

**No Woman No Cry:
Understanding Women's Incremental Gains and the Transformative
Potential of Feminism within Twentieth Century Jamaica**

Beverly Shirley

**GEM-IWG WP 06-17
November 2006**

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the incrementality of women's gains within state patriarchal ideologies, as well as within the politico-historical processes of Jamaican social, economic and political institutions. It is an attempt to understand the piecemeal institutional shifts and the ways in which the singularity of institutional shifts could not in itself close the gap between the differential participation of women and men to bring true equality. The fact that the patriarchal ideologies which instruct concepts of identity and power relations were not altered despite institutional adjustments, highlights the importance of ideological shifts in moving women from the margins to be considered as a constituency, central to development processes. The argument is centered on the differential participation of women, and the role of the hegemonic state in undermining women's citizenship through its laws. The paper therefore focuses on male resistance to women's carte blanche access to the reserves of men, and the extent to which that resistance denied women social, economic and political power.

Beverly Shirley is an MPhil/PhD (Governance) candidate at the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies, at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona Campus, Jamaica. Her dissertation is entitled "*The Transformative Potential of Caribbean Feminisms within Governance Structures: A Comparative Analysis with Guyana, Barbados, Trinidad & Jamaica in the 1970s*". She also works at the Centre for Gender and Development Studies at the UWI.

No Woman No Cry: Understanding Women’s Incremental Gains and the Transformative Potential of Feminism within Twentieth Century Jamaica

Legalizing Discrimination

The use of law to govern gender in early twentieth century Jamaica exploited femininity and assisted in inculcating the ideologies that de-valued women’s participation and contribution within the institutions of the state. Within colonial pre-independent Jamaica, the Registration of Voters Law of 1908 ceded voting rights only to men. The discriminatory principles within the Law disqualified the majority from voting by imposing high earning and income qualifications which, enfranchised only a select group of men, disenfranchising both groups of men and all women. This situation continued over a decade, when the Law was amended in 1919 to enfranchise women, though imposing higher qualifications for women than their male counterparts. In order to exclude the majority of women, Law 22: The Registration of Voters Law required: a) that women should be literate, and b) that they should be paying property taxes of not less than two pounds which was twice the one-pound requirement for their male counterparts. The law also barred women from sitting on Parochial Boards, and from becoming members of the Legislative Council.

Brush (2003) in an analysis of the state in relation to laws and policies, observed that the state as an apparatus of rule would be guided by historical processes that reflect a ‘particular set of power relations in civil society’. Brush’s (2003) analysis may be applied within the context of Caribbean political history to underscore the use of power within the historicity of colonial governance. This governance discriminated against and oppressed particular groups based on gender, class and race, while endorsing the hegemonic rule of others. Connell (1987) commented on the role of the state and its use of power in the institutionalization of hegemonic masculinity, as the state embraces the relations of power as well as the political processes in which “patriarchy is both constructed and contested”. A reasonable assumption based on Connell’s observation would be then that the state, by virtue of its masculinist and patriarchal orientation, would invariably hinder women from participating on an equal basis with their male counterparts. It would then be inevitable that

within the context of Jamaica, the colonial state would support and apply sexist practices across all social groupings of women.

It may be argued that poor women would be even more vulnerable to discrimination and abuse, given that they lack the economic independence to challenge the relations of power within state institutions, as well as those within their own domestic sphere. But the fact that the enfranchisement extended only to literate, propertied women highlights the extent to which the colonialist discriminatory attitudes stood resolute against the female black majority even within post-emancipation Jamaica. The law therefore supported a piecemeal system of conferring rights and opportunities based on sex, class and race, and in its application, institutionalized the differential participation of women within the political process. The fact that women's access to political rights was deliberately made difficult emphasizes the unwillingness of the state to cede opportunities and rights to women, but more importantly suggests that women's gains should be incremental and narrow. The difficulty of women's access to political rights also suggests that the androcentric state legitimated the differential treatment of women's citizenship, and assisted in inculcating the ideologies that undervalue women's contribution and participation in economic development.

Linnette Vassell's (1993) compilation of women's perspectives during the era elucidates that the patriarchal state did not just confer suffrage rights on women, but that it was catalyzed through the social mobilization of women who advocated for those rights. Vassell (1993) revealed a letter that was submitted to the editor of the *Daily Gleaner* by Nellie Latrielle, which has been excerpted:

“We must teach our people as the English women are taught, what the votes mean, what its advantages will be for them and for their children, how it will help them to help their sister woman, and to place her where she has never been placed before in this island of Jamaica. It is not far to say unless they manifest interest it will be withheld. Agitate for the interest to be awakened...” (Nellie Latrielle: 1918)

Vassell's (1993) anthology of women's experiences and perspectives, *Voices of Women in Jamaica*, disclosed Latrielle's own disenfranchisement under the law, as she was not propertied though literate. Latrielle's letter pointed to her vision for women's political

autonomy and her own conviction concerning the significance of suffrage to women's agency and political freedom. Latrielle's (1918) envisioning of the benefits to be achieved from the granting of suffrage as to 'how it will help them to help their sister woman' highlighted a futuristic notion of the strategic positioning of women through shifts in political institutions. Her reference to English women and their suffrage rights pulls into sharp focus the nexus between Britain and Jamaica, and the ways in which that relationship instructed the public discourse which would have served to strengthen the case of the local lobbyists. Within the writings of Vassell (1993), it was clear that women's gains were also assisted by pro-feminist men, such as the editor of the local newspaper Herbert George DeLisser, as well as a member of the Legislative Council, Hubert Simpson. But they met with bitter opposition. The fact that a few influential men supported women's political positions may have assisted the women's movement in permeating the seemingly monolithic state, and in bringing about the eventual piecemeal institutional shift that facilitated women's political participation.

The fact however that the post colonial state would have derived its socio-cultural characteristics from colonialism highlights the ways in which legacies of sexism have influenced contemporary understandings, and corroborates with and legitimates the argument of Linden Lewis (2002) concerning the masculinist nature of the post-colonial state in its orientation and policy. The argument may be construed to explain hegemonic masculinity and the exclusion of women from political processes, through the institutionalization of sexist methodologies, understandable within colonial historicism within the Caribbean. Lewis described the exclusion and marginalization of women as forms of violence against women perpetrated by the state. He stated:

“...violence is endemic to the system we have inherited and seek to reproduce. It is manifested in the nature and operations of the state. Violence has to do with the deprivation of rights. Exclusion of women and marginalized men from participation in the major decision-making processes...” (Lewis: 2002)

Mills (1998) referred to masculinity within the colonial context as “extreme and excessive” as it emphasized the kind of patriotism required from colonial subjects. This argument may then be used to shed some light on the political power dynamics within the

Legislative Council which would have fuelled the resistance, as well as the notions of incrementalism that restricted women's gains through the legislation. Male resistance in preserving exclusive rights to the political process underscore efforts to retain male privilege and power. This resistance also alludes to the ideologies that instruct male actions and their efforts to maintain women's differential participation in politics, even into contemporary times. This therefore suggests a legacy of thoughts and actions learned through Caribbean historico-socio-cultural progression that has not evolved sufficiently over time to transform the psyche of women and men to constructively shape the ideologies that inform gender politics. Brush (2003) and Connell (1987) discuss the state's role in shaping social patterns within the governance of gender, privileging and positioning masculinity in relation to femininity. The argument alludes to the allocation of rewards based on gender, and the devaluing of femininity to sustain masculinized structures of governance. Within the context of the Jamaican situation, women gained from the liberal feminist strategy which focused on legal shifts as imperative to the equality agenda, though piecemeal gains reflected the rigidity of the patriarchal state, challenging the women's movement in several ways. These challenges contest with women's own perspectives on identity, power and gender roles, which had implications then, and still have implications for instructing gender relations within contemporary times, evidenced by the women's movement's resistance and marginal support of Jamaica's first female Prime Minister in 2006. The inference here is that patriarchy has the capacity to co-opt women's support in the preservation of male privilege, and paradoxically govern gender, challenging the transformative potential of Jamaican feminism. In fact, in reference to suffrage, eighty seven years prior, men's understanding of women's political worth, citizenship and intellect, reflected in the literacy requirement and double tax imposition, alleged women's inferiority, approximating the social value of one man to be equal to that of two women. The co-option of 'erudite' women within contemporary Jamaica seems then to suggest women's internalization of men's ideologies concerning women's rights, hence the ways in which women lend themselves to the exploits of men. In fact, the indictment on women's intellect seems also present in contemporary times, reflected in female job slums. Despite the fact that the graduates of the University of West Indies were 79 per cent female in recent years, the majority of women seem crowded into low-wage jobs, creating a feminization of poverty and social breakdown. This suggests

continued strength of ideologies that confer inferiority on women's intellectual gains and a capacities.

The fact that the law aided and abetted separatism and contributed to gender polarization points to ways in which the state understood Jamaican femininity and masculinity, and its use of the law in instructing both sexes in different ways. The symbolic value of the law in initiating the political empowerment of women provided the first rung in the climb for women's political autonomy. This was manifested in the introduction of universal adult suffrage in 1944, which enfranchised all persons reaching the age of 21. Universal adult suffrage under The Representation of the People Act of 1944 gave women the legal right to sit on Boards, and to be actively involved in the institutions of the state. The fact that activism contributed to the adoption of adult suffrage in spite of resisting forces suggests the pliability of state monolithicism, and the possibilities for poor Jamaican women. The enfranchisement of women and men under equal terms regardless of race, class or sex, reduced the differentials between female and male political participation, but more importantly provided the platform from which women's citizenship may be revalued. Though constitutional reform improved women's political participation, it paradoxically did not abandon the discriminatory legal principles that continued to marginalize both women and children. These ranged from legal categorizations of legitimate vs. illegitimate children, with implications for inheritance, rights and opportunities, to work permit rights that were allocated based on sex. This challenged the sincerity of lawmakers in promoting equality through constitutional reform, and gave rise to speculations concerning the piecemeal reward system and the possible exploitation of women's political power given that a general election was being called, also in 1944. Notwithstanding that women gained, the fact that discriminatory laws still existed despite the Constitution indicates the unwillingness of the state to move towards an equality agenda, or to create the institutional adjustments that could improve women's legal access.

Barriteau (1998) commented that within the context of the Caribbean, local and international pressures were important contributors to the institutional shifts that improved women's access to rights and opportunities. She noted:

“Through a combination of indigenous and external pressures the evolving Caribbean state has altered women's unequal access to its

resources. It has removed, amended or reformed the legal inferiority or dependency assigned to women in constitutions and laws...” (Barriteau: 1998)

Barriteau’s (1998) argument drew attention to the impact of institutional shifts that disconcerted the unequal relations of gender and positioned women to ‘contest the ideological relations inscribed in gender identities and roles’. This line of reasoning may also be used to explain the capacity of states to conveniently shift their social and political arrangements to facilitate contemporary thought, though in contradiction to their own patriarchal value systems. In highlighting the complexities of state institutions, Barriteau (1998) argues that the state may seem immovable, but it can be responsive to pressures and interventions, challenging the resilience of women’s activism in permeating the monolithic veneer, and negotiating for social transformation of poor women’s lives.

No Woman No Cry: Challenges and Victories

The Jamaican historicity and the institutionalization of an incremental rewards system based on class and gender held implications for women and children’s rights to maintenance and property, *inter alia*. Women’s gains were slow and seemed calculated, and male resistance to women’s access to opportunities preserved for men, by men continued. In fact the male hegemonic legal institutions which used the laws to concretize gendered ideologies alluded to men’s move to create an idealism which was rooted within the relations of power that would sustain men’s control, and ensure women’s continued dependence on men.

The incrementality of suffrage rights from its inception, which moved from benefiting a few men, to benefiting even fewer women, to a gender neutral political benefit through universal suffrage, highlights the calculated efforts of the androcentric colonial state to preserve minority male hegemonic rule. The fact that a few women gained may be considered a stepping stone for women’s future participation, though the limitations within the law pointed to the insecurities of Jamaican masculinity, given the fervor in preserving and reserving the masculinity of governance.

Although women’s minority participation may become important in deciding narrow margins in an election, the fact that the most economically dependent were marginalized challenges political representation of poor black women by affluent white women, given that

the issues of both groups would be hardly likely to intersect. This suggests then that early suffrage was a symbolic gain for the majority of women, negating any assumption that the concerns of black women could be embodied within interests of white female colonial subjects through the exercise of voting privileges. It should then not be difficult to comprehend that political mobilization of a minority group on their own would be the only way to influence the colonial quasi-democracy to include the social and economic concerns of the minority within policy formulation and development planning.

The eventual granting of universal suffrage in 1944, institutionalized through constitutional reform, was another gain for women and a milestone in the political trajectory of empowerment. Women could then vote on equal terms as men, and the literacy requirement was abandoned. Constitutional reform attempted to address the differential participation of women and men, but the singularity of institutional shifts was insufficient to adequately deal with the ideologies that supported the unequal relations of gender and the differential treatment of women's citizenship. Institutional shifts however may be considered important to begin the process, to cede some leverage for women to contest gendered ideologies. Kaufman (1988) referred to the struggles for universal suffrage as well as other liberation struggles as 'those struggles to secure rights that the bourgeoisie itself has often shown a reluctance to extend to the population as a whole'. He argued that the denial of 'individual liberties', as well as the existing inequalities and inequities, prevented meaningful and consistent intervention into the political affairs of the country. Kaufman alleged that state patriarchy nurtured the unequal relations of power that systematically removed power from the masses. He stated:

“...the majority of the population do not have the educational, ideological or economic resources nor the psychological orientation to intervene directly and consciously in the political affairs of state on an ongoing basis. The simple struggle for survival within what appears to be the inevitability of an unjust society further reduces the ability of the population to engage in political struggle.” Kaufman (1988)

It may be realistic to assume that socio-economic survival issues would have been the focus of the majority, rather than political struggles. It should not be surprising then that

the political arena within the Jamaican experience was dominated by the male bourgeoisie, and although universal suffrage afforded women greater political autonomy, social and economic deprivations would have militated against women's political participation, hence the minority female representation in party politics. In fact the discriminatory laws and social policies that persisted over the years with respect to child maintenance, birth registration, *illegitimacy* and citizenship contributed immensely to women's socio-economic condition. The fact that the Maintenance Law of 1881 enacted over 60 years before was ineffective and was not amended despite women's activism, and the sexist nature of the birth registration laws and policies that allowed men to extricate themselves from paternal responsibilities of their 'illegitimate' children, were but markers of a phallogentric environment supported by the patriarchal state. It also points to women's economic and political powerlessness to effect the radical shifts requisite to improve their own lives even with universal suffrage and constitutional reform.

The fact that constitutional reform did not hinder the passing of the Work Permit legislation in 1964 that ignored the citizenship of Jamaican women, spoke volumes concerning women's peripherality and agency. The indictment on women's citizenship was highlighted by the fact that Jamaican women could not pass on citizenship to their husbands as could their male counterparts, forcing foreign husbands of Jamaican women to obtain temporary work permits. Despite the activism of the women's movement, and the arguments to explain women's socio-economic difficulties as a result of the law, the amendment came ten years later in 1974. The fact that masculine censures of women's citizenship rights were manifested within the laws after constitutional reform also pointed to the patriarchal understandings of women's otherness and value, but more importantly, the inability of legal shifts to create changes in the ideological.

Tracy Robinson (2003) argued that within the context of the Caribbean, men remained 'the paradigm of a citizen and in significant measure, women are included as citizens through their relationship to men'. This argument puts into perspective the state's role in creating understandings of femininity and masculinity, and its subsequent positioning of masculinity in relation to femininity. This positioning would have contributed to the gendered reality of women's unequal participation, manifested in the fact that women's work in the home is not even factored into measures of national income; that a binary exists with respect to the categorizing of work – *formal and informal work, formal and informal sector*- and the

ways in which the majority of women fall within the 'informal'. This suggests notions of casualness associated with informality and women's engagements, which may be linked to the state's casual treatment of women's interests.

Women's incremental gains however, in spite of the challenges of the patriarchal state, chart a trajectory aimed at closing the differentials between women and men. Institutional shifts present a rung in the climb to empowerment, but without ideological shifts, women's social and economic situations seem unlikely to be significantly improved, hence Bob Marley's hush words "No Woman No Cry", but a *virtual* comfort to women.

REFERENCES

- Vassel, Linnette. 1993. "Voices of Women in Jamaica, 1898-1939". Department of History, University of the West Indies, Jamaica.
- Brush, Lisa. 2003. *The Gender Lens: Gender and Governance*. Altamira Press, USA: 36-66.
- Kaufman, Michael. 1988. "Democracy and Social Transformation" *Institute of Social and Economic Research Journal*: University of the West Indies, Jamaica: Vol. 37: No.3: September.
- Mohanty, Russo, and Torres. 1991. *Third World Women and Politics of Feminism*. Indiana University Press, USA: 11-22.
- Cumper, Gloria. 1972. "Survey of Social Legislation in Jamaica". Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies: 24-27.
- Mohammed, Patricia. 1998. "A Symbiotic Visiting Relationship: Caribbean Feminist Historiography and Caribbean Feminist Theory" *Confronting Power Theorizing Gender: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in the Caribbean*. New York Press, USA: 50-57.
- hooks, bell. 1989. "Black Women and Feminism" *Feminist Frontiers II: Rethinking Sex, Gender and Society*. Random House, New York: 448.
- Robinson, Tracy. 2003. "Beyond the Bill of Rights: Sexing the Citizen" *Confronting Power, Theorizing Gender: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in the Caribbean*. University of the West Indies Press: 231-236.
- Vassell, Linnette. 1993. "The Jamaica Federation of Women and Politics, 1944-1950" The Twenty-fifth Conference of the Association of Caribbean Historians. University of the West Indies, Mona: March 27-April 2.
- Vassell, Linnette Silvera. 1993. "Voluntary Women's Associations in Jamaica: The Jamaica Federation of Women, 1944-1962". (MPhil Thesis) University of the West Indies.
- Barriteau, Eudine. 1998. "Theorizing Gender Systems and the Project of Modernity in the Twentieth Century Caribbean" *Feminist Review – Rethinking Caribbean Difference* No. 59: Summer: 165-186.
- Mills, Sara. 1998. "Post-colonial Feminist Theory," *Contemporary Feminist Theories*. New York University Press, USA.
- Connell, RW. 1987. *Gender and Power*. Stanford University Press, California, USA: 125-138.
- Lewis, Linden. 2002. "Envisioning a Politics of Change within Caribbean Gender Relations" in Patricia Mohammed, ed. *Gendered Realities: Essays in Caribbean Feminist Thought*.

Pp512-519. Mona, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press & The Centre for Gender and Development Studies.