

Women and The Left in the Caribbean

by

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Introduction by
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CARIBBEAN LABOUR SOLIDARITY

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Preface

In keeping with CLS's commitment to presenting booklets on issues affecting the people of the Caribbean and its diaspora, it is with delight that I present this contribution of Marsha Hinds to you. Marsh raises here a very pertinent and often overlooked issue for Caribbean politicians and leaders. With more women coming to the forefront of politics in the region, the time is right for the 'woman question' to be addressed. In this contribution she pulls no punches in her analysis and criticism of male leadership where it is warranted. Women have always been engaged in the fight for liberation from slavery and colonialism, but too many of our male leaders have not taken women's issues seriously enough, despite the central role women often play in political party organisation. Marsha reminds us that Caribbean women were never the 'stay at home type', they toiled on the plantation in equal measure to the men, and suffered more because of their gender.

Marsha draws attention to our history of oppression and how it has left us with a few issues to sort out. Chronic issues of male leaders not taking responsibility for their actions, and often colluding with the sexual abuse and exploitation of women. A continuation of the oppression woman had to endure as a result of enslavement and colonisation.

The region continues to be a bastion of sexist and homophobic oppression and it is not enough for our leaders to spouse socialism or Marxism whilst ignoring 'the woman question' in these changing times. We need leaders proud to declare their anti-sexist and anti-homophobic credentials. More importantly that they demonstrate this in their lives. The 'personal is political' seems to have missed many a leader in the region and it is timely that Marsha draws our attention for this to be addressed in the region and diaspora. Too many of our leaders behave in oppressive manner against women whilst proclaiming to be revolutionary. There can be no revolution whilst half of the population is oppressed because of their sex. We owe a debt to Marsha for so boldly bringing this issue to our attention.

In solidarity
Luke Daniels
President Caribbean Labour Solidarity.

Woman and Caribbean Socialism¹

If We are for Liberation the Woman Question is a Legitimate Question

The Women of the Caribbean are owed a debt by the architects of the nationalist movements. Marxism has been a part of the political and intellectual ferment in the Caribbean which provided the framework for the creation of nationalist societies. While Marxism has provided a strong basis from which intellectuals such as Fanon and C.L.R James have constructed roadmaps for the creation of post-slavery Caribbean societies, the question of women and their integration into society as equal partners has been over and under looked. The problem perhaps reaches from as far back as the original intellectual footprint of Marxism and its development. On the one hand, it can be argued that by recognizing that societies are made up of "...a complicated arrangement...into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank" Marx and Engels leave room for the subjugation of women to be channelled and rejected.² On the other hand though, the major contention of feminists, womanists and other commentators has been that Marxism's inability to measure and count women's work related caring and reproduction has resulted in maintaining social structures that oppress women. In the context of societies characterized by plantation organization there were hierarchies of race and class as well as those constructed specifically along gendered lines.³

This paper calls attention to the need for a new revisioning of the place of women in the Caribbean socialist project. It uses womanist theory and the writings of foremothers in the Caribbean women's struggle including Andiaeye to first set out the historical and intellectual issues inherited by the women's movement. Next the paper considers how impediments such as race and class combined with patriarchy to weaken women's organising in the Caribbean. Finally, the paper asserts that women's organizing and treating embedded issues of misogyny and patriarchy cannot be seen as women's work alone. The paper affirms that Marxism and socialism as philosophical spaces still hold lessons of import for the Caribbean, but the erasure of women and their issues has been detrimental and needs addressing. Women have fought and dedicated their lives to drawing attention to these issues for years, but from the periphery of the 'real' intellectual discussion – this paper aims to centre the issues.

1 Caribbean in this article means the region commonly referred to as the Commonwealth Caribbean only. It shares a common history, culture and political profile.

2 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) p. 28

3 Hilary McD Beckles, *Sex and Gender in the Historiography of Caribbean Slavery*, In Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton, Barbara Bailey (eds) *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1995);

Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2001)

What if I told you there was a song, still highly regarded as an important mark of Barbados' folk culture, that glorifies street harassment of under-aged girls? What if I told you that even at the height of the #metoo revolution and the repositioning of views on men, and acceptable masculinity - manifested in the efforts to hold public figures like Bill Cosby and R. Kelly accountable - that Barbadian men were feeling no pressure to reposition themselves in relation to cultural and historical gender norms that legitimize the sexualization of pubescent girls and the general commodification of women? What if I tell you that the status and treatment of women in Barbados are issues socialist men – or most men for that matter – refuse to engage? The attitudes of socialist identifying men are specifically analysed in this paper, including through a brief review of the content of the popular folk song. The song records the experience of a woman going to the community pipe (the Standpipe) to catch water. The song begins with the male refrain,

Every day she come down hay she looking so good good. And every time she pass by hay I like to touch up she bumsy⁴, uh like to touch up she bumsy, uh like to touch up she bumsy.

As the female offers her refrain, we realize that she is actually a child:

Every time I pass they pull at me. Every time I pass they pull at me. I gonna tell me Mama doan send me down hay.

The men retort by affirming that women/girls, and not men, are the ones responsible for avoiding harassment:

Tell yuh Mama doan send yuh down hay.

The men also make it clear that they have no intention of stopping their harassment and that really no female in the family is safe. The exchanges in the song then expand to a conversation with other women witnessing the harassment:

Men: *If she Mama come down hay*

Women: *You trouble she*

Men: *If she aunty come down hay*

Women: *You trouble she*

Men: *If she sister come down hay*

Women: *You trouble she*

Men: *And if she pass back hay*

⁴ 'Bumsy' is a Creole term for posterior. It is usually used as a terms of endearment to females.

Women: *You trouble she*

The men end the retort with the women by reiterating the responsibility of women to keep themselves out of men's space:

Tell she Mama doan send she down hay.

The themes and expectations in the folk tale cannot be archived as a past or bygone era in Barbadian history, especially when interrogating the place of women within the political and social frameworks that create post-colonial societies. This song captures the Barbadian male's expectation to have the attention and bodies of women at their disposal. The song manifests the underlying sexualization of black female bodies that is an enduring legacy of the plantation social and economic model of production, and traditional gender norms that have been present and reinforced through heavy Christian religiosity in Barbados and the Caribbean. The tools that developed in the Caribbean as a part of the broader self-determination and nationalist project, heavily influenced by Marxism and socialism, from the 1930s onward has done very little to uproot the prevailing views about women. This paper argues that Barbadian men in particular⁵, but also Commonwealth Caribbean men more broadly, have evaded integrating the needs and care of women into their agendas for creating nation states and their day-to-day realities. The paper contends that socialism, the major framework used to resist colonial social structures and reimagining a new society after independence, did little to create space for the issues of women and girls.

There are ways in which socialism has created unsafe space for women by absolving men of unacceptable behaviour toward women. Through a discursive interaction between history and Marxism/socialism, the paper concludes that despite the historical subjugation of women by men there is space for different engagements in the 21st century Caribbean. Men's embrace of the concerns of women and girls is not just a choice, it is amends that are outstanding and need to be made. It is the final investigation and confrontation of all the ways that power relations affect the lives of women in the Caribbean. The paper seeks to add to the quickly growing literature on different aspects of the Caribbean intellectual history of the Caribbean. The understanding of intellectual history here is perhaps in line with the definition of Whatmore in terms of the importance of interdisciplinarity as an important feature.⁶ This current article is written on the intersection of the history of political movements

5 I have spent my entire career in activism focused on Barbados. While I accept that there are ways that the culture of the Commonwealth Caribbean is connected, I also realize that there are ways that to stretch analysis across multiple territories is overgeneralization. Readers who think it is appropriate to replace Commonwealth Caribbean with Barbados would not be wrong to do so. Conversely, readers who wish to read the paper as limited to Barbados also are not wrong to do so.

6 Richard Whatmore, *What is Intellectual History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2016) pp. 12-14

in the Commonwealth Caribbean and women's studies. Intellectual History has to be defined broadly for the purposes of this paper, as well as to effectively treat the many important observations of Aaron Kamugisha in "The Promise of Caribbean Intellectual History". Kamugisha makes the point that much of the material to be considered in the intellectual history of the Caribbean is not in traditional and tidy 'academic' receptacles. He explains, The figures who can be perceived as its [Caribbean social and political thought] chief theorists have a primary commitment to radical social change rather than scholarly tomes; and the profound (and uncompleted) epistemological decolonialization necessary to have this work recognized as worthy of critical study and engagement".⁷ By interrogating socialism as a praxis of decolonialization and how organization was done in Commonwealth Caribbean spaces, who was included and who was not, this work puts forward another type of consideration in building the intellectual historical footprint of the Caribbean. Not only are the writings of the architects important for what they share with us about ideas and the dissemination of ideas in important periods of our historical developments but the organizing of these important figures, and who they included and excluded also sheds important explanatory light on their beliefs, personal and philosophical non-negotiables, and in some cases unchecked biases.

Along with what it does for Commonwealth Caribbean intellectual history, the paper also adds Caribbean specific reflections to bodies of writing about women and socialism in other parts of the world and womanist and feminist knowledge. This paper agrees broadly, for instance, with the thesis of Gruber that socialism as a theoretical construct and praxis was more responsive to the 'woman question' than other options such as capitalism.⁸ Notwithstanding, Gruber does accept that, socialism and feminism are "...two great movements [that] grew to prominence, converged, diverged, competed, and cooperated. Each of these movements is viewed as a complex matrix of organized and unorganized participants".⁹ The competition between socialism and feminism is one of the major reasons that the woman question was poorly articulated within the Caribbean and other black struggles. The view of Lenin, for example that women should not be distracted in anyway by bourgeois concepts such as feminism and that these interest of women could detract from the struggle for the liberation of workers trickled throughout the philosophical space of socialism.¹⁰ Lenin's disdain for feminism was conflated and translated as a disregard for issues

7 Aaron Kamugisha, "The Promise of Caribbean Intellectual History", *Small Axe*, 47-60 (2021) p.52

8 Helmut Gruber and Pamela Graves, *Women And Socialism - Socialism And Women: Europe Between The World Wars* (New York: Berghahn Books 1998) p.4

9 *ibid.* p.4

10 Vladimir Lenin, *The Emancipation of Women* (New York: International Publishers, 1978) pp. 102, 103

Lenin's writing are related directly to communist Russia. However the broad philosophical underpinnings of Lenin and other writers would have had significant influence on the struggle in the Commonwealth Caribbean.

affecting women in the metatheory of socialism. However, close investigation of Lenin's repertoire of writings show that this is an erroneous interpretation. Several of Lenin's writings made it clear that he believed in equality for men and women as a tenet which both defined and differentiated communism from other systems like capitalism. While Lenin was opposed to what he thought to be bourgeois and useless approaches to the 'woman question' and others related to sex and sexuality, he also rejects mistreatment of women by their husbands.¹¹ Lenin also supported women's organizing within the wider struggle.¹² It is my contention, that an understanding of women's marginalization in socialist struggles in the Commonwealth Caribbean is rooted in colonial approaches to black women. Black women were the bottom rung of the racial and gender ladder that supported slave societies. Black women had no power or agency over their bodies and their usefulness was for their capacity to work in similar capacity to enslaved black males and further, to provide sexual exoticism. The views of black women and their place in Commonwealth Caribbean society are preserved and pervasive plantation relics. Those embedded views about women and insecurity about having the struggle split, if women opted to organize separately, made the men of the Caribbean struggles adamant about 'keeping women in their place' as a function of all types of organizing, in the interwar and subsequent years. I share the view of Lenin that feminism does not have much to offer to women in unequal power relations with the Western women who created the construct.¹³ Notwithstanding, Caribbean women have never been solely restricted to feminism in their liberation project. They used organic methods, other theoretical spaces such as womanism, or just the generic space of women's organizing.

Kristen Ghodsee in *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism* explores the financial liberation that socialist reforms allowed women in Russia historically.¹⁴ During slavery black women worked alongside their male counterparts in all aspects of plantation production.¹⁵ Women's work in the Commonwealth Caribbean obviously did not translate to economic empowerment because their labour was forced and unpaid. However, it is important to note that black and Indian women who make up the majority of the female population in Barbados and the Commonwealth Caribbean were never at any historical point, stay-at-home makers. Socialism was not liberatory for Caribbean women in the sense of moving them from inside to outside – it was the

11 *ibid.* p. 115

12 *ibid.* pp. 120, 121

13 *ibid.* pp. 120, 121

14 Kristen Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence*, (New York: Vintage, 2018)

15 Hilary McD Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989) pp. 1, 2

Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles* (2001) p.35

challenge to no and low waged work under colonial structures that created deep pockets of poverty in colonies which impacted women the most. Women were disproportionately affected, and they also were a critical mass in organizing against race and class oppression. Rhoda Reddock in her essay "The Politics of Sex, Race and Class" traces the involvement of women in the struggle of Trinidad and Tobago. Like in Trinidad, women were intricately involved in protests and other types of resistance across the Commonwealth Caribbean. Although that is true, little was done to tackle how women were treated by virtue of being women. Their involvement in the uprisings and organizing in the interwar years and the 1930s to 1970s in the Caribbean, from the point of view of their experiences as women, remains a significant lacuna in the literature. While this essay celebrates the contribution of the Commonwealth Caribbean to the overall development of socialism internationally, it also highlights the silence on women's issues that has resulted in the Commonwealth Caribbean societies still having unresolved issues such as detrimentally high levels of gender-based violence and archaic ways of dealing with children (especially girl children) in conflict with the law to cite two critical examples. The themes and attitudes to women highlighted in the folk song at the beginning of this article are unfortunately embedded in the relations between women and men who utilized socialist agenda to interrogate other forms of oppression including race and class oppression. Gender oppression became a subjugated scourge in the overall struggle. Ironically due to the way that oppression was constructed during slavery, this meant that only one half of the way that black people were dehumanized was confronted.

To understand current perceptions about Caribbean women it is important to connect to the way that socio-cultural patterns were established in plantation societies. The scholarship of Lucille Mathurin, Edward Brathwaite, Rhoda Reddock, Bernard Moitt and Hilary Beckles to name a few whose work has focused particularly on the Commonwealth Caribbean has offered critical insight into the lives of women on plantations. Beckles makes the point that gender was one of the constructing factors in creating slaves and slavery.¹⁶ The classification of being a slave resulted from the status of the mother at a child's birth, which meant that black women were particularly important in perpetuating the slave system. This fact led some analysts to classify the Commonwealth Caribbean both during the time of slavery and in subsequent periods as matrifocal. Beckles rejects that assertion.¹⁷ Slave plantations were constructed around white owners and masters. They were the ones with ultimate power over all the lives of women including white and brown women in plantation societies. For the purposes of showing some of the most entrenched and enduring ways that

16 Beckles, *Natural Rebels* (1989) p.131

17 *ibid.* p. 116

constructions of women and womanhood have impacted on current Commonwealth Caribbean social norms, I discuss intimate relations between man and woman, the fetishization and sexual violence against women and the relations between different kinds of women in plantation society. Socialism has not confronted any of the power relations and dynamics that undergird any of these relationships. The result has been that while we seek economic and political unity within and for black people living in the Commonwealth Caribbean, there are deep seated and festering cleavages in our own relations with each other. Beckles notes that polygamy was an African derived family structure that made its way into plantation society.¹⁸ While a full discussion of polygamy is outside the scope of this essay, it is important that we not simplify polygamy as a familial structure in Africa. Men and women are open in polygamous relationships and roles and responsibilities of each family member are established. Beckles concedes that laws on the slave plantation kept some families apart and thus there were changes to the structure of families even when African polygamy may have been the philosophical starting point. He also noted that 'polygamy' as he termed it became a privilege and class marker in the plantation setting.¹⁹ Polygamy as a patriarchal privilege in the plantation society would not have factored in any detriment to women it may have created. Furthermore, cheating is not polygamy. Beckles himself conceded the difference when outlining that the wives in multi unions had a cordial code of conduct.²⁰ This suggests that the women knew what their partners were doing and were not being lied to or evaded. I think there were both polygamous relationships and cheating in plantation society. Evidence that polygamy and cheating were not simply synonyms for the same behaviour comes from the fact that cheating persisted, Beckles asserts, after the nuclear family structures became the preferred structure by the end of slavery in 1838.²¹

Polygamy is not called out, what is, is the tendency for Commonwealth Caribbean men to conceal extra-relationships from primary/staunch intimate partners that cannot be subsumed under an African cultural retention. It must also be noted that cheating is a form of emotional abuse of an intimate partner. The behaviour is accompanied by other problematic ones such as gaslighting and withholding emotional bonding and support. Cheating also suggests that the male perpetrators do not understand the perpetuation of the colonial relic of unequal power relations, that arise when women use their bodies as barter, since they feel that they have little agency and offerings outside of their sexuality. It is possible for a person experiencing poverty and deprivation of basic needs to engage in self-preservation behaviour that is emotionally

18 Beckles, *Natural Rebels* (1989) pp. 118, 119

19 *ibid.* p. 121

20 *ibid.*

21 *ibid*

or psychologically detrimental, even to them as individuals.²² The conflation of cheating with polygamy is another way in which Caribbean men have dismissed the detrimental effect of their behaviour. Adherence to socialist ideologies has not changed the overall tendency. The disregard for women's emotional well-being is tied to another colonial relic – the unadulterated use of women's bodies for the purpose of recreating the slave population necessitated dehumanization of the black woman and her sexuality. The question is not about how many partners men take on but the ideological view of the female partner and his understanding of his role and responsibilities as a partner. If black women are seen as not needing support, and incapable of emotion they are basically treated the same way they were treated on the plantation – fetishized as sexual beings and resultingly, bearers of children they care singly for, with community assistance beyond the male.

Women's bodies, and especially black women's bodies due to their important role in reproducing the units of labour, were an important site of control on slave plantations. Black women's reproductive power became an enterprise, complementing other earnings for slave masters. Since plantation owners wanted to encourage black women to carry children, there were benefits derived by women. Moitt shows that women who carried four or more children could claim extra off days in French colonies.²³ Beckles reports similar for Barbados.²⁴ Black women derived various stereotypes in society based on their reproductive capacity. Slave owners mistrusted them and sought to legislate control of abortions and other means that women used, to resist giving birth in slavery. Moitt also notes that women in slavery were impacted by venereal diseases.²⁵ The diseases that women in slave societies contracted, undoubtedly resulted from their inability to control their bodies, but rather than that fact being the focus, women were labelled as licentious and loose. These stereotypes about women lingered far beyond slave societies. The power dynamics that created the barter of sex by women for financial gain, and to meet their basic survival needs were also overlooked. Men of all classes and races in the colonies availed themselves of women's bodies, fully absolved of responsibility for their actions. Moitt concurs with other writers that "...women were blamed for their own victimization".²⁶ Sexual abuse of pubescent girls in Barbados and the Commonwealth Caribbean remains a cultural feature. Girls are still described as 'hot' or 'force ripe' as a justification for their sexualization and exploitation.

22 Beckles, *Natural Rebels* (1989) p.130

23 Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles* (2001) p.94

24 Beckles, *Natural Rebels* (1989) p. 97

25 Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles* (2001) p.93

26 *ibid.* p.99

The unwillingness of socialism to fully engage the 'women question' and the 'softer' societal issues has left us firmly entrenched in the very plantation ethos which we set out to destroy with placard and protest. Another little discussed relic of slavery is the ways that it has caused mistrust and division among women in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Both white women and black women were oppressed within the construction and validation of the slave society but because of the connection between women's organizing and Black self-determination/anti-colonial struggles, white women have not been included as welcomed partners in women's organizing in Barbados. There has been a complicated but largely unaddressed relationship among white, brown, and black women. This is a relic of the way that these women were ranked in the plantation society and the separations of the roles they were seen as suited for. Beckles notes that colour gradations were significant in terms of women's ability to use sex as a means to manumission or financial stability.²⁷ White women also owned slaves in the Commonwealth Caribbean and traded black women for sexual labour. Many white women endured their husbands' open flirtations and liaisons with black women. The divisions of labour and ownership and the patriarchal construction of plantation society caused socio-cultural disdain and complicated relations among women in the Caribbean. The divisions obscured the reality that no woman was spared the cruelty of the slave society. Commonwealth Caribbean socialism has inherited a complex structure in terms of uniting women in the Caribbean for the purpose of struggle. Whereas in Western society where socialism originated, women were more easily categorized into bourgeois or proletarian categories, in the Commonwealth Caribbean there was an interconnected and complex set of norms and values that resulted in different types of plural 'bourgeoises' – for white women or black women and different ways that women themselves exploited each other – black middle-class homeowner on black working class maid. The differences among women have been overlooked and it has resulted in generally weak women's groups both within socialist organizing and beyond. These issues have been overlooked by socialist struggle in the Caribbean. Socialist struggles have not challenged class oppression because many of the leaders of the struggle have been middle class or aspired to be middle class and gender oppression ignored because many of the leaders have been male.

The relations among Black women and men were also affected by life in plantation societies. Black men were a subjugated class and did not possess equivalent power and privilege to white men. Black men were also oppressors because they subjugated black women and children. In some cases, based on jobs such as slave driving or artisanal work, Black men could accumulate quite significant power and privilege in plantation

²⁷ Beckles, *Natural Rebels* (1989) p.147

society. Black men and women also participated in the sale of black sex and black bodies within plantation societies in order to survive. Beckles captures the dynamics of oppression that resulted in white men being more desirable as partners for many women in the slave plantation structure due to wealth and jobs being racially controlled.²⁸ He also notes that the practices of bartering sex by women in slave plantations and expecting sex to accompany several female dominated jobs such as washing, housekeeping and seamstress became a part of the cultural overlay of Barbados and Commonwealth Caribbean slave societies.²⁹ These norms were inherited by the societies, and the riots and rebellions of the 1930s and then nationalism by the 1960s on, did not replace these social norms. One of the fundamental oversights of socialism in the Caribbean is that it started from the point of black men as racially subjugated people without dealing with their complicity in class and gender subjugation of others. Rhoda Reddock calls out the male-centric nature of reform movements and socialism in the early 1900s in Trinidad.³⁰ She also traced the involvement and contribution of women in socialist organizing in the Caribbean.

Up to now I have used the term socialism in setting forth some of the historical gaps between plantation society and the framework for resistance in the interwar period, but I have not defined the term. For the purpose of this paper, socialism is used to capture a series of related political phenomenon that contributed to the overall resistance movement in the Commonwealth Caribbean, starting in the interwar years and culminating in several of the former British colonial strongholds, mainly connected by the Caribbean Sea, but including Guyana on the South American continent which became independent from the 1960s on. Various themes for the various political movements which were both interconnected and discontinuous include self-determination/anti-colonial/anti-racist/nationalist/panAfricanism. Margaret Stevens in *Red International and Black Caribbean* captures the ideological complexity of liberation in Black radical organizing. In discussing the connection between Harlem and the Caribbean she writes that there was a ...hodgepodge framework within which liberation was proclaimed [and which] represents a microcosm of the contradictions and forces at work in the political movement that was the New Negro Harlem [and Commonwealth Caribbean] scene of 1919".³¹ Stevens notes that despite the contradictions the Caribbean represented "...a critical epicentre that prompted the growth and spread of black radical ideas...".³² The Commonwealth Caribbean was an

28 *ibid.* pp. 147, 148

29 Beckles, *Natural Rebels* (1989) pp.142-3

30 Rhoda Reddock, *Women Labour and Politics In Trinidad and Tobago: A History* (New Jersey: Zed Books 1994) pp. 99, 100

31 Margaret Stevens, *Red International and Black Caribbean: Communists in New York City, Mexico and the West Indies, 1919-1939* (London: Pluto Publishers 2017) p. 23

32 *ibid.* p. 24

important living laboratory in the theories and praxis of Bolshevism, communism, socialism – pretty much every challenge to oppression except those rooted in gender, and resulting in unequal power relations arising from patterns of slavery that bore sexual privileges for men. The gender aspects of the plantation structure of society is still in place in the Caribbean. Men still expect sexual favors to be an embedded perk of their social status. There is a willingness to overlook sexual and other kinds of violence against women and to blame the victim in all cases.

Socialism has harboured men who are problematic in their behaviour and leave unchallenged colonial codes of interaction between women and men. In 2020 Barbadian based pan Africanist, David Comissiong writes *The Pan-African Love Story of Arnold and Mignon Ford*. Seemingly completely tone deaf to the influence and push back of the #metoo and #lifeinleggings movements, the book glorifies an older (married) man using his position of power to have a relationship with a far younger girl whom he meets in the course of his work and activism in Garveyism.³³ Comissiong notes that the mentor/mentee relationship" between Arnold Ford and Mignon Inniss led to the end of his first marriage, and subsequent remarriage to Mignon, who was twenty-four, thirty years her husband's junior. My reason for highlighting this 'love story' is not to pass judgement on whether Mignon enjoyed a happy marriage or not. What the story reveals are the ways in which socialism overlooked the unequal power relations and traditional interactions between men and women that were rooted in the plantation experience. A part of the more recent challenge that socialist organizing has had with capturing mass imagination in the Commonwealth Caribbean region is its willingness to uphold particularly problematic 'socialist' leaders. Defiant defense of the Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines comes readily to mind as an example. Gonsalves was a noted communist and socialist figure during his student days at the University of the West Indies, Mona. He was the President of the Guild of Students during the student protest that erupted after popular History lecturer, Dr. Walter Rodney was denied entry into Jamaica after an intellectual engagement in Canada. However, Gonsalves' career has been blotted with accusation of sexual violence and inappropriateness by several women. This type of leadership mimics the plantation structure, with the overlord expecting sexual availability from all women. Where there are accusations of sexual misbehavior they are expected to be set aside with the support of other men and to a lesser extent, women. There have also been questions about the freeness and fairness of elections in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. This has left some of the most radical women in the Commonwealth Caribbean displaced because to participate in socialist struggle is to

³³ David Comissiong, *The Pan-African Love Story of Arnold and Mignon Ford* (Bridgetown: Clement Payne Cultural Centre, 2020) pp.34-5

continue to be self-deprecating. When Kristina Hinds and I stood against the abuses of Vincentian state power that resulted in a young woman being arbitrarily held at a psychiatric institution, we were booed and jeered by senior leaders of the Caribbean left in the Caribbean.³⁴ Socialism and more broadly the left in the Caribbean is weakening the struggle by refusing to engage social injustices rooted in gender.

In reflecting on the demise of the Grenada revolution, Andaiye expressed surprise at the unwillingness to harness the revolutionary potential of women.³⁵ Of the most significant problems Andaiye noted that men were speaking on behalf of women in the party structure, there was sexism and a disregard for the issues of women by party leadership, and women themselves seemed not to feel that they had the agency and political skills to demand to be a part of what was happening with the communist project in Grenada.³⁶ Andaiye notes that the treatment of women by the revolutionary project in Grenada gave impetus to how women organized in the Caribbean by providing an example of what not to do.³⁷ Ironically, Caribbean intellectual, Aaron Kamugisha believes that if the left of the Commonwealth Caribbean is still alive and thriving in any way it is largely because of the work being done in what he calls feminist and LGBTI organizing. He asserts:

It is, though, as I alluded to earlier, an error to view the Caribbean left's history as a tale of decline since 1983. In the past three decades, the most discerning interventions in the quest for human freedom beyond coloniality have come through the work of Caribbean feminist thinkers, who have fundamentally transformed our conversations about citizenship, the law, lived experience and intersubjective relations, and revised the conditions of possibility through which Caribbean people conceive of their belonging and citizenship within their nation-states. This transformation is routinely missed by both the Pan-Africanists and leftists of a generation who still hold on to a very narrowly conceived view of Caribbean social and political transformation. (I am talking of the type who will blithely speak of the Caribbean man and his woman" or suggest that our womenfolk" need to caucus among themselves as part of the movement forward).³⁸

34 After the Yugee Farrell affair reached the peak of criticism, Gonsalves was enabled to present a public lecture at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus in February 2018. This tactic of invoking respectability after an incident involving his treatment of women was a clear pattern in his abusive cycle. Then Lecturer in political science, Dr. Kristina Hinds organized a three woman protest against Gonsalves in the lecture hall. He was supported by prominent men in the Caribbean including David Comissiong and Prof. Hilary Beckles. See coverage of the protest here "UWI lecturer protests against Gonsalves in Barbados", *iWitness News* (23 Feb 2018) <https://www.iwnsvg.com/2018/02/23/uwi-lecturer-protests-against-gonsalves-in-barbados/>

35 Andaiye, *The Grenada Revolution, the Caribbean Left, and the Regional Women's Movement: Preliminary Notes on One Journey*. In A. Trotz, *The Point Is To Change the World: Selected Writings of Andaiye* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) p.42

36 *ibid.* pp42-3

37 *ibid.* p.44

38 Aaron Kamugisha, "Caribbean revolutionary movements and 1968", *New Frame* (28 January 2019) <https://www.newframe.com/caribbean-revolutionary-movements-and-1968/>

It seems as though the 'woman question' offers a redeeming space not just for the women of the Commonwealth Caribbean but also for socialism and the left of the Caribbean. Far from having fractured the movement women have offered a continued lifeline to left organizing in the Caribbean. The men of the Caribbean must now be resolute enough not to want to be the 'massa' of Caribbean women's bodies and sexualities but to address unequal relations such that Caribbean women can be true equals and enjoy the liberation that they helped to struggle for under banners of anti-colonialism, communism, and socialism. Black men on the Caribbean Left have been more concerned with gaining the benefits of the bourgeois class and Massa than with dismantling the oppressions necessary to enable those privileges. Kamugisha terms it the "cooptation by the left".³⁹ It has kept heavy investment in toxic models of masculinity in relation to partnering, partnering and social justice in post-colonial Commonwealth Caribbean spaces. Even with the lack of robust data mechanisms St. Vincent and the Grenadines has the third highest rape rate per 100 000 in the population according to United Nations reporting. In Barbados, there is systemic abuse of girls in state care. Liberation in the context of the Commonwealth Caribbean has been simplified to mean male liberation and that liberation does not even come with a caveat against oppressing others. Misogyny and colonial relics are robbing the Left and socialism from progress. This essay is a call to action to the men of the Caribbean – to the vanguard.

39 *ibid.*

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Women and the Left in the Carriibbean

by
Marsha Hinds Myrie

Introduction by Luke Daniels

Marsha Hinds Myrie is a Barbadian/Canadian citizen with an ancestral, cultural and intellectual home in Africa.

She is the immediate past president of the National Organization of Women of Barbados, and has spent 22 years developing an advocacy model to address the issues of underprivileged groups of women in Barbados, and the Caribbean. Marsha has lectured at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill and St. Augustine campuses since 2009 and continues to teach applied equity related courses at both Campuses. Currently, Marsha is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Guelph (Ontario). She is also a sitting member of the Pickering Public Library (Ontario) Anti-Black racism group.

Marsha is the co-director of the first Barbadian victim-led, non-governmental charity, providing services for women affected by gender based violence; Operation Safe Space.

Luke Daniels is President of Caribbean Labour Solidarity. He is the author of *Pulling the Punches: Defeating Domestic Violence*, a self-help, awareness raising book for perpetrators.

He has also written *Defeating Domestic Violence in the Americas-Men's Work* which argues that domestic violence is political action to keep women subordinated and it is only by political action that lasting solutions to end the violence can be found. Perpetrators need counselling support to end their violent behaviour but men must take responsibility for their violence. Governments have responsibility for passing laws and providing for survivors and work with perpetrators.

