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## **Gnawing at the Seams: Challenges for Contemporary Jamaican Feminism and the Equality Question\***

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### **Abstract**

Long before the term “feminism” existed, women always sought opportunities for social and economic empowerment, whether through welfare-oriented schemes or through other forms of activism. The 1970s Caribbean experience marked significant developments in feminism where women advocated, and through those efforts, permeated state institutions to achieve legal shifts in the interest of themselves and their children. During that era, both local and global women’s activism converged to address issues of inequality and discrimination and, as a result, reaped positive results where basic reforms were concerned. In Jamaica, there was extensive legal reform as several new laws were enacted as well as amendments made to existing laws. This was especially significant in the matters related to equality of pay despite sex, legitimizing the status of all children, maintenance, maternity leave, *inter alia*. Although these were major achievements, there were still issues that continued to contribute to asymmetrical gender relations. This paper, therefore, discusses how women’s achievements within a patriarchal space were not indicative of changes in conventional gender ideologies; more importantly, it questions the extent to which the legacy of the past, by itself, within the context of women’s

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achievement and women's politics, is capable of charting new directions for contemporary feminism.

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## Introduction

Contemporary Caribbean societies have emerged from the historical processes of colonial oppression, and activism for social and political transformation has always been part of the history as well as part of Caribbean sociocultural experiences. This has had an impact on the ways in which Caribbean women and men understand, and relate to, issues of oppression and survival. The agitation for suffrage in the early twentieth century, for example, underscored that women were aware of the social and political inequalities, and how the denial of rights marginalized their social existence. The activism also highlighted that they understood the value of women's political participation, and that social change would come through their own efforts to transform the space in which they lived. Women's achievement in winning the vote was significant but marginal, as the majority of women were disenfranchised by the law that excluded those of the lower social strata. Only women of the elite class, with property that was at least twice the size of those owned by men, were considered worthy of the vote (Vassell 1993). The significance of women's franchise was embodied in the fact that patriarchy had relented, and women could actually see the worth of women's collective organizing. The activism demonstrated that state institutions could be permeated despite their seeming to be monolithic with respect to control, governance and power.

This earlier liberal approach to feminism (though it may not have been called *feminism* then) which focused on institutional shifts, was reflected in the agitations for social transformation at different periods leading into the decade of the 1970s. One outstanding example is the advocacy for reforms in 1938, when women such as Mary Morris Knibb and Edith Clarke (Moyne Commission Report) petitioned the Moyne Commission to make legislative changes that would improve the social conditions of poor women and children (West India Royal Commission Report 1945). There were several proposals for legislative change—for example, to amend the existing Maintenance Law in an attempt to address matters related to *illegitimacy* (a status assigned to children born out of wedlock); to address issues of paternity and the maintenance of children. That women's advocacy focused on these issues suggests that women were aware of the impracticability of the colonial laws in dealing meaningfully with the issues of Caribbean family and women's social existence.

After universal adult suffrage was won in 1944, and a new Constitution was institutionalized, the discriminatory nature of the laws persisted and fomented continued activism. This discrimination was evident in the Laws of Jamaica as they existed in 1944, with particular reference to laws such as the Work Permit Law that disallowed women from passing citizenship to their children; the Bastardy Law that created categories of children in relation to each other, by ceding rights and opportunities based on the marital status of parents; the Maintenance Law that placed the burden of proof of paternity squarely on the shoulders of women, and other anomalies despite the establishment of a new Constitution. Women's journey, therefore, into the 1970s would have been long and hard. It should not be surprising that committees such as the Cumper Committee and the Law Reform Committee emerged in the early '70s. The Women's Desk (later renamed

the Bureau of Women's Affairs) was institutionalized as early as 1973, prior to the United Nations Decade for Women 1975–1985 (Reddock 1998).

The path of feminism in Jamaica was clear in the 1970s. There was a deviation from the earlier forms of welfare-oriented activism such as that adopted by the Jamaica Federation of Women (Vassell 1993). The establishment of the Women's Desk in 1973, in the Office of the Prime Minister, was the corollary of the activism of Mavis Gilmour and Lucille Mathurin Mair. Indeed, the institutionalizing of the Women's Desk (renamed the Bureau of Women's Affairs) was one of the firsts in the world (Reddock 1998). These women had demanded state intervention in addressing the social and economic difficulties of poor women. This visionary move challenged the power structures from within, signaling that women understood state capacities, and the ways in which opportunities may be linked to state political ideologies. Comparisons may be drawn between the achievements of women in Jamaica in the 1970s under democratic socialism and the achievements of women in Guyana in the 1970s under cooperative socialism—which will not be discussed in this paper.

Feminists have always argued concerning the patriarchal nature of states, and the extent to which there can be reform in the male-centeredness of the power structure. This is linked to how states tend to use the rule of law to position masculinity in relation to femininity, which in turn underscores the ways in which laws help to shape ideologies, and also determine the nature of women's social existence. That women must turn to the State for redress is paradoxical, although the establishment of legal structures is a first step in the inculcation of new notions to confront women's differential participation. Clearly there are dangers in leaving the administering of justice to the patriarchal State, and similarly, there is jeopardy in State-run feminist structures. Anderson Manley (1991) pointed out the danger as feminism runs the risk of becoming “part of the same patriarchal process that denies women their rights.” The harmonization of feminist interests with the interests of the State is oxymoronic, and threatens the possible co-option of feminism by the State. Anderson Manley's reference to the failure of the Bureau of Women's Affairs throughout the Caribbean to get substantive support from the respective governments, highlighted the peripheral treatment of women's interests by states. This failure brings into question the custodianship of women's gains by the patriarchal State, but also challenges the local women's movement to find ways to protect the victories won by women's collective organizing. Indeed, the energies exerted by past women's activists, how they confronted the issues, how the women's movement was experienced by activists and by other groups, and women's gains through reforms, spoke volumes concerning the visibility and the success of the advocacy.

The contemporary situation does not suggest a level playing field with respect to issues of inequality and justice, despite the reforms of the past. Issues of domestic violence, incest, rape, abortion, substantive representation of women in Parliament and other structures, among others, still prevail. Though a few women tend to be in the forefront in the contemporary Jamaican situation, such as through their participation in Beijing Plus Five, a corollary of the Decade for Women 1975–1985, the silence across women's organizations, the incoherence, the inconsistent nature and sporadic moments of

advocacy, force those who are not in denial to admit some dysfunctionality in the contemporary Jamaican women's movement. The big question is, where have all the feminists gone? (Castello 2006) Other questions are, have we passed the baton on to the State to address the women's issues, given that women's past gains were mainly institutionalizations within the power structures of the State? Are we so satisfied with the reforms of the past that any other difficulties are minute, and in time, will naturally be righted? Have we run out of gas? Do we now feel that equality is reached given women's educational achievements in institutions of higher learning?

In defining the contemporary women's movement, Taylor (1986) noted that it encompasses a proliferation of independent organizations, with ideological heterogeneities and goals that are loosely connected by overlapping memberships and networks. This points to a flat organizational structure that is capable of supporting decentralized leadership, and as such, increased autonomy should emerge. This particular structure is expected to enhance capacity for the expansion of goals within the context of collective organizing and advocacy. Though the contemporary women's movement should have all the features to support effective and substantive representation of Jamaican women, the invisibility and inaudibility despite the issues suggest that there is an empty space to be filled. In fact, women's past achievements and the ways in which women networked with the State for reforms in their interest should have indicated to contemporary activists the capacities of the transformative potential of feminism. Hence this phase of invisibility needs further research. It may be debatable as to whether the complexities concerning the sociocultural environment and patriarchy, the power relations, modernity and globalization, to name a few, may have intertwined to create an environment of diverse foci in which women's concerns are not necessarily central.

A survey conducted in 2004, by Shakira Maxwell, showed that students pursuing courses in gender at the University of the West Indies, Mona campus, were not aware that a feminist movement exists. This information is important as it highlights the dormancy of the movement. Though I do not claim to have all the answers, I would like to posit that the flatness in the organizational structure of the movement, and the fact that there is no clear structure which ensures centralized focus on pressing issues, may have contributed to the seeming fragmentation and incoherence. I also posit that a Jamaican feminist tradition of liberalism may now have led to the co-option of feminism within the structures of the State. This may be linked to the economic dependence of Jamaica on international funds and the limited resources for feminist initiatives. The other dimension could be that women's educational achievement in institutions of higher learning (as noted in the UWI Student Admission, Registration and Graduation 2007/8 Statistics) may have encouraged women into professional capacities, leaving a void for outreach activists. While nothing is wrong with women's search for social and economic power, it is also imperative that the substantive representation of women by other groups of women is not clouded by the personal politics of class and limited opportunities. It is within this context that a new category of "feminists" may have emerged—*femocrats*. The term *femocrats* refers to educated women who have strategically placed themselves in positions of power in some women's organizations. These are women who were never involved in the activism of the past, have no particular interest in the issues of the present

outside of issues that facilitate their enlightened self-interest. They have not made any significant contribution to the feminist struggle and have little, if any, commitment to the cause. They create parallel patriarchal cultures in their work spaces in which the subordinates are underpaid, undervalued, overworked and oppressed. This may have resulted from a Movement that has not been structured to include mechanisms of accountability.

bell hooks' (1989) critique of the contemporary women's movement pointed to its emergence, as that which came out of a commitment to eliminate sexism, but hooks posited that the positioning of the movement within a larger cultural framework has served to contradict its broader aim for collective change. bell hooks, in her observation of the contemporary women's movement, noted as follows:

“...Initially I believed that the women who were active in feminist activities were concerned about sexist oppression and its impact on women as a collective group. But I became disillusioned as I saw various groups of women appropriating feminism to serve their own opportunistic ends. Whether it was women university professors crying sexist oppression (rather than sexist discrimination) to attract attention to gain promotion; or women using feminism to mask their sexist attitudes; or women writers superficially exploring feminist themes to advance their own careers, it was evident that eliminating sexist oppression was not the primary concern...” hooks (1989)

The importance of this critique is that it brings into full view an observation that is not Caribbean but still has relevance in the Caribbean. It suggests that the phenomenon is not unique to the Caribbean, but that there are challenges in some directions of contemporary feminism. Given that the interest of feminism is to transform the lives of poor women, then shouldn't there be measures to ensure that female leaders in feminist organizations are committed? Shouldn't the pastor be a Christian, the Pujari, a Hindu, the Houshi-sama, a Buddhist, and the activists and leaders in the Women's Movement, feminist? In fact, interviews conducted with 60 percent of female employees in three women's organizations in Jamaica headed by women, highlighted that the workers were distressed by the harsh work environments (Shirley 2006). The comments made by female staff ranged from unclear hiring and promotion policies to no succession planning, among other complaints. That female workers working in three separate situations had anti-feminist experiences in spaces supposedly run by “feminists”, *gnaws at the seams of Jamaican feminism*. If women's experiences were to be treated as empirical knowledge, then support must be given to “the concept that less powerful members (individuals and groups) are potentially capable of a more complete view of social reality than the privileged, precisely because of their disadvantaged positions” (Baksh-Soodeen 1998). The intersection of different experiences theoretically challenges the notion of subjective analysis. It points to lost opportunities for the movement to harness the support of women, as obtained in the past when organizations such as the Committee of Women for Progress and the People's National Party (PNP) Women's Movement garnered mass support in the struggle for reforms in the 1970s (Interview with Anderson Manley 2005).

It may be argued that these experiences may be linked to the sociocultural issues of classism and oppression which transcend commitments to social transformation. This is evidenced in the work of Linnette Vassell (1993), which illustrated that the legacies of colonialism have had adverse effects on the history and path of feminism in Jamaica. She noted the visionary move of black feminists in Jamaica to establish the Save the Children Fund in 1938, that emerged as a result of the need to bypass the hurdles that were erected by white feminists in Jamaica. To take a step closer, the Minimum Wage legislation was resisted by some middle-class women in the PNP Women's Movement in the 1970s which led to dissension in the organization (Henry 1986). Though it may be argued that their apprehension may have been guided by their position as employers, the fact that they dissented underscored their priorities and challenged the substantive representation of poor women by other groups of women. Closer yet, the political campaign for PNP Party leadership in Jamaica, in 2005, squarely pointed to the difficulties in the social class phenomenon. Portia Simpson, the first female to run for president in the People's National Party, was not supported by the PNP Women's Movement, not even for her symbolism. In an article in the *Sunday Gleaner* entitled "Beware Endimites and PhDs For Hire", the journalist Dawn Ritch wrote the following:

"She (Portia) won against the political status quo, the party machinery, the media and the intelligentsia. All the PNP women's organizations lined up solidly behind Dr. Peter Phillips or Dr. Omar Davies, to say nothing of an endless string of female celebrities from the party, beginning from Maxine Henry Wilson, Beverley Anderson Manley...There was no feminist enthusiasm for Portia whatsoever...her victory was a plain and straight revolt by the grassroot for a human centred approach to governance..." (March 19, 2006)

The lack of support by the feminist movement pointed to the ways in which conventional gender ideologies are complexly intertwined in the issues of class and identity. It highlighted the schisms between groups of women, the personal politics of group identity and how these are connected to understandings of femininity and women's capacities.

In recalling the social experiences of the granting of early suffrage rights, the contemporary understandings of femininity and difference may also be linked to the history of class discrimination that was supported by the state laws which determined how gender should be governed. The Machiavellianism, in terms of how groups of women selectively support other groups of women, evident in the Portia scenario, the politics of the PNP Women's Movement in the 1970s, and in the contemporary, the treatment of working-class women by women in positions of power in some women's organizations are all evidence of class discrimination. The flip-flop between class prejudices and issues of empowerment presented a challenge for some women. In the case of Portia Simpson, Dawn Ritch noted that Portia's support was from the grassroots which brings into question elitist perspectives on grassroot leadership capacities. But more importantly, it draws a parallel to the patriarchal ideologies which predetermine women's roles based on the understanding of women's capacities. Although it may be

argued that feminism in the '70s was led by the middle-class, it may also be debated how far middle-class women were willing to go, given the dissension that arose over the Minimum Wage legislation which would have benefited poor women (Henry 1986).

### **Conclusion**

That female university students who were studying gender were not aware of the existence of the women's movement indicates that the movement had become obscure. The mirroring of patriarchal cultures in a few women's organizations led by women highlighted a weakness in the movement, that suggests the need for greater accountability. The *immobility* of a movement suggests stasis, and calls for a new era that will continue to chart new directions in the interest of women's empowerment. The new era must acknowledge that the issues of the past are still much a part of the present and the future. It should value legacies of the past with a view to creating new ones, as the movement is not sacrosanct. It continues to be a work in progress in a changing environment where new and different issues will emerge. Women's gains ought not to be trivialized nor memorialized as primeval achievements within the fluidity of social and political change but should be recognized as fundamental to a social project that is not yet completed.

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