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The Patriarchy's Role in Gender Inequality in the Caribbean

Erin C. O'Connor
Gettysburg College

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The Patriarchy's Role in Gender Inequality in the Caribbean

Abstract

While gender equality in the Caribbean is improving, with women's growing social, economic, and political participation, literacy rates comparable to those in Europe, and greater female participation in higher education, deeply rooted inequalities are still present and are demonstrated in the types of jobs women are in and the limited number of women in decision-making positions. Sexism, racism, and classism are systemic inequalities being perpetuated in schools, through the types of education offered for individuals and the content in textbooks. Ironically, the patriarchy is coexisting within a system of matrifocal and matrilineal families, with a long tradition of female economic autonomy due to the Caribbean's history with colonialism. This irony demonstrates the complexity and difficulty to change the dominant ideology and break the vicious cycles creating gender inequalities throughout many sectors of society in the Caribbean. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Caribbean, Education, Inequality, Women, Patriarchy

Disciplines

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Cultural History | Education | Educational Sociology | History of Gender | International and Comparative Education | Latin American Languages and Societies | Latin American Literature | Latin American Studies | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education | Women's Studies

Comments

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Erin O'Connor

AFS 246: Human Rights Policy and Practice in the Caribbean

Final Paper

Dr. Hakim Williams

The Patriarchy's Role in Gender Inequality in the Caribbean

Latin America is the only region in the developing world where girls' educational attainment is equal to that of boys. In the Caribbean, there is a surprisingly low level of gender inequality in education, with literacy rates for both men and women comparable to those in Europe (Manzel & Baten, 2009, p. 41). Although a lot of progress has been made in the last few decades with greater female employment in white-collar and professional careers, the majority of women are still "situated in the least protected, most unstable, and worst-paid occupations of the global economy" (Maier, 2010, p. 340). Gender equality has not seeped into all aspects of society, for systemic inequalities still exist due to Caribbean gender relations being patriarchal even "within a system of matrifocal and matrilocal families," partly due to its long history of colonialism (Momsen, p. 45).

It is widely accepted that education must be central to the development strategies of the region. Adult education, including basic literacy, elementary and advanced educational studies, technical and vocational studies, cultural activities, and social programming, requires priority attention, states the Standing Committee of Ministers responsible for the Education in the Caribbean (Ellis, 1987). Achieving universal primary education is the second goal of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals. Their target is to ensure that children everywhere will be able to complete a full course of primary school by 2015 (United Nations, 2000). The World

Bank boldly states that “education is one of the most powerful instruments for reducing poverty and inequality and lays a foundation for sustained economic growth” (World Bank Group, 2014). However, although education is valued and often acknowledged as the best means of ensuring upward economic mobility, women often struggle to provide it for their children throughout the Caribbean (Momsen, 2002). Guisan and Aguayo (2010) express their concerns and state there is a need for improvement of education spending in Latin American and Caribbean countries which have shown very low resources from 2000-2010. When education expenditures are below 300 dollars per capita in many Caribbean and Latin American countries, with Haiti’s public spending of education in 2000 as low as 17, it is clear that more needs to be done to improve the life of the poorest countries and work towards the eradication of poverty, the first Millennium Development Goal (Guisan & Aguayo, 2010; United Nations, 2000).

Most Caribbean governments have endorsed actions identified to address the issues of gender equality and gender equity related to basic human rights of women. They have ratified international doctrines such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women pertaining to these issues (Bailey, 2003). However, a gap between ratification and implementation still remains and women continue to be disadvantaged in regards to many of their rights. Many of the international conferences addressing these inequalities and concerns indicate that education is central for gender equality and equity and is the means to women’s empowerment. However, the notion that increased participation and performance in education will result in women’s education and their improved position in society needs to be critically assessed in the Caribbean context (Bailey, 2003).

Afro-Cuban and white Cuban women had higher literacy rates than men, as early as 1919, and many of the region's universities now have more female students than male students (Momsen, 2002). While statistically, girls and boys have similar literacy rates throughout the Caribbean, the focus and intent of girls' education in the Caribbean, stemming from the patriarchy, leads to the wider gender inequalities in society. At the secondary level, education has a "distinctly vocational character" in order to prepare the adolescents for their transition from school to work (Massiah, 1982, p.13). The options available for children are determined greatly by their sex and class. The curriculum for upper class boys often follows a classical education, including Latin and Greek in order to "impart to him that indescribable something which we call 'culture,'" in preparation for higher professions (Massiah, 1982, p. 14). In comparison, middle class boys are often portrayed as destined for a commercial life, while girls are perceived as destined to be good wives and mothers. In Chile, from the viewpoint of the church, female education has been exclusively intended to create better daughters, wives, and mothers, never mentioning their professional and economic contributions to society (Manzel & Baten, 2009).

An examination of the textbooks used in schools also demonstrates the perpetuation of the patriarchal dominant values. Analyzing selected English language textbooks used in Barbados, Drayton (1997) concluded that textbooks influence children's attitudes toward another person's race, gender, social class, and other attributes. Gender, class, and racial stereotypes in textbooks perpetuate social inequalities, for messages are conveyed by the teachers in the classroom to the students. Textbooks were found to focus on male principal characters seventy-eight percent of the time, indicating the sexist bias. The number of male occupations was significantly greater than females, distorting the social reality, suggesting that females' contribution to the workforce is inferior to that of males' (Drayton, 1997). "Males were also

presented as natural leaders, more adventurous, more intelligent and more creative than women” (Morris, 2004, p. 89). When men are only portrayed as strong and superior who must not show feelings or reveal weakness, this is not only harmful to girls, but also to boys. Furthermore, with the omission of references to black achievements, racism is also perpetuated. Drayton (1997) concluded that the textbooks reflect the ideology of the dominant group, deeply rooted in the patriarchy, and these reproduce sexism and racism, while obscuring the structural foundations of class differentiation.

The educational needs and quality of education and literacy programs for women in the Caribbean need to not be overlooked, despite the equal literacy rates, for they clearly demonstrate the different intents and the patriarchal focused education for women in the Caribbean. Caribbean women participate in large numbers in a wide variety of non-formal education programs as participants, tutors, teachers, facilitators, and program planners, in which these programs are geared exclusively to women and provide them access to educational activities through self-help, craft, agricultural, home economics, and child care projects. Seventy-five percent of the programs focus on traditional home-making skills and ninety percent of the “income-generating projects women are not producing in response to ‘real’ market demands,” therefore, often at the mercy of unstable, changing markets, leaving the women open to exploitation (Ellis, 1987, p. 65).

These non-formal education programs are not usually planned with long-term objectives and do not address the fundamental issues of women’s relationships to the larger developmental and social issues; these programs are often on an unplanned, short-term basis in weekend workshops and seminars. The attitudes and the perceptions that determine and define one’s place in Caribbean society, such as one’s self-esteem, awareness of personal educational and

developmental needs, and understanding of the social and economic structures are often not given much attention in these programs for women. Ellis (1987) concludes that adult education programs cannot be responsible for solving the larger Caribbean issues for women or for the country as a whole, at least with the current system, for it is further continuing the gender inequalities produced from the patriarchal society.

The patriarchal society has not only impacted the quality of education women receive, but state patriarchal ideologies have created further inequalities in political representation, demonstrated with only two women chief ministers (Momsen, 2002). In total, only 16.3% of women were in political decision-making positions at the national level in 1998, with zero percent of female representation in Anguilla and a mere 8.8 percent of female participation in Parliament in Antigua and Barbuda (Vassell, 2003, p. 7). The Regional Action Plan according to CARICOM has addressed main concerns with promoting women's greater participation in political representation. There is a "need for a more inclusive politics and style of governance" and a "need for the involvement of young women in making public policy," while the "attitude of both men and women to women in political leadership" needs to be addressed (Vassell, 2003, p. 6). The CARICOM policy document has set forth guidelines and has highlighted concerns dealing with "the neglect of issues of gender equity within political life and institutions in the region" (Vassell, 2003, p. 6). However, additional steps are necessary, such as using CEDAW as the framework for advocacy, engaging women's movements to raise women's voices, strengthening women's organizational capacity, and promoting new approaches to leadership (Vassell, 2003).

The attitude to women in leadership is another issue that needs to be examined to greater understand the influence of gender socialization on the construction of masculinities and certain

negative effects on the boys and men on the region. In order to break the current negative attitudes towards women's leadership, one must understand the effects of gender relations on the perceptions or behaviors of both men and women. However, there is a lack of research and information regarding these issues in the Caribbean and how the cultural influences on the perceptions and behaviors of men and women affect the attitudes to leadership, perpetuating that women are inferior and incapable of being in leadership positions (Vassell, 2003).

Women participation in the labor force has increased to roughly forty percent, but compared to male participation at over 70 percent, it is clear the inequality in the labor force needs to be addressed. Even more troubling is that although there has been an increase in women participation in the labor force, it is still the men who are taking the higher-status scientific, technical, administrative, and managerial jobs, while women are in the less economically valued professions and lower-level administrative office and commercial positions (Colón & Poggio, 2010).

The majority of women in the region continue to be positioned in the lowest sectors of the capital market, earn lower wages than men, suffer higher rates of unemployment, experience greater levels of poverty, are under-represented in decision-making positions at the meso and macro levels of social and political institutions and lack real personal autonomy (Bailey, 2003, p. 136).

The capitalist and patriarchal system has continuously lowered working conditions, taking advantage of both poverty and unemployment, which is a major reason why the majority of women in the Caribbean now work under dangerous circumstances. The sexual division of labor is a main contributor to gender inequality, with establishing distinct roles and creating a hierarchy, confining women into a situation of subordination and economic dependence on men.

Women have been forced into positions related to social reproduction, such as nursing, teaching, or domestic work, all defined as “women’s work,” many of which are characterized by low pay and low status, maintaining the patriarchal hierarchy (Ramos, 2012, p. 398). Ramos (2012, p. 402) concludes that “the labour movement and trade unionists must defend and stand in solidarity with the feminist movement to advance women’s rights and empowerment—pushing all towards a society based on the principles of justice, equity and equality.”

Similarly to Drayton’s (1997) analysis of textbooks in schools, the analysis of teaching of economics at the university level reveals a great exclusion of references to gender issues, demonstrating that the issue of engendering economics has not been a major concern or priority for economics teaching and research in the Caribbean. This explains why economists have not focused on gender issues, for they are not exposed to them in their formal education. Social and cultural variables need to be incorporated into economics in order to systematically incorporate gender analysis, which could help lead to change (Downes, 2008).

Despite higher levels of participation and performance in education, women’s access to education in the Caribbean has done little to change their subordinate position in their societies. Colonialism is a primary contributor to the major paradox with the long tradition of female economic autonomy, with female-headed households and a family structure where men are often marginal and absent, while there is still an ideological unity of patriarchy, female subordination, and female dependence. The patriarchy coexists within a system of matrifocal and matrilineal families, as well as the state patriarchy coexisting with the economic independence of women (Momsen, 2002, pg. 45). This paradox is most strongly developed within the lower-class Afro-Caribbean group.

Women in the Caribbean display higher levels of economic autonomy than are found in most parts of the South. Slavery reinforced by later male out-migration, leaving a female majority of the population, has usually explained this. Women have had equal rights to land ownership in the Anglophone and Dutch-speaking Caribbean, allowing women to reject the patriarchal control and establishing the physical basis for matrilineal settlement patterns. Still, despite equality of rights to resource entitlements, women's farms in the English-speaking Caribbean are generally smaller, less accessible, and on poorer soil than those on men (Momsen, 2002). In Francophone and Hispanic Caribbean, patriarchal inheritance laws have limited women's land rights, although women constitute forty percent of agricultural landowners in French Guiana, twenty-two percent in Martinique, and eighteen percent in Guadeloupe (Momsen, 2002, pg. 50).

The Caribbean has made great steps towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2000) and the increase in women's education, the decline in fertility, and women's growing social, economic, and political participation demonstrate the steps toward equality in the Caribbean. However, deeply rooted inequalities are still present, as demonstrated in the types of jobs women are in and the limited number of women in decision-making positions. Sexism, racism, and classism are systemic inequalities being perpetuated in schools, through the types of education offered for individuals and the content in textbooks. Ironically, the patriarchy is coexisting within a system of matrifocal and matrilineal families, with a long tradition of female economic autonomy, due to the Caribbean's history with colonialism (Momsen, 2002), which further demonstrates the complexity and difficulty to change the dominant ideology and break the vicious cycles creating gender inequalities throughout many sectors of society in the Caribbean.

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