

Abstract

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Electoral Systems, Socio-economic Conditions and Gender Performance in the Commonwealth Caribbean.

In the context of changes in the global economy, many Caribbean countries like Barbados have sought to redefine themselves as service economies. This shift has had an impact on labour demands with young women being in high demand for the new types of industry in the data processing zones and call centres. This 'new labour' development has placed significant stress on the Caribbean women and Caribbean families –24 hour days, three shifts, no corresponding support for family and childcare, Young men are being excluded, from the formal workforce, as they are not encouraged to work in these areas, as the work is tedious and deemed not suitable to men's characteristics.

It is not only in the socio-economic systems, that women find themselves at the lower echelon of society. Their socio-economic location is also reflected in their virtual political exclusion. Here, women are where 'power is not'. Regional statistics suggest that women continue to experience discrimination at the political level for a variety of reasons. For one thing the historical record shows that women have been under represented in national parliaments, even in the context of the grant of universal adult suffrage in 1951. Where women are involved in national political institutions their presence is merely symbolic, often an exercise in tokenism. Indeed, there is a historical reluctance of political parties to nominate women as candidates given the socio-cultural biases which predispose Caribbean electorates to view women as being suitable for non political and non leadership roles. Notwithstanding the election of Eugenia Charles to the highest political office in the Republic of Dominica and the February 2006 selection of Portia Simpson Miller by the PNP to succeed the current Prime Minister P. J. Patterson as current leader of the party, thus ensuring her ascension to the office of the Prime Minister of Jamaica upon his resignation in April 2006.

Thus, even in the context of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the recommendations of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and the UNDP to undertake strategies and

measures to substantially reduce gender inequality in the socio-economic and political spheres, the evidence in the region shows that Caribbean women continue to experience discriminatory practices. Moreover, the rising level of fundamentalism in the region has been accompanied by calls for the retreat of women to their traditional roles in the society.

This paper will therefore seek to explore three central issues:

1. regional female participation as it is expressed in their presence in parliamentary representative institutions and
2. The impact of electoral systems on gender representation in parliament
3. globalisation and public policy as it affects women and men economically and socially.