean men, especially in the formal economic sector. In most territories, women have higher unemployment rates than do men (Senior 1991). Men and women earn similar salaries in the public sector. Yet, overall, men earn higher salaries for performing the same work as women; this is especially true in the private sector. Labor force participation rates are higher in the English-speaking than in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean (Safa 1995).

### **1.12 Women’s Movements in the Caribbean**

A strong women’s movement does not exist in the Caribbean. Concerns over class and race supersede concerns about gender in the region.

In Cuba, it proved difficult to establish an independent feminist movement, even under the Cuban Revolution. In the early 1960s, the Revolution established the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) to involve women in the defense of the revolution. In these years, women entered the labor force in increasing numbers as volunteer sugar producers, teachers, and administrators. Yet these new public roles clashed with women’s traditional responsibilities at home. The Family Code of 1974 was meant to govern Cuban family relations by describing the responsibilities of married couples. But men resisted the code, which left Cuban women doubly burdened by their jobs both inside and outside of the household. Divorce rates rose. Traditional gender roles attitudes remain strong in Cuba. Women there are expected to be mothers, housewives, spouses, and workers (Pérez 1995).

Other countries have traditions of women’s activism. In the 1950s the Mirabal sisters became nationally known in the Dominican Republic for leading resistance to the government of Rafael Trujillo. In the 1970s and 1980s, women’s activist and support groups proliferated in the Caribbean, such as the Red Thread Movement of Guyana

and Sistren Women's Theater Collective in Jamaica (Sistren 1986). These groups mobilized around issues of sexual violence, wife battery, sexual harassment in the workplace, teaching job skills, and educating women on their rights.

However, most women in the Caribbean are not politically active. Women tend to concentrate on chronic socioeconomic pressures and household needs rather than on their rights as women. Female trade union and political efforts are not generally well received and tend to be localized and focus on immediate needs, rather than attempting to address larger issues of inequality such as class or gender imbalances. Aside from high rates of church group membership, Caribbean women have low membership rates in formal political organizations (Clarke 1957; Safa 1996).

In spite of the obstacles to gender equality in the Caribbean, in the late twentieth century several women did rise to leadership of their country. Dame Eugenia Charles of Dominica was elected to serve three terms from 1980-1995 as the first Caribbean female prime minister (Higbie 1993). Ertha Pascal-Trouillot, a former chief justice of the Haitian Supreme Court, was named president of Haiti from March 1990 through February 1991. Janet Jagan served as president of Guyana from December 1997 through August 1999. All three female leaders came from privileged backgrounds so that social class made it possible for them to achieve leadership roles that might otherwise have been closed to them because of their gender. Charles and Pascal-Trouillot were both lawyers before entering the political arena. Jagan, a native of the United States, entered Guyanese politics through marrying Cheddi Jagan, who would become Premier and eventually President of Guyana.

More recently, Portia Simpson-Miller was elected the first female Prime Minister of Jamaica in March 2006. Her selection as leader of Jamaica's People's National Party appears to have been influenced by a combination of gender and class-related issues. Her identity as a woman and a member of the urban working class initially made her a popular choice among supporters of both major political parties. Yet, Simpson-Miller was unable to retain her leadership position. The Jamaican Labour Party narrowly defeated the People's National Party on September 3, 2007, forcing Simpson-Miller to step down. So while women are slowly making strides up the political ladder, there is still a long way to go before full gender equality will be achieved.

### **1.13 Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to familiarize the reader with a historical and contemporary outline of gendered relations in the West Indies. While working class Afro-Caribbean women exercise much power and control in the domestic sphere, in the public sphere a lack of equality remains. Broadly speaking, men are still overly represented in the formal West Indian economy and more young men than young women sit for the A-level examinations, which are a prerequisite for university admission in the Anglophone Caribbean. A number of working class women withstand male infidelity in order to continue to receive economic support, and sexual relationships are often more instrumentally than emotionally based among the lower classes. Motherhood is more highly valued than marriage for many West Indian women. Children are socialized according to stereotypical Western gender roles and an underlying antagonism exists between the sexes. Yet, as societies change the possibility of greater female involvement in positions of power remains.

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