

A. Lynn Bolles

**Claiming Their Rightful Position:
Women Trade Union Leaders of the
Commonwealth Caribbean**



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Claiming Their Rightful Position: Women Trade Union Leaders of the Commonwealth Caribbean*

Like most anthropologists, I love fieldwork stories. Those stories recall the pleasant or unpleasant situations anthropologists find themselves in and lessons learned. A couple years ago, a friend sent me a cartoon which said a lot about anthropologists, the discipline and the folk. The cartoon showed a "native," grass skirt, spear and all, looking out of the window of his hut. He spies a person walking up the road, donned by a pith helmet and carrying a tape recorder. The native calls to the folk inside the hut "american anthropologist." The natives quickly start to hide the VCR, the TV, microwave, overstuffed chair, etc., so as to seem as pristine and native-like for the intruding anthropologist.

As the world dramatically changes from day to day and year to year, anthropologists find themselves as keepers of knowledge of the "old ways," as analysts and documenters of the effects of social change and social upheaval. Further, anthropologists are still interpreters of cultural meaning for the discipline and for anyone who wants to read it, including the people under study. My work with women trade union leaders in the Commonwealth Caribbean illustrates the role anthropologists play in their contemporary research. It increases an understanding of the social construction of gender in cultures and societies whose very being was based on inequality exacted at a tremendous price. It analyzes the dramatic effects of social movements for freedom, self-governance and self-determination. And, it interprets a specific social formation — organized labor, which meshes politics and the economy.

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The women represented here are named by pseudonyms to protect their identities. I'd like to thank the women trade unionists interviewed for their collaboration, and Mercy Coogan for her invaluable editorial help.

A number of factors facing anthropological/social scientific inquiries are addressed in this work on women trade union leaders in the Commonwealth Caribbean. First, there are issues concerning methodology. How did I come to do this research on women, and organized labor in the English-speaking Caribbean? How did I actually carry it out the project? Second, the analysis incorporates the social construction of gender, and social inequities found in seven societies — the location of the action — of the Commonwealth Caribbean spanning a period of 50 years. During those years, the countries underwent a transition from being British West Indies (land colonies) to independent nation-states. The majority of peoples in the Commonwealth Caribbean are descendants of slaves. The social structure, including economics, and social organization are framed by the plantation mode of production. And finally, there is the perspective of standpoints — my own and that of the women trade union leaders.

Women's leadership experiences in the labor movement have made substantive contributions to the 50 year history of trade unionism in the region. They played critical roles in these vital organizations — as political entities and mass social movements. However, women have been ignored, made invisible or underestimated by those recording the events of the region — scholars, politicians and trade unionists. In the research, stories of older women trade unionists who were on the scene in the early years of the labor movement (1930s-1950s), women who were active during and after the years of national independence (1960s-1970s), and those designated as the movement's future women leaders. A combination of personal narratives, historical accounts, and descriptions of everyday activities are used to draw attention to the work and lives of these women, as agents of social change. Women leaders from mainstream trade unions in Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Antigua, Montserrat and St. Vincent are represented.

Throughout my career as an anthropologist, I have been completely steeped in and a practitioner of responsible research. The moral responsibilities of conducting research came together full force in the late 1960s, in the discipline of anthropology and the institutionalization of African-American studies. The responsibility of the researcher included paying attention to publications, to persons or organizations given access to materials, to the accountability of the

anthropologist to the people under study, and the context of the work when it is translated into other languages. Moreover, as powerless people are made into subjects by research, specific safeguards should be in place to prevent political and economic manipulations by those who would do them harm (see Gwaltney 1981; Jones 1970; Willis 1974; Valentine 1972). Carrying out one's moral responsibilities are more than assuaging a sponsor agency. For me, the most significant component in doing responsible research rests on the relationship between the fieldworker and the folk (see Bolles 1985).

The positioning of women trade union leader's standpoint is a critical element in this endeavor, because of the past history of colonialism, U.S. hegemonic relations between countries of the region, the varying levels of female subordination in the Commonwealth Caribbean, the invisibility of women in the regions labor history, and the region's status as a testing ground for a variety of research, experiments and fieldwork for North American academicians. It is my intention to express and to interpret the women trade union leader's standpoint, and not to determine for them the meanings and goals of their lives. Writing about the experiences of African-American women, and Black feminist thought, Patricia Hill Collins (1990:750) discusses the interdependent nature of the relationship between the two. She writes, "While Black feminist thought articulates the taken-for-granted knowledge of African-American women, it also encourages all Black women to create new self-definitions that validate a Black woman's standpoint." Black feminist thought's potential demonstrates more than that Black women can produce "independent specialized knowledge." It offers Black women a different view of themselves and that offered by "the established social order." The consciousness of difference and identity already existed among Black women. But by Black feminist's rearticulating those values and traditions, which validates and acknowledges their difference and identity, African-American women have another "tool of resistance to all forms of their subordination."

Aihwa Ong (1988) argues that western feminists objectify non-western women by relegating their status to that of the "Other." In western philosophical constructs, women are subordinated by the patriarchy in such terms that they have no voice, and no concept of self than Other, i.e. not a part of the tradition of male authority which assigns, categorizes and evaluates who and what someone is or

is not. Ong (1988:80) states that "feminist voices in the social sciences unconsciously echo this masculinist will power in its relation to non-western societies." Further on she writes "when feminists look overseas, they frequently seek to establish *their* authority on the backs of non-western women... the claim to common kinship with non-western women is at best, tenuous, at worst, non-existent." Before many white feminists took stock that their notion of global sisterhood was a goal to strive for, not one already in place, my own ethical stance and personal position was a self-determined standard.

For me, some of the dilemmas that I encountered doing research in the Caribbean resulted from my identity as an African-American, and my middle class origins. The later point had distinctive meanings for the two groups of women with whom I have worked. For the working class women, I was a woman of incredible privilege, but not as elitist as their own upper classes (see Bolles 1985). The middle class women, who were represented among the trade union women leaders, viewed me as not being "really" middle class, since I did not belong to their own, and did not have the entry from birth or through West Indian channels of qualification, i.e. their "proper" education, job and civic and/or church affiliations. Plus, who had ever heard of a member of the Black American middle class, unless it was a person of West Indian descent who had done well after he or she immigrated to the U.S. My "native," multi-generational African-American middle class circumstance was an unknown to many, therefore "suspect until proven otherwise."

From my position as a Black feminist, I envisioned a way to provide Caribbean women in the organized labor movement another tool of resistance to all forms of their oppression. In the alternative way of presentation, where their standpoints would be expressed through their own voices, they would also be actively involved in the production of the work. My role was to facilitate that process, because they did not have the time, money and energy to do for themselves.

There is a reoccurring question that guides this work. It asks: How did a people's struggle for self-government and social change end up being another case of male domination, female subordination and social hierarchy? Answers to that question are found by situating West Indian women in the mainstream organized labor movement.

The Setting

The general strikes and worker insurrections which blazed across the English-speaking Caribbean in the 1930s gave rise to two things: a more self-confident working class in demanding its rights; and trade unions. These two factors spurred on a course of social change unseen in the region since the abolition of slavery. Between the end of slavery (1838) and prior to the advent of World War II, the working and living conditions of the masses of people in the then British Caribbean had seen little change. The population grew, but there were few employment opportunities, a huge reserve of unskilled labor, and high levels of under and unemployed labor. Furthermore, three centuries of British colonialism and vestiges of a plantocracy made the effects of the Great Depression even more devastating in the West Indies. It was this kind of general economic and socioeconomic crisis which gave rise to the modern Caribbean labor movement.

From the beginning, the nexus of mobilizing workers and forming political constituencies was the guiding force behind trade unionism and what would eventually be — once enfranchisement was granted — electoral politics in the English-speaking Caribbean.

After World War II and the realignment of world power, anti-communist sentiment influenced trade unionism and politics in the region. Trade unions with socialist leaders were stamped out and their political influence squelched. Labor organizations not targeted in the Red scare, moved forward with their trade union activities and political agendas. From the 1950s to the 1970s, former trade union all-island supervisors were sworn in as heads of state, and trade union members were labelled “the aristocracy of labor.” However, by the late 1970s and through the 1980s, trade unions found their friends in national governments not in favorable situations to help out in negotiating worker’s working conditions and livelihoods. The debt crisis, balance of payment problems, IMF (International Monetary Fund) agreements, restrictive CBI (Caribbean Basin Initiative) contracts, and sluggish economies, etc., placed organized labor in a poor bargaining position to protect, demand, and provide for its members. Rank and file members began to question the institution of trade unionism in general, and their disaffection was noticeable at the ballot box.

At the same time as trade union members were expressing their misgivings about their organizations, women — both members of the rank and file and leaders — raised their voices in dissatisfaction. The UN Decade for Women (1976-1985) helped to heighten the consciousness of women as individuals and as members of groups. In the late 1970s, it was not uncommon to hear rank and file women speak of sexism on the job and on the part of the male organizer who was representing them. There were a host of grievances which were related to their jobs, but those which were clearly sex-specific were called to be placed alongside, and with parity to, the others already on the table. Women trade union leaders spoke of the sexism within their organizations and were frustrated at their inability to help their trade unions through the crisis, which showed no signs of ending.

Women leaders' internal conflicts took on two forms: one focussed on the organizational structure of trade unions in the Commonwealth Caribbean, and the other was self criticism. At the institutional level, women trade union leaders cited sexism as the reason for a number of inequities, including the fact that no woman could claim to be the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) of a trade union; that rarely did a woman engage in collective bargaining; or even know the rudimentary procedures of negotiations; and that although they performed a wide range of functions, most of these involved clerical, secretarial and catering services.

But, self-criticism also played a major role in women leaders critique of their organizations. Many of the very vocal women were angry at themselves for the way they helped create and maintain such a male-dominated institution. Women in decision-making positions wielded a certain amount of power within the hierarchy of their organizations, but they went along with the structure. For the most part, they did not have the self-confidence, knowledge and political savvy necessary for commanding respect, much less securing institutional change from their male peers. Perhaps the best example of this type of situation that many women trade union leaders found themselves in is the case of the executive secretary of a trade union whom I met in the late 1970s in Jamaica.

The CEO's executive secretary, a highly articulate, gifted young woman, served as an administrative assistant, although at that time, she had neither the title nor the salary to fit the work load. She *acted* as an officer of the organization and was a committed trade unionist.

The executive secretary's mobilizing, counseling, teaching and secretarial skills were valued by the CEO and used without recourse in almost all institutional matters. Other members of staff included secretaries, an accountant, an office maid and a handyman.

Direct appeals to the CEO by the executive secretary granted me institutional support in the research I was doing at the time. One of the ways I reciprocated was to be this young woman's sounding board for her anger and "disgust" she felt concerning her situation in her organization. Her grievances had numerous points. She was well qualified, well educated and more importantly, had earned the right to be an officer of the trade union. Furthermore, she deserved to be awarded certain perks that went with the position, and to be a recipient of advanced training offered overseas. Rightly so, the executive secretary wanted to be compensated for her fifty to seventy-hour work weeks which impinged on her family and personal life. The rank and file had already acknowledged her work individually and as groups from different places of work. However, the accolades she received from shop delegates (shop stewards) were in reference not to her personal endeavors, but to her position as the CEO's "right hand." How ironic, the working class trade union members understood her merit, while the middle class men with whom she worked with everyday — her peers and her boss — failed to recognize her valuable work to the labor movement.

In societies, like those in the English-speaking Caribbean, all classes of women are taught two kinds of histories and aspirations to guide them in their walks of life. One is the traditional African heritage rooted in the experiences of slavery. From it come the struggle, activism, collectivity, and community spirit which are the elements that support women, men, and children in their survival. In addition, both women and men engage in the social, cultural and economic activities which value the contributions of people regardless of their gender. Likewise, due to the variation in mating relationships and the constraints of division of labor, the majority of women in the region find themselves, for better or for worse, as the center of many social and cultural arenas.

"The realm of familial responsibility" (Durant-Gonzalez 1982:3) guides the daily lives of the majority of women in the region, and requires reciprocal obligations to kin and friends, which is often extended to community, church and work activities. Although the

sentiment is shared by both sexes, women are the ones most encouraged to be responsible for others and for themselves through those domestic networks which constitute most women's strategies for survival. Often the variety of ways of dealing with the world include demonstrations, protests or personal intervention. Ordinary women, taking responsibility in these kinds of acts of repudiation of the *status quo*, are engaged in traditional cultural acts of resistance to oppression. There are the deeds of exceptional women who inspire others, names not recognized outside of their communities, but who helped improve the condition of peoples' lives. Or, there are others, whose names are inscribed in official histories and documents, or are associated with civic duty and national pride. These include Nanny, the leader of the Maroons; Una Marson and Amy Ashwood Garvey of Jamaica; Elma Francois, of St. Vincent/Trinidad; and Audrey Jeffers, from Trinidad and Tobago (see Ford-Smith 1986; Reddock 1988; Haniff 1988).

The second type of history and culture learned, is based on a Eurocentric model which is part and parcel of the legacy of British colonialism, and the division of labor on which capitalism is founded. Simplistically, in this patriarchal view, men are the breadwinners and women are the housewives. Men deal with the world of wage labor, politics, social affairs, and are ordinate to women. Women deal with the world of biological reproduction, family, domestic labor, and are subordinate to men. Through the constructs of the capitalist system, men's labor is valued, and women's labor is devalued. The wage labor of people is encoded by gender whereby jobs that women perform are based on their "natural" suitability, such as sewing, cleaning, tending to the sick and housekeeping. Needless to say, since men are the "biological" family breadwinners — whether engaged in work demanding physical strength or mental aptitude — they receive greater compensation for their work than women do. Even though the slave system had men and women working side by side, in the modes of production which directly followed emancipation to modern times, men's and women's labor is sexually divided, inequitably valued, and differentially compensated.

In the region today, women and men deal with male domination, female subordination and the sexual division of labor in their productive lives and incorporate this ideology, of male domination and female subordination, into their perceptions of the way things

ought to be (Anderson 1986:320). Men, as the dominate gender are seen as "born leaders," regardless of their class origin. Of course, ruling class membership is an additional attribute for doing what is considered a male inclination. The image of the proper role for women, regardless of class, is that of homemaker and wife. In reality however, most West Indian women do not fit that image. Though by clinging to the ideal, they believe they can aspire to this correct state (Ford-Smith 1986:156).

For those women who lead public lives as leaders, up until recently they did so only as "extensions" of their domestic lives, as e.g., social workers, teachers, nurses and so forth.

So the clash of the Eurocentric ideal and the Caribbean reality frames the configurations of the multifaceted Caribbean identity (Nettleford 1974). Furthermore, the clash of the Eurocentric model with the Caribbean reality is found in all segments of society, including the organized labor movement. Trade unionism, which found its way as an institutional structure in the region was based on a British model. And like many other models which were replicated in the colonies, the inherent gender bias remained unchallenged, even in situations where human resources were scarce. Moreover, the class nature of the early trade union leaders was in keeping with the Eurocentric notions of male domains of work and politics. Women leaders, representing every class, whose socialization made them ideal trade unionists, were locked into a system which rendered them invisible. Thus, the trade union movement reflected the stratification found throughout the West Indies. This stratification was based on class, race, and ethnicity and determined who assumed leadership positions, as well as prescribed "the proper role" for women. What have women trade union leaders done to challenge their circumstances in the organized labor movement, while they still fight, as women and as members of their societies, for the elimination of the social conditions which keep them oppressed, exploited and powerless?

There is a standard joke circulating the Caribbean academic community which pokes fun at the long-windedness of descriptions or analyses of the region. The speaker inevitably winds up saying some generalization, prefaced by the understatement, "but you must realize, the Caribbean is a very complex area!" Slavery, colonialism, four European-language groups, numerous indigenous languages and

vernaculars, world religions and syncretic ones, social stratification by class, color, ethnicity, race, gender, fragmented histories, and geopolitics, hardly make for simple situations or easy explanations.

And never has that often repeated understatement been more true than in the situations surrounding women trade union leaders in the Commonwealth Caribbean. The complexity and varied experiences of these women leaders in organized labor figure significantly in positions they hold in key institutions found at every level of society. Furthermore, the extent of women's contributions — those deemed "indispensable" as well as those that are sex stereotyped and marginalized — contribute to the lack of recognition and esteem accorded them by their peers, scholars, politicians and those who record events. And finally, there are the issues of a personal nature. What role has trade union work played in these women's personal lives as citizens, mothers, mates and kinspersons?

Personal Location and Participant Participation

My research plan was simple. I would elicit the help of the women trade union leaders I had met over the years, who had been participants in a training and development program designed and organized by a team of women trade union leaders from Barbados, the Bahamas, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago in the early 1980's. I hoped that the former Project participants would be interested in meeting and talking with the older women of the labor movement of their country, since they too were interested in the unheralded pioneers of the early years (1930s-1950s) depending on the country. From my previous experience, I knew that personal brokerage was the only way to meet people in the Caribbean. Personal introductions also made sense in terms of mutual respect and mutual personal integrity.

The key role that the women trade unionist played in this research was as "participant participators." Participant participators form a category of indigenous researchers who offer more than just an "insider's" perspective on the body of data being collected and clearly more than indigenous fieldwork assistants. A participant participator is actively engaged in the work, is steeped in its merits and will stand by the outcome of the study which will bear her name.

Thus, there will be long-term value for those participating as researchers.

In the beginning of the research, 10 women trade union leaders expressed their willingness to interview past, contemporary and future women leaders of organized labor in their respective countries. We met on an individual basis, where we discussed the ways of doing interviews, collecting life stories, or if they knew the person well, to doing a life history which required a tremendous amount of time, and energy. These meetings were conducted in five countries on at least three occasions. One woman volunteered to write up the socioeconomic and political history of her country which would frame the narratives. Confidentiality, safety and compensation for time, supplies and mileage were discussed and provided. Tapes of the interviews were copied and deposited in labor union libraries back in their respective countries. Women whose stories were collected could receive copies of their interviews if they so desired. The tapes were transcribed in the region, so as to appease the fear that a North American would not comprehend various West Indian vernaculars. But above all, credit would be given where it was due. Women's names as interviewer or interviewee would be cited if they had given permission.

Even though they were presented with an alternative research strategy to capture their own positions and that of their peers and friends, most of the materials collected by the participant participator's did not stray outside of the basic questions to help guide discussion for collecting narratives and life stories. In some instances, those inquiries evolved into a questionnaire. Only one woman participant participator spend hours and days collecting life stories from a set of early generation of women trade unionists from her country. Although they all agreed to seize the moment to claim their standpoints in their work and lives there was just not enough time, money and energy to go around to do the work. The disappointment was genuine for most of the women, who felt the need to do this research for their self edification and for their organizations. And as a witness to their struggles and works, I recognized when it was time for me to amend the original plan and to become the friend, the academic and then the fieldworker, in that order. Because of my proven ethical stance, my democratic agenda in developing the research design, and my Jamaican identity, (earned

through fictive adoption), the lack of time translated into money and energy were not recounted as fabrications.

The fashion that the materials are presented in the work suggests the multiplicity of their origins. However, letting the women literally "speak for themselves" remained the primary objective. My role became one of a facilitator and director of the production.

Theory, Themes and Issues

What appears in the accounts by women trade union leaders are studies of the interplay of gender relations, social hierarchy and organizational structure. What women do and do not do and why from a female perspective, has been the foundation of *corrective* feminist research. One of the attributes of feminist scholarship has been its willingness to assess old theories, reengage them in a gendered fashion, or try out new modes. Not all attempts of forging new theories have been successful. But no one can criticize feminist scholars of whatever "political" persuasion, of not challenging the *status quo* experimenting with new concepts and ideas. Black feminist theories are predicated on the mutual importance of gender and race alongside other aspects of social systems. As a result, the emerging work in Black women's studies contends that Black women have a self-defined standpoint on their own oppression which suggests that they experience a different world than those who are not Black and female (Collins 1989:747). The concept is helpful in understanding Caribbean women, the majority of whom are of African descent.

Most studies concerning women place primacy on gender relations because they help to explain the role of women in culture and society (see *Social and Economic Studies* 35:2 and 3). Much of that has been written from a male perspective (Ortner 1975). However, with the tremendous rise in feminist research over the past 20 years, the dominance of a masculinist perspective is challenged everyday. Still, the *majority* of the body of knowledge available comes from the masculine perspective. Even the numerous studies done since World War II, studies dealing with marriage and the family in the Caribbean, and therefore focussed on women, only speak of how disorganized and abnormal the West Indian sociocultural arenas were because they were woman centered. The reality is, of course, that the

majority of family forms found in the region do not fit the "norm" of the male dominated model (Bolles 1988).

In the societies of the Americas, the nature of social and economic inequality was and still is measured by the status of one's birth and in some regions, the color of skin and/or race. The legacy of slavery provides the backdrop as to how social and economic inequalities have been manifested throughout the years using skin color as an ascriptive measure for class position. More importantly it should be clear that whatever gains were made in the social and economic well being of peoples of African descent, the nature of racism continues to chart its overt and covert course. And for women of African descent there is the added dimension brought about by both racism *and* sexism. The double oppression takes on a variety of meanings mitigated by class and color in the Caribbean and Latin American context.

Even in the Caribbean today, there are some instances in which to be black and poor places one in a situation not much changed from the days of slavery. The social hierarchy, critical to the success of European colonialism, has been maintained by the ruling classes, and in contemporary times, by the economic agents of wealth and power. To be middle class, implies the continuation of the privileging of color and class. Due to national independence, improved access to education and employment which is a post war phenomenon, Blacks, who took advantage of those opportunities are members of that class. And though the current economic crisis has dealt a blow to the Caribbean middle class, with their ordained positions they have more options to explore for their survival in hard times.

Most of the literature concerning the West Indian middle classes comes from studies looking at class relations, where the emphasis is on the majority — the working classes (e.g. Austin 1986; Braithwaite 1955; Smith 1965; Smith 1967; Stone 1980). A few studies have focussed on West Indian elites, particularly in reference to their share of economic and political power (Alexander 1976; Phillips 1977; Wilson 1973; Bell 1964). Most of the middle class in the West Indies have a cultural heritage of the African based tradition which forms ways of survival and resistance for the majority of the folk. However, in the Caribbean, a commercial middle class is privy to ethnic groups — Chinese, Christian and Jewish Lebanese, and East Indians. Most members of the service middle class, which includes private and

public sector managers as well as owners of capital, are predominantly black or brown skinned. The class position of an individual is based on recognition of kin ties, employment, education, political activity and is circumscribed by the size of the island. In large countries, one's skin color often changes on the basis of one's class in the eye of the working class beholder. According to a study of class relations in Jamaica, being a member of the middle class includes the material base that the term class implies, and a perception of their own life as a matter of individual achievement (Austin 1986). Members of the middle class have a strong sense of moral propriety and sense of cultural superiority that is characterized as "educated" (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the sense of morality and propriety is a product of British middle class civility which was the colonial model for 350 years. For women, this has had numerous consequences.

Patricia Anderson (1986:320) argues that in the Caribbean, female power seems to exist at a somewhat subterranean level, especially in regard to kinship and the family. But she says, women's power is severely curtailed in terms of sex segregated activities, e.g. duties and occupations with their inferred low status. The contradictions between the Euro-based ideology of female subordination and the Afrocentric position of women centeredness are the subjects of feminist historical analyses (Mair 1974; Reddock 1984). It is identified in the findings of the social scientific inquires of Women in the Caribbean Project (WICP).

An even more striking discord between the sexes than seen in literature on the poor and working classes, is found in the gender relations among members of the middle class. Peggy Reeves Sanday (1974) observes that antagonism between the sexes may be noted in societies where female power exists in contradiction to the dominant ideology. Preliminary findings on research on Jamaican middle class women supports this concept (Rawlins 1987). The upper classes are advocates of the tenants of a patriarchal ideology even though women exert familial power.

But it is middle class women and men who are caught betwixt and between the cultural meanings of their own societies and that dominant prescription. Middle class women have the responsibility of maintaining that sense of propriety and socializing children in that mode. Women are to be keepers and managers of the home. They

are never to permit wage employment to interfere with child bearing and rearing. These unwritten rules resulted partly from the division of labor derived from the legacy of slavery, and partly from the availability of domestic workers. They have been socialized to carry on the tradition of propriety, civility and "tea-time" in various forms. Moreover, many middle class maintain the colonial privileged ideology of the class/color system in regards to their perceptions of women of poor and working class backgrounds. But then too, from the ranks of the middle class have come some of the region's most committed women activists for social change. Likewise, some of vital forces of female leadership in the organized labor movement have middle class origins.

A Multifaceted Strategy

In their article "Toward a Unified Analysis of Gender and Kinship," anthropologists Sylvia Yanagisako and Jane Collier provide a model which challenges the major perspective of "western" thought-analytical dichotomies. They suggest that Marxists and non-Marxists alike perceive the world in oppositional categories which are often revealing only to themselves and not necessarily about the social scene which they purport to describe and analyze. Yanagisako and Collier (1987:42) begin with the premise that social systems are by definition, systems of inequality. As a system of social relationships and values, not all things and actions are equal.

Using the multifaceted strategies as a framework, an understanding of the genesis of symbols and cultural meanings finds itself in the historical analysis of the society, which informs the contemporary scene of social and cultural changes over time. Ideas and actions rooted in the evolution of culture clarify the very process of how inequality is organized. By examining what people do, say, fear, explain, influence, etc., as they create relationships, one interprets the cultural meaning of these actions and ideas. Through this type of analysis one grasps the balancing act which exists between the interpretation of the way structures shape peoples experiences, and of how people's actions are coded by structures (Yanagisako and Collier 1987:43).

Since inequality's manifestation is not confined to social institutions, it permeates all aspects of society. Furthermore, there is a good deal of interplay between the constructs of social organizations and of people's actions and experiences. How to interpret the way that people redirect the formations of inequality within specific parameters of a society is the challenge facing social scientists who map out the discourse and those planners and policy makers who stand on the frontline to implement new courses in practice. And such is the situation facing the women trade union leaders who want to reconstruct their organizations so that they will be more democratic, less hierarchical, non-sexist and politically and economically meaningful in this changing world.

Another model of how men and women achieve and exercise power is one created by Howard L. Smith and Mary Grenier. These authors focus on organization's source of power and analyze its relevance for women. For Smith and Grenier, power is defined as a combination of the ability to influence others, and determine others' behavior and the potential to achieve goals. Specifically, a powerful person may directly as well as indirectly influence others through structural avenues, such as decision channels or resource control. In the end, the structural context of the organization will shape and be shaped by the behavior of the women themselves and that *structure and behavior together* determine power.

Smith and Grenier suggest three basic and overlapping sources of power: 1) Participation in critical (survivalistic) activities of the organization which connote the centrality of the agency of the position; 2) Participation in activities which contribute to the control of uncertainty, that is, sets future agenda; and 3) Access to and control over resources. Sub-divisions of the degrees of centrality refer to the way activities are interrelated with a system. These are the structural mechanics of the operation and decision-making process; the separations between line and staff personnel departments, which department's activities are essential to that organization's existence; the chain of command, a direct or indirect line to the top, and the division of labor within each department. For women to advance, Smith and Grenier argue, they must understand these complexities and their interrelationship to the organization as a whole.

Coping with uncertainty is a critical structural category to consider because it is often used against women in their upward

mobility within organizations. The ability to take risks and to assess probabilities are among the psychosocial factors whereby women must "prove" their competency while men are assumed to be competent until proven otherwise. Sub-divisions within this category include the degree of formalization, i.e., how policies and procedures are officially specified; degrees of routinization, meaning who performs jobs with more or less unpredictability; the degree of environmental complexity in a decentralized situations or stringently hierarchical ones; and the positioning of hierarchy in which the more ill defined, non-routine, future oriented a job is the power it wields.

Control over resources is the last category in this theoretical framework of sources of power. Having control over resources includes not only a person's ability to channel funds and resources, but it also refers to the degree of access a person has to future information and resources. Like the other two structural categories, a chain of command, span of control, and degree of formalization are important components which impede or assist one's rise to power.

Depending on the setting and situation then, both structural and behavioral strategies would be emphasized for women to gain, exercise and maintain positions of power. A wide array of structural strategies exist and can be taken in the accumulation of power. Although these strategies are not gender specific, but power specific, women still face sex-stereotyping, old boy rules of entry and conduct and other impediments to restrict and contain their access to organizational power.

The criteria mapped out by Smith and Grenier in conjunction with the Yanagiasko/Collier multifaceted strategy, we can start to elucidate the general cultural meanings of power embedded in structures of Commonwealth Caribbean trade unions and how it is expressed by the behavior of men and women involved.

Trade Unions and Women Leaders

The trade union movement in the English-speaking Caribbean relied on the two fold premise of meeting the worker's needs and of practicing electoral politics. And because for the most part it has been managed by middle class male leadership, the organizing

principles follow the prescribed notions of gender relations, i.e. the dominant ideology of female subordination.

Briefly, the inequality between the genders was reinforced by the direction which labor unions/political parties took on in their organizational structure which was inherited/modeled by labor groups in Britain and the United States. This is evident in the way women as workers or leaders were incorporated into the labor movements in similar fashion in those countries. Such inequitable relations between the genders, devalues, oppresses, subordinates and restricts women's activities. According to a 1979 International Labor Organization (ILO) report, executive positions in the Commonwealth Caribbean were held by men at a ratio of 3:1. Over the 10 years since that report was written, things have changed in a positive direction, but the number of women CEOs is less than a handful in the entire region. Since middle class men direct this movement they operate with the dominant ideology which places women's labor, of any class background second, and overtly devalues the contribution of women whether or not it is in their best interest to do so in order to maintain a sense of control.

These conditions led the executive secretary, mentioned earlier, to organize a network of women trade unionists in the region and to produce The Project.

The roles that women played in the early days, and do in contemporary times as movement leaders, as will be expressed by them in the volume in progress, reflects the reality of the situation. That reality is — women with skills and leadership abilities are desperately needed in trade unions because they play vital parts in the survival of these organizations. Also a part of women trade unionist reality is the result of the impediments to their receiving proper recognition and advancement within their organizations.

The fashion by which women have been restricted can be found in the Smith and Grenier (*op. cit.*) analysis of women, power and organizations. The three sources of power — centrality, control of uncertainty, and access to resources already outlined— have great relevance for understanding the leadership positions of Commonwealth Caribbean women in the trade union movement.

I will discuss the structure of trade unions in general terms. Differences between organizations are quite apparent due to political,

economic and time factors. But for the sake of the argument, generalities will be the medium for analysis.

Centrality

Clearly, one of the tremendous restrictions facing women who wanted access to trade unionist power are the structural mechanics of labor organizations and the decision-making process. Overall, trade unions are extremely hierarchial and the chain of command is direct. In some cases, however, the executive council (composed of officers and elected members of the rank and file) do have a voice in the course of action taken on behalf of the trade union. But the ultimate decision comes from the general secretary or president, depending on which office wields the power. Officers with titles of "president" or "general secretary" are not equal in terms of power and duties from one trade union to another. Depending on the organizational flow chart, a president may be the pinnacle decision-making position, or it may rest with the general secretary. Usually, if one office has the power, the other has the duties which usually include office management. And more often than not, the top female executive holds the "management officer," position, a.k.a. secretarial functions, while the top man holds the power. Therefore, a woman can be "president" or "general secretary," but the organizational flow chart indicates the direction of influence.

In the departments where women do exert power — in office management and social welfare divisions for example — their positions are not questioned or challenged. However, because their line to the top may be different (i.e., indirect) women's power may be checked. Moreover, if their departments are viewed as support services, the centrality (as opposed to "marginality") of the activities is questioned and devalued. They are not considered necessary for the survival of the organization.

Likewise, the division of labor within trade unions is quite sex-segregated. Women are rarely organizers, rarely represent the executive side in contract negotiations, and are rarely considered appropriate to handle such duties. The inability of women to carry out the responsibilities of a labor organizer is reinforced by the sex-stereotyping of women's behavior; they are non-aggressive, defer to men, and incapable of making a decision on their own. Not only do

stories. The narratives are based on actual one-on-one interviews, as well as from written questionnaires. And though they are being retold in a different format that first written or audio-taped, nonetheless, they tell a story which should be carried away. In the following paragraphs I am going to set the scene as to who these women are and then relay what they said.

One of my favorite story telling situations was with Mrs. Maggie Peters, a 93 year old political/labor leader from Montserrat. I arranged to meet Mrs. Peters at her home through the help of a young woman trade unionist whom I had met while she was participating in a workshop at the Barbados Labor College. To say that Mrs. Peters is well-known is an understatement. When I got in the taxi to go to her house, I gave the street address, and the cab driver said to me, "oh you are going to visit Mistress Peters." Maggie Peters also holds the ultimate respect of all trade unionists in the Leeward Islands.

Mrs. Peters was quite bent, gnarled and frail looking. But what a wit!! At our first meeting, she was refreshed from taking a long nap. She talked for 2 hours straight with only her nurse interrupting her to tell her to take a rest, and "Mother" Peters taking the time to dismiss her. Finally in the third hour, I fatigued. Plus, I had to fly back to St. Martin that afternoon. When I said that I had to end our conversation because I had a plane to catch, this 93 year old woman said "but my dear, I have much more to tell you. I have gotten up to 1953."

Maggie Peters came from a solid African-Caribbean middle class background. Her father was the headmaster of the colonial schools in Montserrat. He also was a small land owner. Her mother was a homemaker. Maggie Peters went through primary schools in Montserrat, went to boarding school on neighboring Antigua and was sent to England to finish her studies.

When she returned home to Montserrat, Maggie Peters became a school teacher, but also found herself in the anti-colonial struggle surrounding worker's rights and labor conditions on sugar estates on the island. In her classroom, she taught home economics. And in the cane-fields, in her yard, and in meeting places Mrs. Peters taught cane-workers their rights as workers and as people. Because of the influence of her father and the militancy of her husband, Maggie Peters life-career was that of an agitator. Only during WWII and

when she was having babies, was Maggie Peters not on the front lines. She was never elected an officer of the trade union she helped to found, nor held a political position. Mrs. Peters did not see that as her role. However, things would not have happened if she had not been there.

Another woman who was on the frontlines in the late 1930s was Hon. Lady Bustamante, widow of National Hero, Sir Alexander Bustamante. Devaluing her own position, she says, "I was secretary to Sir Alexander Bustamante for three years before the start of the BITU." The BITU (Bustamante Industrial Trades Union) was formed in 1939. So for 50 years and more she had been a member of that organization. I asked if more women were in leadership positions, would Caribbean trade unionism be different? Lady Bustamante replied that "yes, because women can manage very well since women put their minds to what is needed."

Another elderly Jamaican trade unionist is Miss Halcyone Idelia Glasspole, former office manager of the National Workers Union in Jamaica. Her brother was a trade union man and one of the founders of the modern labor movement in Jamaica. In 1988, when Miss Glasspole was interviewed, her brother Florizel Glasspole was the Governor General — the Queens representative of Jamaica. Miss Glasspole (she never married) entered union work in 1938 because of her brothers' involvement. "Everybody decided that we were going to form this big organization, the TUC [Trades Union Congress]. And so it was formed and we carried along. We only had a few female workers who did just the clerical work. We weren't interested in the organizing part of it, because it was terrible uphill work, and the men did that part of it, and we stayed inside and did the clerical work. And we struggled along, as I told you, it was a terrific fight, fighting the employers and we went right along until around... 1945 when we decided to call a strike at the Mental Hospital... The Bellevue Hospital now, and that was when you had the terrific upheaval." That struggle goes on, "And we were threatened to be sent to jail and that was hard, particularly for my bother because he was the general secretary so he was the mainstream of the struggle." Asked if this is how she got involved, she replied "yes, this is how I became involved."

Miss Glasspole was hesitant and very nervous during the interview. But by the end, she did relax a bit. However, she was not

free with information because she *still* sees herself as one of the few confidential and competent persons to have served in the early Trade Union Congress and the National Workers' Union. She is *still* very willing to give service, loyal and faithful to the labor movement.

Brenda Burnham represents another age cohort of women trade union leaders — those who joined in the early 1970s. She had been a member of the Barbados Workers Union for 15 years. When asked if her parents approved of her joining the labor movement she said “Well just being a member was no problem.” “At Executive level, especially when I had to go to the Exec meetings, my mother kept a lot of noise because it meant staying out late till one o'clock, two o'clock some mornings and she didn't like that at all, she quarrelled until I came off.”

Women from St. Vincent and Guyana had this to say about the opportunity for advancement, and what kinds of discrimination women experienced. These women clearly recognized too the limitations both in society and in themselves.

“Not many women were interested in advancing. They avoided the hard work that was associated with the leadership position.” “There are a number of women who are showing that they can separate, but I think that somewhere along the line there is still this traditional feeling that men must operate more readily in the positions... I think women have to prove too much that they have a super ability to be given the post first off-hand. You will not be given it as readily as if a man had come in and showing the kind of ability.”

“You must fight very hard and be very well educated if you are to attain these positions and men in the unions have not been superbly educated in terms of academic ability.”

“There is room for advancement and opportunity for both genders. But as we know in the trade union world many of the members are men and they can't but to work with men, so we, the women in the organization, have to speak out and show where we also need opportunities to advance our knowledge, our abilities.”

“Very often men did not support me because I was a woman. They felt I was playing a man because it was felt that trade unionism is for men.”

“The discrimination within the trade union is just like within any other organization... because the men and women — sometimes I

would even say more so the women — feel that men can handle the situation better than the women.”

“I know that... they look at you as an upstart, a strife-maker and why pay her sufficient attention that she'll think she's important, that is how I feel.”

In closing, I would like to let a young woman trade union leader from Barbados Workers Union do that for me. Miss “Watkins” says:

“You cannot be satisfied, you have to keep educating the women, keep getting behind the women to do things for themselves and then break them out of that whole pattern, that whole traditional role if possible. There will always be some women who will not change, but those of us who recognize that what benefits can be derived on a personal level from breaking away from the past in terms of what we are accustomed to, what are expected of us, what we have to do is to work on our children and work on other women where possible to get them to break out of the tradition, to take up things that are not necessarily seen as “women things,” get into areas which are not seen to have traditional women areas, see themselves as individuals and try to improve themselves as a person and try to take up more, be more ambitious in their goals, in their careers, take up more challenging roles. I would like to see women being recognized as proper equals not behind men nor out in front of men... Equality will preserve all through life.”

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