



Should We Still Hope? Gender Policy, Social Justice, and Affect in the Caribbean

[Michelle V Rowley](#)

Associate Professor
Department of Women's Studies
Woods Hall
University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland

Abstract

National gender policies continue to be offered as redemptive, an instrument that saves us from inequity, and excessive – an instrument that challenges scarce resources if implemented. In this paper, I try to engage this tension by first examining the ways in which engagements with these policies are rendered and narrativized by Caribbean nation-states. I then argue for an affective turn, noting that if policy is to be effective it must first matter – people must care (as distinct from want). To this end, I argue for the building of “gender polities” and point to the work of queer activism in the region as a possible model for how this idea of a “gender polity” might prove to be effective.

Keywords: social justice, national gender policy, gender polity, queer activism, Caribbean

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The Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing) of 1995 brought unprecedented attention to the question of “gender” as a category of sociopolitical transformation. The impassioned speeches of Burmese human rights activist and dissident Aung San Su Kyi and then First Lady of the United States, Hillary Rodham Clinton, signalled a bold and strident assertion of women’s ontological value. Women’s rights were named as human rights and pronounced integral to the pursuit of “peace, security, human rights and democracy.” Both speakers sealed a link between two actors – women and the state. Two actors, who, going forward, would need to find a language to talk to each other.¹

Contemporary “national gender policies” are now the primary scripts used for these conversations. Consequently, I am keen to understand the kind of conversations that are documented in these scripts and the ways that gender policies orient our attention toward certain issues and away from others. Further, and by way of redress, I’m interested in the kinds of strategies that might minimize the many ways in which these two agents often talk past each other. Yet, despite this dissonance and limited efficacy, the script matters. As such, the underlying premise of this paper is that feminists, regardless of where located, must continue to lobby for and insist on the value and relevance of national gender policies. I nonetheless argue that while lobbying for state-based gender policies, gender advocates located within the state should be about the business of strategic circumnavigation, a circumnavigation that becomes necessary as a result of the many ways that Caribbean states fail one of the core principles of gender policies – that of social justice. This paper traverses the rhetorical terrain of the relationship that exists between Caribbean states and women. I first offer a regional overview of the ways in which the category of “gender” has been emptied of its transformative possibilities, and then argue for a cognitive turn away from efficiency models of policy formulation to ones governed by an affective analytic. For state-based advocates to think of policy through the terrain of affect, lies so far outside of current political and partisan approaches to gender policy that it may require a strategic feminist circumnavigation of the state to do so. However, I argue in this paper that

national gender policies are in dire need of a gender polity; one that in turn may help resuscitate the transformative possibilities of gender by holding the state accountable for issues of equity. My speculation in this paper is that navigating through a framework of affect may help facilitate this goal. Finally, I consider the ways that ongoing queer activism in the region may indeed offer a template of how to build such a polity.

Gender's Abduction – Finding a Home in the State

A peculiar thing happened on the English-speaking Caribbean's march to gender equity – an abduction occurred. But for the notice of a few academic feminists and activists, the state abduction of “gender” as a marker of justice and equality in the Caribbean not only occurred but went largely unreported. The modus operandi for this abduction has been variable, but there are a few things that we can say with certainty. We can, for example, say with some certainty that the conditions that placed “gender” on the run have exhibited striking similarities from one Caribbean territory to the other: a slow elimination of the agents intended to protect it, the eviction from its home (ministry), parried from one home to the next until too weary to evade capture; the circulation of political rhetoric that marks it as a drain on the state, as foreign, or not quite in the interest of the country's citizenry; and finally, the elimination of the needed financial support that would allow it to rectify these assaults.

So, while my musings of a state-sponsored abduction may be metaphoric, they are neither hyperbolic nor far-fetched. A simple examination of the category's gradual diminishment at the hands of state driven politics offers no shortage of evidence to this end. How else might we, for example, account for country gender status reports that begin by noting that “an analysis in 2013 revealed that GFPs (gender focal points) were “missing” from a number of ministries. It has been recommended that GFPs should be appointed to all ministries in which they are missing.” (Caribbean Development Bank 2014A, 61). Or the contradiction of a gender affairs unit that has a staff complement of twenty, as reported by Antigua and Barbuda, but a budgetary allocation (2013) that was less than one

per cent (0.7%) of its host ministry's total allocation, the majority of which was earmarked as compensation (salaries, etc.), thereby increasing the difficulty of actually conducting the exercises or implementing the strategies that would help the unit fulfill its mandate of gender-just change. (Caribbean Development Bank 2014B, 55)

That gender's abduction has gone largely unnoticed is easily understood because it has been replaced by a doppelgänger, thereby allowing business to continue as usual. The political maneuverings to which "gender" has been subject, and the subsequent institutionalization of its additive doppelgänger, is now well-trod terrain among Caribbean feminists.² As such, I will not rehearse these incisive critiques, but make the following point. Many of the critiques of the institutionalization of gender in the Caribbean mark it as an "additive" process; this use of the category "additive" however, is too often treated as a descriptor and thereby, benign. I think it is important to revisit this in order to understand the category "*additive*" as a process and, therefore, dangerous.

"Additive" approaches to the formulation of gender policy in the Caribbean is a process; one that deliberately and intentionally aims to circumnavigate the complexity of gender-based inequity. This is a two-part process with a specific end goal. The first is a rhetorical move where the operationalization of gender is conflated with sex (male and female), following on from which policy makers and politicians are *then* able to argue that everyone has a "gender" (by which they mean "sex") and since this is the case, the category and the deployment of resources should address both men **and** women (both genders, by which they mean sex). Understanding additive approaches as a process rather than a description alerts us to see the rhetorical move as a kind of canary in the mine, or as an alert for or precursor of its end goal – the upward redistribution of resources, that is to say, the reallocation of state resources toward a disproportional engagement with issues of masculinity. With such an end game in mind, an overview of "gender's" trajectory throughout the region better

illustrates why an additive approach to gender is more aptly understood as a process rather than a static, though not benign, descriptor.

The 1990s marked the beginning of and subsequent surge in the use of “gender” to mark an institutional shift where the rationale for this rhetorical move was a thinly veiled articulation of what I have been pointing to as an upward redistribution of state resources. Where the category “woman” would have previously functioned as the primary signifier of state care, the 1990s marked a moment where many units made the decision to move from a “Women’s” Affairs desk, unit, bureau, or department to that of “Gender Affairs.”

Trinidad and Tobago serves as ground zero for the twin process of rhetoric and resource re-allocation, moving in 1998 from a Women’s Affairs Division to that of a Gender Affairs Division. A mere year later, we find evidence where the burden of proof for the allocation of state resources becomes masculinized. The then Minister of Gender Affairs, for example, recounted the (masculinized) burden of proof required by her cabinet colleagues to support her travel to an international conference, namely, the need to reassure them that the conference she intended to attend would address the issue of “male marginalization.”³

Saint Kitts and Nevis’ decision in 2000 to change the name of its Women’s Affairs Department to that of Gender Affairs reflected what would become the now commonplace recasting of gender as sex, declaring that the change in name “would more accurately represent the goals of gender and development with *women and men* as decision makers.”⁴ Barbados, also in 2000, made the shift to a Bureau of Gender Affairs, efficiently articulating both the recasting of gender and re-allocation of resources simultaneously in their effort to craft an institutional model that would move away from “the traditional single focus of the Women’s Bureau to wider gender issues to ensure that problems facing certain sections of the male population are systematically resolved.” (UNDP 2007). The report in which this rationale is cited went on to observe that “*This*

prioritisation of male issues demonstrates Government's commitment to the achievement of sustainable gender balance, and that it has been actively engaged in research on the gender-based issues affecting Barbadian men, including: substance abuse; men and the criminal justice system (men at risk) and parental rights" (emphasis mine). Grenada and St. Vincent were among the territories that made the change in nomenclature in 2001. Grenada implemented the Division of Gender and Family Affairs after an earlier presence as "Women's Affairs," while Saint Vincent and the Grenadines' became a Gender Affairs Division. Vested in SVG's institutional shift was the belief that it would serve to establish "*equality between women and men*, proposing socially responsive legislation and implementing policies that favourably affect women" (emphasis mine). (Caribbean Development Bank 2015, 37). In 2009, Dominica added to the growing number, becoming a Bureau of Gender Affairs in order to, among other things, give increased attention to "male gender gaps" in the society" (Caribbean Development Bank 2014A, 61). Jamaica's more recent arrival in 2016 also reflects the pairing of rhetoric and re-allocation. Jamaica announced that the Bureau of Women's Affairs would become the Bureau of Gender Affairs, noting the need for the "re-establishment of the male desk, because it is not just about us, it is not just about women. It is also about our men, particularly our young men affected by marginalisation." Each example listed here highlights what I have marked as the upward distribution of state resources -- the prioritization of masculinity under the nomenclature of gender. Each is marked by a process, where gender is first cast as sex and the resources are reallocated to ensure that both sexes receive "equal" (fiscal/policy) attention.

Taken one step further, Guyana presents an interesting twist that deepens our understanding of the processual nature of additive approaches to gender. In 2010, Guyana established a unit of "Men's Affairs." At the launch of this unit, the then President of Guyana, Bharrat Jagdeo, noted that such a unit would mitigate against the "effeminisation of men," and, further, that despite the fact that the constitution protects "people's orientation," "we don't want every young male child to start thinking that that is okay." This 2010 Men's Bureau was,

in 2016, merged with the Women's Bureau to facilitate the creation of a "Gender Affairs Bureau." On this occasion, the Head of the Women and Gender Equality Commission, Indra Chandarpal, observed:

"I don't see a problem; initially the idea of a Gender Affairs division entailed that you have two desks, one for male and one for female, we have other jurisdictions where it operates in that way. What we need to ensure however is that men's issues are also taken on board because the problems we face in society are not only female." (Fanfair 2016)

Here, Guyana offers us an example of how "gender" is used to efface "queer" in the Caribbean context. As we know, the collapsing of sex into always works to fix "gender" as a binary, and by extension, an exclusionary construct. State sponsored privileging of heteropatriarchy serves to embed an anti-queer/LGBT sentiment to the deployment of gender thereby ensuring that *queer understandings of gender* stand outside of the state, its protections and resources.

Throughout the region, "gender" has brought neither more resources nor more stability to the respective state units. What the preceding regional overview shows most clearly is that "gender" has brought "men" and additional programming for men, a portfolio that will now need to be served by the already thinly stretched staff of the former Women's Affairs unit and existing resources.⁵ By way of its quotidian deployment, the effacing effect of "gender" on women came into clear focus quite unexpectedly in Guyana's Budgetary Parliamentary Debate (2016), where, in response to the Minister of Finance's 2016 reading of the budget, Opposition Member Joseph Hamilton retorted, "...if you check all the budgets in the last 23 years you would see women were always mentioned separately. What measures are there to deal with alleviating poverty among women? All of us are aware that a lot of our children are supervised by a single parent. *This budget casts women aside and wraps them up in gender affairs.*"⁶ Whether perceiving the heft of his observation, the regional scope of its ramifications, or the systematic erosions of historical gains,

Hamilton in this parliamentary debate astutely marked what I have been marking as the danger of gender as enacted in the region.

While the use of “additive” often serves as an adjectival descriptor (the state uses an additive approach), the preceding regional overview shows the value of reading the additive as process. The preceding modes of institutionalizing gender typify a very specific process that begins with a specific set of rhetorical performances, which first aim to fix gender as a prescriptive binary, *followed or accompanied by* the reallocation of state’s resources in ways that draw on the logic of primogeniture, which then establishes a policy infrastructure and ethos that is inherently anti-LGBT/queer by virtue of the rhetorical dynamics that refuse the malleability of “gender”.⁷ Each of the rationales above justifies the state’s move from “woman” to “gender” in ways that excise concerns for structural inequality; each articulates worry that Caribbean state machinery has failed men; and, in some instances, points to womanhood and queerness as forms of inadequacy. “Gender” inhabits an ironic condition in the Caribbean in the ways that it works to normalize male hegemony; this despite its originally intended conceptualization as a pathway to redress the ways that minority subjects have been made peripheral in their national contexts. It is certainly important that we think of men as gendered, given that the liveability of women’s lives absolutely depends on this recognition; the existing gendered hierarchies of parenting, harassment, bodily safety, are, for example, all implicated in this recognition. The danger of present framings of men as gendered beings is that these discussions are increasingly framed in ways that erase how women are made vulnerable by this gendering.

Gender (Equality) Regimes, National Gender Policies, and the Promise of Gender

When “gender” travels, the various gender regimes through which it is rerouted determine what the category is able to accomplish, and more importantly, the local strategies needed to ensure that the category maintains its ability to signify *as a category of equity*. I’ve argued to this point that the category can only

signify as a mark of social change through a comprehensive, not additive, re-mapping of the boundaries and contours of a country's gender regimes and that this end goal is hampered in the Caribbean.⁸ I am using "gender equality regimes" to point to the legal, political, and social frameworks that work collectively to facilitate a favourable national context for gender equality. In this sense, gender equality regimes name the principles, core values, rules, and commitments that guide and shape the end goal of equality. They are tiered, scaled, and intersected. As much as one hopes that these tiers—international, regional, national, institutional, the community, individual (e.g., state agents, activists, disparate categories and groupings of women) – work in consort with each other, each tier introduces new contradictions and complications. Walby (2004, 10) reminds us that gender relations "are constituted by all these levels rather than there being one privileged level. As the nature of gender relations changes at all these levels, so do conceptions as to what constitutes women and men and perceptions of what might constitute their cultural, political and economic preferences and project." In this sense, gender equality regimes are also multivalent. As a result, despite the most heroic of efforts to enumerate action areas, principles for ratification, and rankings of gender equality, the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of these goals are subject to slippages in interpretation and application. For example, "gender equality" may be well framed to prioritize, let us say, the intersections of safety/bodily integrity and girlhood, which is then deemed as lacking in urgency at the national level and ignored within the community without sanction. Concerns that are articulated at one tier do not survive "intact" as they move from one sphere or constituency to the other.

Gender policies, then, by intent, are potentially instruments of re-articulation, directing attention to the multi-tiered conversations and struggles over what "equality" can mean. Yet, as discussed here, perceptions of men's structural vulnerability have now come to sharply shape the English-speaking Caribbean's contemporary gender regime. These anxieties and anger about failing and marginalized masculinity have produced an ethos where masculinity now reasserts its "rightful place" supported by the very resources that were

earmarked to make the region less patriarchal. National gender policies, therefore, as McFee (2014) notes, inhabit “an unstable, very masculinist policy domain.” McFee goes on to identify gender policies as:

“...a meta-plan for the integration of gender equality and equity concerns across and within sectors of any state machinery. This plan takes into consideration the place of governmental and non-governmental actors in its operationalization. It provides a blue print to governments’ policies for achieving gender justice, with an underlying commitment to respecting the dignity, freedoms, social, political, economic and cultural rights of all citizens.” (Ibid)

Thorough in its framing, McFee’s definition guides us toward the domains of operation, the designated implementing agents, and the guiding principles that undergird the work of national gender policies. This meta framework allows us to track some successes (e.g., the very formulation of policy, given the inability of many countries to achieve such, should be marked as a success of sorts), but also many failures and limitations (e.g., absence of high ranking ministerial advocates, inadequate budgets and personnel, diffused agenda, etc.). While Mcfee offers us a technical framework, Joycelin Massiah’s earlier framing of policy provides an important layer – that of motivation. Far from the neutral terrains suggested in the language of technical-rationality, policy settings are rife with politics and persona. Massiah, in the context of the Women in the Caribbean Project (WICP), marks this interplay of domains, tiers, and actors as “a *political process* which place a high premium on functional efficiency defined in relation to *political advantage* (emphasis mine).” Following McFee’s and Massiah’s lead, gender policies are more readily recognized as instruments that identify and establish a mandate of collective steps and strategies that should putatively bring that country closer to achieving its goal of gender equity. From this meta perspective, (gender) policy simply becomes “whatever governments choose to do or not to do.” (Dye 1998, 1). Yet, even as Massiah points toward policy as rife with the business of politics, top-down approaches, as a meta approach, are more inclined to treat policy frameworks as disembodied instruments that stand outside of culture, history, and politics.

In the realm of policy, this feigned neutrality merely masks the ways that gender regimes, themselves naturalized hierarchies, are already at work and embedded within the logic that frames the policy environment. Where gender policies exist, they offer plans, bulleted items and mandates that prescribe how various units and agents should implement even greater meta-level gender goals (CEDAW, MDGs, Belen do Para). In this layered fare, national gender policies function as both national agent and international broker, navigating the demands of the local through the imperatives of the international goals that are perceived by most citizens as originating elsewhere. While the goal of gender policies is to increase the culture of gender accountability through the naming and assignation of goals and responsibilities, it is constrained by a context of prescription without penalty. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the perceived exogenous nature of gender equality goals, unwillingness to cede gender privilege, exacerbated by its very re-inscription through the language of equality, has provided a regional impasse where there has been very little buy-in on the importance of national gender policies.

Regardless of how we list and frame our desired gender outcomes, the most meaningful dimension of any gender policy is its mandate to push beyond the existing logics and naturalized hierarchies that shape how we – women, men, queer, Indian, indigenous, African, x – relate to each other as Caribbean people. The irony of gender policy formulation is that the very absence of enforcing protocols serves to render gender policies as philosophical and ethical, if not utopic documents; yet these are the very dimensions that are often disregarded in favour of working our way down a checklist of gender equality goals. Gender policies are proclamations of a counter narrative and thus sit at the nexus of plan and vision. My pairing of plan and vision is an invitation to see rational-technical approaches to gender policy formulation as only one entry point, an approach that should be complemented, if not supplanted, with an understanding of gender policy as imaginative labour. An imagined sense of how Caribbean gender relations can be made anew, a vision of what our societies imagine of and for themselves and a “collective” agreement to become that calls for very different modes of engagement.

Above all, thinking of gender policy as imaginative labour expands how we attend to policy formulation. This modality foregrounds policy, in this instance gender policy, as a creative act of world-making.

Gender Policy as Creative World Making

The categories “affective” and “creative” are rarely, if ever, associated with “policy,” to the detriment, I would argue, to the ways that gender policy frameworks can be deployed to enliven and enhance our capabilities and worlds. What would im/possibilities present themselves to us if policy makers look not to the techno-rational prescriptions of policy but a point of departure that pursues policy as creative wonder, an opportunity to shape new worlds? At a bare minimum, if we think of gender policy as an opportunity to wonder and create, where then might our policy advocates reside? In the arts, literature, digital? The interdisciplinary ramifications that follow from the questions that I am asking cannot be pursued here, but these, too, are intriguing musings.

The citational field for affect theory is at times layered, at other points networked, and at other moments quite oppositional to each other. Such variation makes it somewhat of an imperative to map one's own location within this terrain. Gregg and Seigworth (2010, 7) offer some categorization of these various routings guided by the sphere's “initiating premises, (or) endpoints of their aims, or both.” Wending their way through phenomenology, assemblages, human/non-human interfaces, psychoanalysis, among others, the authors note that a possible “commonality” within affect's variable terrain is an effort to account for “the relational capacities that belong to the doings of bodies or are conjured by the world belongingness that gives rise to a body's doing.” This engagement with the body and the question of “belonging” are at the heart of the pursuit of the lines of flight that might exist when thinking about national gender policies and affective re-positioning.

In their overview, Gregg and Seigworth (2010) characterize feminist engagements with affect as ones that are shaped by an analysis of the

“regularly hidden-in-plain sight,” the experience of “living under the thumb of normativizing power,” as well as the “persistent repetitious practices of power can simultaneously provide a body...with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm.” (Greg and Seigworth 2010).⁹ My engagement with gender policy through the lens of affect similarly foregrounds a critique of power, embodiment, and belonging, but this is only one reference point. I also want to embrace the disciplinary intransigence that shapes feminist thought by drawing on the phenomenological bent found in Sara Ahmed’s (2010) work, thereby allowing us to see the act of being “affected” as an orienting device. What follows is also informed by the theoretical bent found in Ann Cvetkovich’s (2012) work, which (via Raymond Williams) centres the collective and historically-structured character of what we come to ascribe as a “feeling” (as distinct from an individually possessed emotion, though collectively informed feelings do manifest at the individual level) (Cvetkovich 2012, 4). For the rest of this discussion, I want to weave these three threads – the body and its belonging in the world, orienting devices, and the structured nature of feelings – in order to create a sense of dissatisfaction with our present inclination to see national gender policy as realizable only through the auspices of the nation state or the logics of rational-technical approaches.

Arguably, the majority of Caribbean citizenry may have little sense of, or confidence in, the ways that a national gender policy will improve their daily lives. This lack of a vested constituency potentially adds to a lack of traction for gender policies within the region. However, in a region where “policy,” at best, only matters when ventriloquized through law, and is more likely experienced by the general populace as political bantering and partisanship, such apathy might not be unwarranted. Policy is rarely the locus of long-term change in the Caribbean. The idea of “policy” as distinct from the “government’s position” means that gender policies are attempting to transform entrenched social hierarchies by depending on a process (the idea of “policy”) that has little track record of realizing long-term, non-partisan change in the region.¹⁰ (Thane and Thakur; Antrobus 1988, 36-54; Rowley 2004, 655-688; Hosein and Parpart 2017).

The lack of political will is often cited for the lack of movement on gender policies. Certainly, as I have discussed earlier in this paper, the lack of initial support by state managers, the ongoing constraints on budgetary and institutional support, and the ease with which “gender” becomes a veil for the resurgence of male privilege, all suggest that this is true. However, I want to think about Ahmed’s use of affect as an orienting device. Ahmed reminds us that “... to be affected by something is to evaluate that thing.” Evaluations, she goes on to note, “are expressed in how *bodies turn toward things*.” (Ahmed 2010, 23). While there is a lack of political will, the lack of interest by the larger populace, that they are oriented away from gender equity is the bigger and more damning issue.

“Policy” is not what Caribbean people orient themselves toward with the expectation of change, yet policy continues to be touted as the transformative moment and continues to be where we direct our attention while lobbying for resources and support. This emphasis turns our attention and sense of urgency toward whether we have gender focal points or the support of a given political office. These questions are certainly ones we need to be resolute about, but, given the economic constraints and political expediency of small island states, they are also questions that will remain with us for a while yet. The issue that is ahead of us is to think about the possibilities and ways that we might complicate the ongoing discourse from that of laying hold of a *gender policy to the work of building a gender polity*.

As gender circulates presently it is through a rhetorical and legislative framework of loss for men (e.g. male marginalization, legislation that corrects the perception of women as property) or drain (e.g. on state resources) and blame for women (e.g. too many female teachers). Gender does the work presently of saying what we do not want in our societies (e.g. men who abuse women), but we are yet to give equal and concentrated effort toward what gender can create (e.g. a desire for enhancing a range of capabilities). Orienting ourselves toward building a gender polity brings us into creative and imaginative

relationship with the goals and philosophical content that are at the core of whatever we refer to as a “national gender policy.”

Until a national gender policy arrives (and then beyond its arrival), how might we creatively shape our messaging, activities and programming (as distinct from ad hoc, vote driven activities) in ways that intentionally serve as a kind of gender dowsing rod aimed at bridging the distance that presently exists between the philosophical core and goals of gender policies and the population?¹¹ Ahmed is helpful in her observation that “We are moved by things [and] in being moved, we make things.” (Ahmed 2010, 25). For many feminists, the establishment of national gender policies throughout the region was seen as a promissory note, a promissory note that would hold state managers to interpretations of gender. The effort needed to realize and deliver on these promises may have contributed to our forgetting the known and potentially new constituencies to whom this note was promised. What might we make of our society if our approaches to gender justice gave some attention to building a gender polity alongside that of a gender policy? What might this gender polity demand if it were to orient itself toward the ideas that are contained within the region’s national gender policies both draft and actual? Getting Caribbean citizenry to care about gender justice requires a completely different orientation for state-based advocates themselves.

Gender justice gives us much to care about. Earlier in this paper, I pointed to the damage inflicted on regional understandings of gender equality due to masculinist co-optations of messaging and meaning. This is discursive terrain that has to be recaptured, but beyond what “gender” means is the question of what we call together *under the sign of gender*. Building broader support for issues of gender justice undoubtedly requires not a reductive or additive notion of gender but one that returns us to the wide range of issues that are made manifest “under the thumb of normativizing power,” the “regularly hidden in plain sight” if we return to Gregg and Seigworth’s (2010) characterization of feminist engagements with affect. A more dynamic, capacious, and

intersectional understanding of gender provides an opportunity to build and connect an agenda that shows how gender inequity continues to be at work in our societies, to show the ways that only a very few actually benefit from the normativising heft of inequity.

Strategically attaching “gender” to issues that can bridge the realm of justice to sentiment is critical to our reorienting processes. Let us, for example, as former enslaved and indentured individuals look at an issue that has always mattered — labour. Throughout the region, domestic workers stand among the most unprotected class of workers. According to Human Rights Watch, 26.6 per cent of women in the Caribbean are domestic workers, unpacking this reality, for example.¹² Yet Caribbean women who engage in domestic work are not recognized as workers. Compounding this invisibility are a number of other vulnerabilities: low wages, employers who refuse to pay into national insurance programmes, ageing, failing health, lack of housing for those who may have been live-in helpers, to name a few. These conditions are exacerbated for women who experience varying levels of discrimination and isolation as part of the region’s internal migration pattern, for example, Guyana–Barbados/Trinidad.

In 2013, Barbados conducted a study of domestic workers as a means of beginning to build baseline indicators and to facilitate Barbados’ ratification of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) (Cumberbatch, Georges & Hinds 2013). Underway are the needed conversations that would bring the domestic legislation in line with the requirements of the ILO Domestic Workers’ Convention.¹³ Beyond this, the ratification of the Domestic Workers Convention (189) does not appear to be on the radar of the regional state, given that to date, only Guyana has ratified the Domestic Workers’ Convention (ILO 2013). Certainly, there is minimum wage protection for domestic workers in Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and Barbados (fixed separately from the general minimum wages), and the National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE) is one of the few unions of domestic workers, started by the late Clotil Walcott in Trinidad and Tobago and now directed by the Regional Coordinator Ida Le

Blanc. The marginal status of these women makes it difficult for them to garner the recognition that is needed. Similarly, in Barbados, unions can only negotiate on behalf of a constituency after 50 per cent of the members of that domain have registered. This can be hampered and has been for a host of reasons, such as immigration status, as well as the disconnected nature of this particular line of employment, where each individual works for a separate employer, which makes it more difficult to ascertain the nature of the whole.

There are a number of irregularities facing domestic workers, much of which comes to a head when they are no longer able to work. For example, the National Insurance Board (NIB) of Trinidad and Tobago acknowledges that only fully employed citizens are eligible to receive national insurance. This makes immigrants, part-time domestics and those employed full time for whom insurance had not been paid, particularly vulnerable. The lack of job stability makes women hesitant to unionize, lest there be retribution or loss of work if found out. At present, to be seen as an “employer” in Trinidad, one needs to have employed three or more individuals. Consequently, households with one domestic worker are not seen as employers. This arrangement makes it difficult to recognize the work that domestic workers do *as work*, and it makes it difficult to hold employers accountable for any exploitation of said worker.

The question for consideration here is, how might issues such as this one be strategically identified toward building an empathetic gender polity -- a population of Caribbean citizens who insist that state managers remain accountable to the core philosophical and material goals of a gender policy? What are other issues that may have similar valence?

What, for example, of the elderly? It is estimated that 10 per cent of the population in Latin America and the Caribbean are elderly and that by 2050 it is expected this figure will increase to 25 per cent. (Social Investigations Divisions, T&T 2013). While elderly men, having worked, receive some form of post-work compensation, elderly women, by contrast, experience greater financial need

because they were more likely to have been un-, under-, or seasonally employed and, therefore, without retirement support, thereby making non-contributory pension schemes vitally important to elderly women.¹⁴ Elderly women, particularly if they were a single parent or did not work, lack social networks and savings on which they can rely, placing them at the mercy of kin and the state for the most basic of needs: food, health care, housing, and social contact. With the region's declining fertility rate presenting an inverse relationship between family size and the growth of the aging population, there is a shrinking population of young individuals to care for the members of society who are aging, thereby placing a greater burden of care on the state and civil society (e.g., churches and NGOs).¹⁵ How might we build a gender polity here?

Or, might we wish to consider the reproductive discrimination faced by young women in the Caribbean? The Caribbean accounts for some of the lowest age ranges for sex initiation, with boys beginning sexual activity at a younger age than girls. While the adolescent fertility rate in the Caribbean has fallen over time, it presently stands at 72/100,000, still fairly high. For example, 18 per cent of all births that occur in Jamaica do so to adolescents, and 15 per cent of births in Trinidad and Tobago are born to adolescent mothers (*Population and Vital Statistics Report, 2000*). Despite the prevalence of early sexual engagement by boys and girls, when young girls become pregnant, they encounter many forms of what we might refer to as reproductive discrimination.

Understanding the importance that education has played as a pathway to social mobility, how might we work to build a gender polity around the fact that, in many territories, the life chances of young girls are significantly stymied when required or, through social stigma, find it easier to leave school? How might we build a polity guided by the fact that masculinity is not required to account, if also a teenager and, too frequently, if an adult, are not reported to the police for statutory rape? There has been movement on this issue in a number of different territories, but not yet enough to fundamentally shift how we see and support young women who become pregnant.¹⁶

I have been arguing for re-orienting the region's population with a view to build a gender polity. The underlying premise of this argument is that dedicating some effort toward the formation of a polity can help circumnavigate and push against the present limits of achieving a gender policy. For illustrative purposes only, I've identified issues that are inherently gendered, that carry broad-based social urgency, which might help translate the importance of gender justice into the everyday lived realities of the region's populace in ways that take us away from the misnomer of male marginalization (as distinct from instances where different categories of men may experience discrimination). However, there are caveats. Highlighting issues that are socially urgent is important, but it is not enough to support my argument. Polities are never homogeneous and, as a result, never coherent, and navigating such is made even more difficult when the "common sense" understanding of gender that has already been brokered is of little use to any transformative or structural change. In this context, issues do matter, but so does messaging. This brings us to the third dimension of our affective turn, one that invites to think about how we structure care and regard for others through the lens of (gender) justice.

Empathy may indeed be precarious, but it is not useless. Historian Saidiya Hartman's work flags attention to empathy's "slipperiness," indeed its very "precarity," where, to consider suffering, we imagine not the one to whom suffering has been inflicted, but to a version of ourselves being subject to the same condition. Hartman notes that "We are naturally too callous to the sufferings of others, and consequently prone to look upon them with cold indifference, until, in imagination we identify ourselves with the sufferers." (Hartman 1997, 18). Her cautionary note voices concern for the ways that this other/self-substitution leads to the objectification of a suffering subject. Yet, for all of its limitations, "empathy" brings us closest to working our way out of the very quagmire that it creates.

Apathy and empathy are both brokered conditions. What we turn away from is not an accidental "oops" of history or a genetic coding of humanity. Whether

we are apathetic to the discrimination of Caribbean gender non-conforming citizens – the poor, the homeless, the elderly – is no accident. Throughout the piece I have been wrestling with imagining the kinds of new worlds we might create with our activism, policy, and legal challenges if we begin with an understanding that policy, law, and institutional framings as always already undergirded with affective states and logics – in other words, that we have feelings about these issues is, on the one hand a reflection of our individual position and on the other hand, a reflection of a social predisposition that precedes and exceeds our individual responses. These, therefore, are not merely individual emotional states, although as Cvetkovich (2012) reminds us, “the felt experience of everyday life” is certainly connected to these structured orientations (what we turn to and away from). I am, though, interested in the collective and structured affective states of public life. What are our visceral responses when we sit to consider policy, draft law, and make appointments? How do we imagine our people and their value, to themselves, the country, region and world? Do we write in ways that re-orient us to see each other as having value, or do we write to subordinate some to the right(s) of others? The failure of policy to do the former is why I want to consider how to reframe our public affective conditions: to re-write our visceral responses to how we consider and frame the “other” in public life.

This work is therefore creative, as we make anew and revolutionary, in so far as we understand “revolutionary” to mean that “what exists is something against which we should revolt.”(Ahmed 2011). It is also empathetic. Cautioned by Hartman’s (1997) critique, empathy, nonetheless and at the very minimum, turns us toward rather than away from each other and does so within an ethical framing, given that a notion of empathy sits at the heart of all ethical considerations as we regard the other. Caribbean queer activists offer instructive models on this front.

Nationalisms in their exclusionary logic have historically been marked as a conduit for the entrenchment of political power and as a “technology of

violence” (McClintock 1995)¹⁷. Positioned as alien and as a threat to the integrity of the nation state, Caribbean gender non-conforming citizens continue to re-orient the state’s narrative of expulsion through both legislative and social challenges.¹⁸ This activism rests in the mercurial, “not yet” nature of citizenship, which, as Berlant (2011) reminds us

“.... is a status whose definitions are always in process. it is continually being produced out of a political, rhetorical and economic struggle over who will count as “the people” and how social membership will be measured and valued.”

Recent constitutional challenges have made significant inroads toward making citizenship for gender non-conforming citizens just a little bit roomier, a little less more expansive in who sings the nation. Acknowledging the difference in scale, the pursuit of gender justice and rights for sexual dissidents share interesting trajectories: both are perceived as “foreign,” against the “order of things,” and, therefore, positioned as inconsequential to how regional nation-states imagine themselves. Ongoing political opposition to more dynamic understandings of “gender” policy is often premised on the not so subtle grounds that such an understanding will take us to sexuality; this is a hailing to the ways that the two categories are more imbricated than Caribbean gender advocates are wont to admit, actively working instead to ensure that “gender” is deployed in ways that occlude sexuality. But what might we learn from the ways that Caribbean queer activists are scaffolding new affective ties by re-orienting and, in so doing, reimagining the region’s social fabric? In answering this question, I think it is important to be clear that affect takes us not to a place of “feeling good about” but rather orienting us toward what needs to be seen. The labour that Caribbean queer activists invest in reorienting Caribbean societies toward what must be seen is what I am offering as having heuristic possibilities, particularly for gender advocates who are state based.

The gay rights organization CAISO and its co-founder, Colin Robinson, give us a number of hints on the value of and sociopolitical merits of massaging the

affective boundaries of activist work. Remember that I appeal to affect for three reasons: to re-frame our understanding of what we deem “valuable,” to challenge the normativising hold of existing power relations and, in the process of reorienting what we consider of value, to imagine different and reconfigured communities of care. Drawing on Gosine’s (2015) “CAISO, CAISO,” I want to highlight three moves that CAISO makes that are illustrative of the argument that I am offering here: they commandeer political messaging; they appeal to a historically derived and “homegrown” sense of “fair play”; and they draw on the recognizable cultural symbols to engineer queer intelligibility. What might these three moves offer, if translated to the work of making “gender” legible within the everyday? How might these three moves expand, shift, redirect the work presently being done by those who are labouring toward gender equity.

From the organization’s motto, “making sexual and gender diversity part of T&T’s national identity,” to Robinson’s own feminist nationalist politic, Gosine’s piece highlights the layers with which CAISO and Robinson deliberately take on what “nationalism” must come to mean, its “not yet.” Completely cognizant of the heteropatriarchal impulses that drive nationalist desires, CAISO shows a savvy understanding of the role that nationalism plays in the self-determination of recently independent small-island states and, rather than dismiss this, they creatively reimagine it. Whereas earlier Caribbean queer theorizing started from the identity of a “gender outlaw,” CAISO refuses expulsion and meets this desire with a gnawing insistence that Caribbean nation-states are already queer because members of their citizenry are queer.

At the core of this re-imaginative work is a vision of nationalist discourse that has a social justice script embedded within it. The organization’s name, CAISO, which plays in the Trinidadian musical art form of calypso, their activism which draws on culturally recognizable and loved ephemera, such as the Crix biscuit, is part of the imaginative work which draws on Trinidad and Tobago’s love of double entendre, word play, and humour in order to render a recognizability to queerness. This imaginative work on the one hand renders the estranged as

familiar and familial and, on the other, it deploys the ordinary (What can be more ordinary than Crix?) toward the achievement of the extraordinary or not yet imagined rights.

The creative dimension of this orienting field is such that, as we make our way toward the attainment of legal and social recognition for gender and sexual minorities, we invariably change the very terrain that we traverse. Thinking creatively around what makes queerness/gender intelligible is needed in order to build a polity that is informed by an empathetic relationship with those who face discrimination. Returning to the need to build a gender polity alongside of, and because of the glacial pace with which policy is being considered, I find myself thinking about strategies that will signal to our citizenry that gender policies matter to the possibilities of their everyday lives. In this vein, I find myself wondering about what a feminist midnight robber might have to say about respecting women's personal space at Carnival? Or, alternatively, how might a national primary school competition drawing on this medium gradually build a new ethos nationally? A battle of words and wits of extempo, the lyrical dexterity of dancehall, national school debates where the issues at hand are issues of social justice, art (all media), weekly talk shows that provide new ways to talk about old issues – the creative world making possibilities toward building a gender polity are endless, and promising.

I have asked us to be mindful of the ways that “gender” has been emptied of its capacity for transformation. Its interpretation and application have been gutted of its ability to call out the power differentials that exist in the region, leading to a condition where everything to which it is subsequently appended in like manner becomes anaemic – gender policy, gender justice, gender equity. But this thought piece has been no eulogy. Rather, it is a resuscitative realignment. While the last twenty years have marked the ongoing assertion of male privilege, political placement on the state's periphery and subsequent divestment of the state's interest in gender as a tool of transformation, I maintain that thinking through a gender critique is still an important placeholder for change. The

messaging that shapes how we understand the possibilities of “gender justice” has gone somewhat awry, the present preoccupation with having the “correct” definition, by which is meant not sexuality, means that work needs to be done within and external to the state to reclaim the category’s transformative possibilities. While I maintain the importance of state action toward the establishment of well-thought functioning gender policy, partisan inspired conservatism continues to leave me less than optimistic. To this end, I have argued for the importance of building a gender polity alongside of the need for a gender policy. If those charged with gender policies cannot fully articulate why justice (before focal points and definitions) matters, why should we expect the general population to make those connections or hold leaders accountable? The optimism that instigates this project is a utopic desire that sits at the core of collectively unlearning privilege, hence my appeal to affect for language and ways of thinking about how one might build new social neural pathways to equity and justice.

I want to end by way of a few caveats. The creative thought processes needed to begin to shape a gender policy do not translate into ease or homogeneity. As Ahmed cleverly reminds us,

“We cannot even assume that those who appear directed “in the right way” feel the same way about the direction they are facing.” We should, therefore, in all fairness, ask why should we change course to one that incurs cost, to one that is an uphill climb and offers no guarantees? My appeal to affect does not suggest “success” or the emergence of “good feelings” about justice; it is merely intended to strategize toward something other than political indifference, and further, to strategize toward an ethos of justice that emerges out of community. My hopefulness in the face of apathy rests in what Greg and Seigworth (2010, 12) refer to as “a generative, pedagogic nudge aimed toward a body’s becoming an ever more worldly sensitive interface, toward a style of being present to the struggles of our time.”

This pedagogic nudge, through law and a sociocultural scaffolding of queer intelligibility, is one that we see already at work in the queer activism that is in play in the region, the irony of which is that while the work of gender is too often deployed to efface queer, it is in this space that gender justice, both as policy and polity, has its best resuscitative hope.

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¹ While Beijing remains a pivotal citation in the global circulation of gender as a category of social change, its momentum and capacity to energize globally happened as a result of gender's placement within a newly consolidating infrastructure established to facilitate gender equity globally. This infrastructure would have included, for example, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, adopted in 1979, The UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (1993), The International Conference for Population and Development (1994). Additionally, the Gender Development Index and the Gender Empowerment Measure, both also unveiled in 1995, further marshalled attention to the category of gender and brought a new level of interrogation to the nation state itself, given that what the Index and Measure now allowed for was quantifiable and comparative scrutiny.

² For a broader discussion, see, for example, Barriteau (2000, 2003).

³ The former Minister observed, "I remember I was going to a meeting in India, I think in 1999, and there were a number of issues that we were going to discuss in India and there was opposition to my going to India. But ...when I talked about the males, because we were going to deal with that thesis on male marginalization... When I mentioned that, in fact not only did I have to mention it, I had to bring documentary evidence that the male marginalization thesis was being addressed in India... that allowed me to go." (Interview with former Minister of Gender Affairs March 10, 2002) *Feminist Advocacy*, Michelle V Rowley, 75.

⁴ "Concluding Comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women: Saint Kitts and Nevis" Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Twenty-Seventh Session. 3-21 June, 2002. Excerpt Supplement No. 38 (A/57/38). P.1

⁵ At the time of writing this paper, the Facebook page of the newly formed Gender and Child Affairs in the Office of the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago had issued three calls for training of the general populace. The first, "Women in Harmony Program," targets single female heads of household; the objectives are not stated. The second, "Defining Masculine Excellence Program," which targets males 14+; the objectives are not stated. The third, "Food Preparation and Home Management for Men and Boys Program," the latter targets males from 9-99; the objectives, beyond what is implied in the title, are not stated.

<https://www.facebook.com/genderaffairsdivision/photos/a.291335020982563.66376.291114284337970/1009116685871056/?type=3&theater> accessed Jul 06, 2016.

⁶ 24th Sitting of The Eleventh Parliament of Guyana Under The Constitution of The Co-Operative Republic Of Guyana. February 8, 2016. Emphasis mine.

⁷ See Jacqui Alexander's (1997) discussion where, in the context of domestic violence legislation, she explores the ways that state manipulation of sex and gender lies "at the juncture of the disciplining of the body and the control of the population and are therefore constitutive of those very practices." I am also indebted here to her thinking on the use of "primogeniture" as a way of marking the reassertion of patriarchal privilege within state mechanisms.

⁸ Nuket (2002, 413) acknowledges the importance of attending to the "legal instruments and compliance mechanisms" of gender equality mandates, but concludes that what is needed going forward are more "systematic case studies on how and under what conditions global gender equality norms are being implemented across the world. This paper attempts to respond to these localized complexities.

⁹ See also Ahmed (2010), Cvetkovich (2012) and Barad (2015, 387-422).

¹⁰ See, for example, Thame and Thakur's "The National Policy on Gender Equality of Jamaica: (En)gendering Equity in Neoliberal Times" discussion of the structural limitations of gender equality in Jamaica. Their interviews with a various state agents show that many of the limitations that agencies experienced at their inception (limited or no budget, staff, etc.) continue to exist. See also, Antrobus (1988, 36-54), Rowley (2004, 655-688) and Hosein and Parpart (2017).

¹¹ A dowsing or divining rod was used as a tool of divination. Dowsing (also divining or witching) rods were invested with the power to direct diviners toward buried water, metals, ores, etc. I purposefully invoke this metaphor in the context of a "gender dowsing rod" in keeping with Ahmed's notion of affect as an orienting device. What new forms of messaging might we need to build support for the promised change of gender policies, how do we orient our populations "toward gender"? Equally as interesting is the materiality of dowsing. Dowsing was deemed magical because the diviner possessed the ability to find, to unearth the unseen and the unknowable without the use of scientific apparatus. If gender justice is our buried ore, then without the technical apparatus of policy, what kind of imaginative work lies ahead in terms of unearthing interest in and regard for the goal of gender justice?

¹² <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/10/27/claiming-rights/domestic-workers-movements-and-global-advances-labor-reform>

¹³ See <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spotlight-interview-with-toni?lang=en>

¹⁴ See, for example, National Report Implementation of the Brasilia Declaration, Grenada, UNECLAC p. 10.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ This form of discrimination came to a head in 2009 in Antigua when there was an attempt to amend the Education Act to bar pregnant girls from continuing with their education. The opposition that resulted, including from the state-sponsored gender unit, caused the proposal to be pulled. Dominica and Jamaica stand as two examples where a policy position has been implemented to protect girls from this form of discrimination. Dominica stands as an anomaly in that it amended the Education Act (1997) to ensure that girls return to school after pregnancy. In 2013, Jamaica launched its National Policy for the Re-Integration of School-Aged Mothers into the Formal School System. One of the provisions of the policy is that a space must be retained within the school system for the student. This is without negotiation. It may or may not be at the same school, but return is guaranteed. See "National Policy: Reintegration of School-Age Mothers into the Formal School System": moe.gov.jm and <http://programmeforadolescentmothers.webs.com/>

¹⁷ See also Jasbir Puar (2007) and Gosine (2015, 859-894).

¹⁸ *Orozco v AG of Belize* (2016), *Maurice Tomlinson v The State of Belize and Trinidad and Tobago* (2016) and ongoing *McEwan et. al. v AG of Guyana* have met with varying levels of success, however, each carves some inroad toward queer intelligibility.