

1. INTRODUCTION: THE CARIBBEAN CONTEXT

a) The Commonwealth Caribbean countries in the Third World

The six case studies on the development of women's bureaux examined in this publication are from the Commonwealth Caribbean countries, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana and Jamaica. The Commonwealth Caribbean shares the socio-economic characteristics of poor Third World communities, with special features derived from the history, economic development and geographical position of the area.

Historically the population has been imported. The majority are the descendants of African slaves brought to cultivate and service West Indian sugar colonies and the plantocracy. After the British emancipation of slaves in 1838 indentured workers, mainly from India, provided labour for the estates. Many indentured labourers opted to remain after their contracts expired. Guyana, of the six case study countries, has a majority of families of East Indian origin.¹

The racial mix of the Caribbean people includes strong minorities. Their origin is Chinese, Portuguese, mainly from Madeira, immigrants from the Middle East, generically termed "Syrians", and Europeans whose forebears - planters, merchants, clergymen, missionaries, doctors, lawyers and other professionals - did not return to Europe.

Of the six samples in this study, only in Guyana, Belize and Dominica do Amerindian communities remain. They are subject to special legislation and social welfare measures because they mainly live apart in their own communities. In the mainland countries, Belize and Guyana, the majority of Amerindians are still living on a subsistence economy in the forests and villages of the interior. There is, on the other hand, a Carib Reserve in Dominica where in fact Carib Indians pursue similar economic enterprises to the rest of the population.

Other racial groups and intermixtures live without discrimination in law. While it would be naive to say that there is no racial prejudice in the Commonwealth Caribbean, the public image is promoted of multi-racial and multi-cultural communities living together in harmony without discrimination. Differences arise mainly where one group wishes to maintain its original identity and this takes political forms.

The second critical historical inheritance is a dependent economy which reflects all the vicissitudes of First World economic variations. Sugar has long ceased to be "King" in the Caribbean, but remains to four of the six in our sample a source of foreign exchange, namely in Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica and, to a lesser extent, Belize. Tourism, particularly with North American links, is in some years the top foreign exchange earner for Barbados, Jamaica and Grenada. Guyana and Jamaica have bauxite industries which they have nationalised, but which share the current fate of the world

¹ The term "East Indian" is used to distinguish immigrants from India since the 19th century from Amerindian populations who were the indigenous people when Europeans began to arrive in the Caribbean four centuries earlier.

slump in aluminium consumption. For the rest, there are smaller but critical markets in agricultural products such as bananas, citrus fruit, rice, timber, coffee, coconuts and coconut products and spices.

The agricultural sector has declined significantly. There are experiments in manufacturing, particularly of garments, food and drink products and some building materials, but Caribbean investors are cautious, and foreign investors, despite the fact that most of the banks and insurance companies are linked with their North American or British progenitors, are still equally hesitant to commit themselves.

That proximity to North America is a considerable determinant of Caribbean development has become increasingly evident as each Commonwealth Caribbean country has gained political independence. Migration between the mainland and the Caribbean throughout the recorded history of the Caribbean has been steady. It has accelerated into the United States of America over the past century despite legal deterrents, and Canada has received an increasing number of Caribbean immigrants since the Second World War. Most Caribbean students studying abroad now attend North American universities. This first hand acquaintance with North American levels of living and consumption practices has given Caribbean citizens of most socio-economic groups aspirations which cannot be met in the economic circumstances of their own poor countries. This is one of the major differences between the Caribbean area and African or Asian Third World countries. The Afro-American, or Asian-American, experience has created a series of Third World communities which covet the North American opportunities and material advantages, but essentially do not want to be identified with their other social values.

North Americans are also strongly aware of the Caribbean at their doorstep. In one context the islands in particular provide tropical paradises near at hand for relaxation and escape from winter weather. On the other hand, these same islands and Belize and Guyana, the two Commonwealth Caribbean countries on the mainland, are newly independent countries in the American "backyard", which could be a threat if they became unfriendly. Current events in Grenada demonstrate that the Commonwealth Caribbean is divided in its attitude to the United States of America as patron, protector and "godfather". Ex-British colonies are now more immediately influenced by their world power neighbour than by their British colonial historical connections.

The current situation is that all six Commonwealth Caribbean countries forming the sample in this study are now independent countries and enthusiastic new members of the United Nations and its agencies. Four are also members of the Organisation of American States (OAS); the two mainland countries, Guyana and Belize, are not yet members because they have unresolved territorial disputes with their Latin American neighbours. They are all members of the Commonwealth. Finally they link with other Third World countries as signatories of the Lomé Convention and members of the ACP group (African, Caribbean and Pacific) related to European Community countries. In short the Caribbean countries have established relationships with organisations offering prospects to developing countries on a far wider front than in colonial days.

The Commonwealth Caribbean countries have also set up their own Caribbean Community (CARICOM) as the regional planning and development

agency, with headquarters in Guyana and the Caribbean Development Bank in Barbados. Recently the six smallest Commonwealth Caribbean island countries, have initiated the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), for sharing facilities, services and other mutual benefits; Dominica and Grenada are the members of OECS included in this study.

All the countries in the sample are currently rated by the World Bank as lower-middle income economies, with the exception of Barbados which is assessed as an upper-middle income economy. The preoccupation of each, particularly since the oil price crisis of 1974, is to create an economy which can offer employment, a reasonable level of living and an acceptable infrastructure with services for the population at large. In fact the Caribbean countries have shared the Third World experience of the nineteen-seventies, and of the eighties to date, of increasing unemployment, particularly among school leavers and women of all ages, declining levels of living in face of inflation and drastic cuts in government expenditure for lack of funds.

The politics of independence have reflected their times. Jamaica, Barbados, and Guyana all gained their independence in the 1960s, before the abrupt rise in oil prices in 1974 shattered the illusion of sustained socio-economic progress in the non-oil producing Third World countries. Grenada, Dominica and Belize have been granted independence since the prospect of any substantial development has disappeared. By now all Commonwealth Caribbean countries are facing heavy international debts, lack of capital and a tendency for the citizens to seek their own solutions to problems. The aspiration of the new independent countries for collective development is fast becoming individual enterprise for survival.

b) Women of the Caribbean

Women in Caribbean countries have participated, or are participating, actively in both the developments and the vicissitudes of Caribbean history. They are seldom passive sufferers. Their peculiar role in resisting the slave system has been well documented by Dr Lucille Mathurin Mair in her *Rebel Women*. They are equally resourceful in dealing with today's problems.

The mother is the head of the majority of Caribbean families, "My mother who fathered me" is the key figure for most Caribbean children. She is well supported by "Nanny", the grandmother who cares for the family while the mother works or seeks work. In contrast with many Third World women Caribbean women have become as mobile as men in migration to towns and also in seeking opportunities abroad. Of the Commonwealth countries for example, it is only from the Caribbean countries of the Commonwealth for example, that the number of young women seeking higher education abroad equates with those of the young men.

As in most poor countries employment for women is harder to find, and less protected, than for men. Increasingly women become informal marketers, "higglers" and "hucksters"; they are developing an extensive unofficial import-export business selling in street markets goods they have purchased in French or American islands and in Panama or Miami. Self-employment amongst women is increasing, and there is less dependence on the traditionally ill-paid occupations of domestic service, dressmaking, laundering or retail selling. Women with adequate schooling train as

nurses, teachers and secretaries, and often find ways of pursuing these occupations in better-paid North American posts. The numbers of women in professions, including architects, accountants, lawyers and senior public servants are slowly increasing. The Prime Minister of Dominica, one of the sample countries for this study, is a woman; she has also become the first leader of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS).

The influence and participation of many women at all levels of Caribbean communities is undoubted, but it still remains remarkable. It is only just beginning to be publicly recognised and supported by legislation and programmes to alleviate the specific social disabilities of women. It remains to be seen whether what is sometimes called the Women's Movement, or the international drive for the participation of women in development, will allow women's enterprise to become a public asset rather than a personal safety valve.

Traditionally, since the emancipation of slaves in the British colonies, men have been mobile at home and abroad, both in search of employment and of better-paid occupations. Fathers have not been resident in the majority of families, leaving women, supported or unsupported, to raise the children. Regular statistics of internal and external migration show that young women no longer accept this differentiation. In some years more women than men now leave the Commonwealth Caribbean countries in search of better work opportunities. They are encouraged by favourable schemes for domestic work in North America, which enable them at the same time to get further training. Nurses trained in the Caribbean migrate steadily to North America, also in search of higher remuneration and better opportunities for further training. These two occupations alone account for ever increasing numbers of women leaving home.

The increasing mobility of Caribbean women is not a matter of public policy, but of private initiative. The policy makers are by default failing to mobilise women at home for national development which would encompass their own economic imperatives. Family legislation, including family courts and the abolition of illegitimacy as a legal status, can assist women in their role as heads of families. What still has to be sought are activities which secure their participation as independent citizens, both as contributors and beneficiaries in the whole spectrum of socio-economic development.

c) Caribbean Initiatives in Dealing with Women's Affairs

The resourcefulness of Caribbean women in facing their own considerable problems has been well established. Through church and other voluntary groups there has also been a good deal of social welfare work generated and organised by women. Both professional women and middle class wives devote considerable time to fund-raising to assist needy women, for training in crafts and domestic skills, for the development of better nutrition, better-child rearing and, hopefully, for production for sale. Family planning programmes have also been the concern of non-government agencies. The YWCA, church groups for women and many special groups pioneered by individual women have played a significant, if not over-publicised, part in women's welfare in most Commonwealth Caribbean countries. Many of the leading women in social welfare work in the different Caribbean colonies have been known to each other and have learnt from each others' programmes and projects. A logical consequence of this

sharing of experience was the formation of the Caribbean Women's Association (CARIWA) in 1970. By this date Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados and Guyana were all newly independent countries so that CARIWA was one of the earliest regional organisations to be established by Caribbean independent initiative. Guyana in 1973 started the Conference on the Affairs and Status of Women in Guyana (CASWIG) as the national counterpart to the regional body.

The colonial governments did not concentrate on the need either to guard the interests of women or to plan for them specifically in any social reform. The new political parties which arose after the Second World War did encourage the participation of women in politics and in some cases formed a women's auxiliary within the party. The Women's Auxiliary of the Jamaican People's National Party (PNP) and the Women's Revolutionary Socialist Movement (WRSM) of the People's National Congress (PNC) in Guyana took strong initiatives in causing the Government, when their party was, and is, in power, to set up machinery for the official recognition of women as indispensable partners in development in their countries. The development of the Women's bureaux in these two countries, after a series of experimental institutional arrangements, derived from their own experience and from their socialist concern to eliminate deprivation in the community. In Jamaica and Guyana in the 1970s the political motivation, to mobilise the participation of all in the country's development, was the main context of government initiatives in women's affairs. After the coup in Grenada in 1979 the People's Revolutionary Government in a much shorter time made a similar drive for the participation of women as a power group in the promotion of revolutionary development.

The UN International Women's Year, 1974, followed by the Decade of Women beginning in the following year, came at a point where the three larger countries of this Caribbean sample were already independent and themselves UN member states. Grenada became independent in International Women's Year and Dominica and Belize in 1978 and 1981 respectively. The newest three Caribbean countries of the sample therefore entered the international movement to promote Women in Development at a point when its generalised objectives and influences were at their most articulate.

By the International Year of Women the Commonwealth Caribbean countries were ready supporters of the Women in Development concept both as the result of what they had already done in identifying the needs of women, and in their role as new, or soon to be, members of UN. To offer a better deal to women became one of the development objectives in the early independence years of all Commonwealth Caribbean countries.

In 1977 the Caribbean hosted a sub-regional meeting which produced a *Regional Plan of Action*, later incorporated into the UN Economic Commission for Latin America's regional plan. Both regional plans advocated the establishment of government machinery to deal with women's affairs on a systematic basis.

In 1976 two regional organisations took initiatives which were later to support the development of the governmental machinery for women's affairs in the Caribbean countries. Firstly, the Organisation of American States set up and held a conference of the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM). Secondly, the University of the West Indies started an outreach activity to assist Caribbean countries in launching their official

women in development programmes (WAND). Both WAND and CIM appear as supports in the operational stages of the activities in the countries of the sample studies. Two years later CARICOM also appointed an Adviser on Women's Affairs, who has in particular maintained constructive relationships between Caribbean women working on their development programmes in the different countries.

It is clear that the Caribbean countries had both Caribbean precedents and the international guidelines to help them in setting up their official programmes for women in development. The reconciliation of the two has not always been happy; it has sometimes led to ambiguity and unhelpful generalisation. This can be seen particularly in the first statements of objectives in all the Caribbean countries, in the uncertainties about the location of women's bureaux in the administrative establishment and, perhaps most of all, in the initiatives for decision-making and programme-setting.

The six countries have, however, all established an official machinery for the handling of women's affairs. They have all moved from comprehensive objectives to more realistic statements of functions. There is a dichotomy between the objectives which might be termed structure-oriented in some cases and programme-oriented in others. The location of the Women's Bureau, or its equivalent, continues to be a problem, as are staffing and budgetary arrangements. The outreach aspect of the programme is matter for concern in all cases. None of the writers of the case studies suggests that the initiation is over, nor that a programme can now proceed on agreed objectives. Rather they stress the limitations, and even concern themselves with survival.

Whatever the varying first experience has been and whatever the present resolution of the problems to date in each case certain developments are generally looked for. They are nearly all structural. The desired organisation now is generally expressed as first, a minister of state to represent women's affairs as a political issue; secondly, a well staffed and budgeted women's bureau; thirdly, an inter-ministerial committee to secure women's participation in the development projects and activities of other ministries; fourthly, a national commission for women's affairs as an advisory body, bringing in the long experience of non-government organisations as well as all influential elements concerned with women in the community; and finally a district-based network of programmes and organisations to reach women throughout the country.