Making it Work in the English-speaking Caribbean: Women as Mothers, Providers and Leaders

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Over the centuries and across the region, women regardless of race, class, ethnicity, or suffrage struggled to effect political power in wider society. Power is held by men, and enforced through ideological, economic and various social mechanisms. During the 20th century, women have used a variety of strategies to change policy, create prescriptives for the common good, or to bring attention to injustice, inequality or other social causes.. How they have been able to do break into such a male stronghold is of underlining importance here. It is here that we find women of the Commonwealth Caribbean who can claim to be true pioneers of women's political activism in the region. Across the region, and decidedly so in the Caribbean, women's political work is very local, concentrating their activities in villages and in neighborhoods. By narrowing the field of vision to focus on the Anglophone Caribbean, we see that a handful of women leaders have been able to move beyond the village, or community level, and have become leaders of women and men.

For almost seven decades Anglophone Caribbean women activist leaders have been able to carry out public political, social and economic work on behalf of women men and children of their country, the region and the world. I argue that certain Commonwealth Caribbean women's ability to embark on a collision course with patriarchal social "norms" have to do in part with British colonialism and the loop holes found within that seemingly rigid system, and its antecedents in more contemporary times. Needless to say, additional attributes for women's success include individual charismatic personalities, organizational skills, political savvy, and specific family histories. Further, it is not some West Indian cultural norm at work here either. It does not have to with mother-daughter dyads, female headed households or Protestantism.

As a matter of fact, the political work rarely evokes the notion of motherhood, as a political strategy used women elsewhere, e.g. in Argentina. What it does encumber is a common colonial history that shaped local society and opportunities for girls and women of a certain class position. British colonialism had a long history in the Caribbean and continues to this very day. To illustrate the point, the British seized Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655, and the Union Jack flew over the island until 1962. Clearly a mere 307 years of colonial rule leaves an imprint on culture and society.

Although labor, trade and politics intervene time to time, barriers impede communication, information and experience sharing. Latin American still suffers from barriers erected by the varying colonial powers include language and travel restrictions. This point was clear at the 1975 meeting UN Decade for Women held in Mexico City. At this meeting, regionally marked interest groupings were very apparent, however the larger Latin American contingent recognized the common hemispheric threads that bind the region. It was also that moment that Caribbean women leaders and their work found mutual ground within the region, and acknowledged the diversity therein. Never daunted, women still make a way, as numerous gatherings of like-minds continue to speak. A goal of this paper is to contribute to the discussion of the comparative nature of Latin American women's political activism.

The work has three sections. The first theoretically positions 20th century Commonwealth Caribbean women's leadership in a socio- economic context of later-day colonialism. This is followed by a brief examination of British colonial "indirect rule," and how this policy provided the necessary loop-hole for women leaders and their activism to enter the scene. Finally, I look at the lives of three women from three

countries of the English-speaking areas. They are Jane Phillips Gay of Guyana, Phyllis Shand Allfrey of Dominica, and McArtha Lewis (Calypso Rose) of Trinidad and Tobago. The reasons for choosing these particular women are: they represent the range of long term activities of women in Commonwealth Caribbean; the power base of each woman is housed in women's groups in which they were/are leaders; and they represent a woman's agenda in other forums and are acknowledged throughout the region and the world for their work.

Position of Women and Colonial Loop-Holes

There is a very convenient model that helps scholars to discuss the positions of women in society. It is a model of the social construction of gender. When doing comparative work, the model can direct where differing aspects of culture and society lie. The model consists of three apexes, each angle projecting flows towards one another, so it has a circular motion to it. One point is the biological, housing the ability of females to produce ovum, accept sperm, give birth and other physical characteristics. The second apex is the ideological base that houses the body of ideas on which human beings base notions of what families or other social organizations are located, what roles people play in them, why certain people are included in them, and where the action takes place. Finally, the third apex is society and culture, that are products of history subject to change, responses to the environment, modes of behavior, system of symbols, and a structured existence shared by a group of people. Shaped as a triangle, the model illustrates how the socially constructed gendered relations flow through and back and around to ideology, and how biology circles and inscribes race, class, religion,

ethnicity, physical difference, sexual orientation and so forth. This basic model indicates sites where difference and similarity reside.

For the English-speaking Caribbean, “indirect rule” provided the homogenous governing structure across the cultural and societal differences. The policy was able to entrench patriarchy in every facet of public and domestic life, as it engineered a mechanism to further reinforce the social stratification of race, color, class, ethnicity, gender and religion so pronounced in the development of Creole societies with their legacy of slavery.

Indirect rule became the hiring practice for the British Empire following its effectiveness in East Africa in the late 19th century. Indirect rule was established to satisfy governmental and bureaucratic needs of the Empire by filling jobs usually manned by low level English civil servants with local “natives.” In doing so, a new classification of work was created as well as a new set of cleavages in British colonial societies, including those found in the Caribbean. Low level bureaucrats strengthened colonial ties. Furthermore, in Caribbean societies indirect rule reinforced male domination. For the most part, men were the bureaucrats hired thereby cementing a male stake in preserving the system.

Another benefit of the development of the civil service sector was the upward mobility that went along with the job. By the turn of the 20th century, men who assumed these civil service jobs had the necessary qualifications for employment including passing GCE (Cambridge school examinations). This is evidenced in the number of secondary schools that opened up for non-elite boys. Education beyond the secondary level had to be obtained in England, as no thought was considered for developing a

institution of higher education in the islands. As a matter of fact, when the regional institution of higher learning, the University College West Indies located in Jamaica was established in 1948, it was an extension of the University of London. The University of the West Indies (UWI) as it is known today was not chartered in its own right until 1961. The lack of seats higher education and training facilities was a limiting factor and kept in check the rise in social rankings in the populations. Nonetheless, particularly after W.W.I there was a great demand for housing, banking, churches and other accouterments of middle class status for the growing number of colonial bureaucrat families. By means of indirect rule, phenotypically darker skin men could enjoy a social mobility usually reserved for those of lighter skin color. Fathers, who were low and middle level civil servants and professionals like religious ministers, made a way for some daughters to enter a new place in society beyond that of marriage and children. They could work as clerks, nurses, teachers, and perhaps social workers.

Daughters of the civil service families were educated in religious denominational institutions like their brothers. However their education was the type deemed appropriate to the proper training of girls. The goal was to make these young women good wives following middle class rules of British decorum. Pending a failure on the marriage mart, girls, at best could be primary school teachers, and nurse maids (higher ranking nurses were British expatriates). Further training was available only in England or Canada requiring access to funds which a civil service salary usually could not afford.

To make it clear, middle class girls/young women were not encouraged to move beyond home by dictates of class position and colonial rule, guided by local patriarchy. Across class lines, women's power was located at home. Patricia Anderson (1986:320)

argues that female power seems to exist at a somewhat subterranean level, especially in regard to kinship and the family. In the work force, women's power is severely curtailed, occupying sex segregated activities and duties that infer low status (Bolles, 1996). Organizations, save for British expatriate wives clubs and similar social welfare groups did not question male domination or female subordination. Leadership was a male construct that implied conduct unbecoming of a lady, including public speaking. Although public speaking became a critical assets for all women activists, it is the use of other skills that marked the talents of women leaders for improved quality of life and social change.

Karen Brodkin Sacks (1988:120-49) talks about the difference between leaders (usually men) and organizers (usually women) in her study of a strike in the 1980s at the Duke University Hospital. Women who mobilized others into action assumed their stature based on their central role in forming networks and shaping worker consciousness. Sacks called these women, centerwomen. The centerwomen were the key figures in all of the activities of the Duke workers during their strike against the hospital. Organizing was facilitated by the interpersonal skills of these women. As the short glimpses of the life's work of the three women under study illustrates their ability to establish social networks, and to effectively use interpersonal skills. These are the attributes that made them stellar examples of Caribbean women's activism. Entering the door of public life allowed the following set of pioneering women leaders featured here the advantage to bring in the rest of us along with them.

Minister of the Federation and Writer -- Phyllis Shand Allfrey

Phyllis Shand Allfrey (1908-1986) was born into the white planter class of Dominica. The Shand family roots in the Caribbean trace back to the 17th century. By the time Mrs. Allfrey was born, the family fortune was lost, but their position in society was secured by class and race. After attending an elite school for girls in Dominica, Phyllis Shand was tutored at home for the GCE. The family did not have the finances to send her abroad, so Phyllis Shand worked as a bank clerk (an elite white woman's job) while saving for her trip to England so she could continue her education. Bored with saving and waiting, in 1927 she took up the offer of free passage to New York, and sailed away from Dominica with JP Morgan II on his yacht.

Phyllis Shand worked as a governess for the Morgan's and other high society New York families, and was troubled by her downward mobility. A wedding in England saved the day, and provided the circumstance of meeting her future husband, Robert Allfrey an English gentleman with a Oxford degree. When they established themselves back in England after living in the US and having children, Phyllis Shand Allfrey sought out fellow Dominicans and other West Indians. She became a student of socialism and supported the Republic Army during the Spanish Civil War. Since she started writing early and published at the age of 13, the family income relied heavily on Phyllis Shand Allfrey's writing commissions. Robert Allfrey was a supporter, not a provider. After the Second World War, politics became a center point of Phyllis Shand Allfrey's life, and tested her marriage. She literally and spiritually moved back and forth between England and Dominica.

Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert writes (1996:76) that in the 1950s,

“Phyllis’s most cherished ambitions -- literary and political -- crystallized.” She would write and publish her novel *The Orchid House (1953),*found the Dominican Labor party, run two arduous, yet... victorious political campaigns, and become a minister in the West Indian Federation. The triumphs were tempered by family crisis including her son’s institutionalization in a mental hospital, the floundering of her literary career and the near loss of her marriage because of her “passionate devotion to her party.” Nonetheless, it was because of politics that Phyllis Shand Allfrey was able to represent Caribbean women in local, regional and international forums. And despite the gender bickering, e.g. after addressing a session, Allfrey was told that she had “Spoken like a housewife,” she was also refereed to by other Federation ministers as Lady Minister. “Being a politician” she wrote, ”is not an easy role for anyone,” but it was still less so for a woman, since we seem to be more vulnerable to insults, slander, mockery and the minor disgusts of political life than men” (Paravisini-Gebert 1996:180).

The West Indian Federation (1958-62) began with tremendous optimism and ended in the fracturing politics that still plagues the region. Phyllis Shand Allfrey’s ministerial portfolio covered the usual ones assigned to women -- health, housing, welfare and education -- as well as sports, the Red Cross, Alcoholics Anonymous, the International Labor Organization and UNESCO. During the Federation’s final session with most ministers already departed for home, Mrs. Allfrey reminded her colleagues that one of the lasting benefits of the Federation was the royal chartering of the regional university. As of April, 1962, the institution was to be known as the University of the West Indies, with the main campus in Jamaica and a second in Trinidad (the Barbados

campus came later). During her years as minister, Mrs. Allfrey also championed the cause of establishing school of medicine on the Jamaican campus.

Although her life seemed to be reduced to opening bazaars, as the only woman Federation minister Phyllis Shand Allfrey did do more than her share of openings and celebrations. At times when she was able to address a gathering of women, she spoke to issues to their mutual hearts. September, 1960, Mrs. Allfrey took part in Nigeria's independence celebrations. Traveling as a Federal MP, and as "a member of the greatest... the most powerful trade union in the world -- the working women's trade union," her chief mission on that trip was to meet Nigerian women leaders and to talk about common concerns. Mrs. Allfrey remarked on her return home that regardless of what had been said about the advantages of African countries over the West Indies, "we...can still teach the people of the Northern regions of Nigeria something about the emancipation of womankind" " (Paravisini-Gebert 1996:178).

No matter what course of politics transpired, Phyllis Shand Allfrey relied on the women voters as her constituency. Speaking as the vice-president of the Caribbean Women's Association she noted:

> "If women decide to act in unity, they are *quite invincible*.. The only thing is that men know this too, and their counteraction may be summed up in these words: Flatter and divide, and above all keep women in their proper place. Of course, it is up to individual women to decide what that proper place is; but fewer and fewer of us nowadays will accept anything less than absolute equality with joint responsibility. Our demands are quietly and (I hope) graciously expressed, but the answer we expecting from the men of the Caribbean is an unequivocal YES" (Paravisini-Gebert 1996:187).

Trade Unionist, Jane Phillips Gay

Jane Phillips Gay (1914-1995) received the kind of education deemed appropriate for girls of her era, as she obtained her GCE at the College of Preceptors in Guyana. Her goal as a young girl was to be a preacher, but instead she used her power of communication as a trade union leader, and later on as an elected Member of the Parliament of Guyana.

From 1948-1966 Mrs. Gay worked for the Guyana Industrial Workers Union, beginning as a volunteer, then clerk eventually working her way up to the position of General Secretary. As is the case in organized labor in the Commonwealth Caribbean, the CEO power resides in either the general secretary, or that of the president. The alternative to CEO is that of an administrative manager. Only a handful of women have assumed either one of those positions since 1938 throughout the entire region. Jane Phillips Gay was General Secretary with the primary duties as a manager.

Mrs. Gay never had children and separated from her husband early on in the marriage. However, as a woman born in relative privilege, she had this to say about how she came to the trade union movement (Bolles 1996:100)

> ...My anxiety to understand the problems of the sugar workers. As a young girl my parents used to look forward to the various shootings of the industry There were some uprising of the estate, but they could not give me any type of knowledge what was really responsible for this. So when the opportunity presented itself to me, shortly after the 1940 Emerald shooting, I took office of the president of the GIWU and that's how I began to gain knowledge which I was seeking for years. Then he invited me to a meeting he was about to attend at the Plantation Providence; and we sat and I listened to the workers, what they discussed with him. I became more interested then; asked him if I could go to the Plantation Highblock on the Sunday where he was scheduled t have a meeting. I went, and there again my interest grew. And then he asked me if I would like to see some of the workers personally from other estates -- the generally visited his office every Monday. And so I went Monday, and there is where I became actually involved in the problems of the sugar workers.

Recalling how difficult it was for sugar cane workers in the 1950s, Mrs. Gay told the interviewer

"I suppose you might realize that the cane-cutting, standing in the filed, which has no shelter rain or shine, then you will appreciate in my days, in days the workers had to drink form the trenches, same trenches where they're the alligators live and die, today water is being carried out into the field."

Mrs. Gay began attributed her 1983 election as an Member of Parliament to her work as a trade union leader. Asked what she thought what leadership meant, Jane Phillips Gay said " To be a good leader you got to sacrifice, you got to be devoted and you have to have the honesty of, first people must realize it has to be a practical display of honesty and work" (Ibid.).

In *We Paid Our Dues* (Bolles 1996:202) women trade union leaders spoke of who their role models were, and what they thought were the essentials of being a leader. They spoke of interpersonal skills, outspokenness, firm resolve, and philosophical understanding of the situation. One name often mentioned, by Commonwealth women trade unionists as an ideal leader and a role model was Jane Phillips Gay.

Calypso Rose, McArtha Lewis

McArtha Lewis, known by her stage name Calypso Rose, is not only a great calypsonian, but "the mother of calypso." The power of calypso is satire and social commentary on current events sung in a syncopated rhythm. It focuses on human relations, and in syncopated style targets two subjects -- sex and politics. Needless to say up until the success of Calypso Rose, the music, the performance and overall business of Calypso was a world of men. Calypso, a popular song tradition of Trinidad

and Tobago has its roots in African and European musical formats. Gathering popularity during the 20th century, calypso tested performers verbal abilities of improvisation, quick wit and style. Some of these elements still remain, particularly the competition. However, standard calypso artistic practices now include high tech sound systems, a music industry format, and a market beyond the English-speaking Caribbean to the Caribbean Diaspora. This is the world that Calypso Rose helped to create.

Born in 1940 in Tobago into a religious home, Rose started singing calypso and writing calypso songs as a teenager. Her father, a devoutly religious minister, was most annoyed with these turn of events. He hoped that his daughter would sing in the church, and perhaps hold a civil service job. Rose continued in the church and took on a job in the civil service, all the while her calypso career was waiting to take off. Rose remained a spiritual person, but also continued to sing calypsos because she felt it was a part of the culture of the people.

Calypso Rose met a great deal of criticism because she was intruding into a male dominated arena. In the early days of her career, it was very hard as a performer and as a young woman socialized to be “respectable” according to social mores. Since sexual innuendoes are key to the song style, a newspaper referred to Rose as the “Queen of Smut.” At that time, Rose recalls, “ there was certain types of calypsos.....I demonstrate whilst I’m on stage and they couldn’t understand that in singing calypsos the feeling is within, especially when certain instruments are used......that keep me kicking and there are certain lyrics that have to project and doing so, oh boy, they would say ‘oh Boy look at she, man” (Ottley 1992:5).

In 1956, Rose was encouraged to sing in the calypso tents in Trinidad by none other than Prime Minister Dr. Eric Williams, who visited the twin island of Tobago to celebrate his election to office. The election led to the formation of the ill-fated West Indian Federation, followed by Trinidad and Tobago's own independence in 1962. During these years, Calypso Rose traveled to Trinidad and performed with Lord Kitchener, one of the genre's premier singers. These course of events began of her tremendous career, and the opening-up of the world of calypso to women as performers. In 1963, Rose left Trinidad for her first regional tour. Competing in Grenada, St. Vincent, Barbados, Antigua and the USVI, she was the only female calypsonian on tour. Nonetheless, Rose became first woman to wear the Calypso *King* crown.

Rose's arrival on the calypso scene brought a female perspective to the topics written about and sung in calypso. Critics argue that calypsos often denigrate women, and portray them as untrustworthy, interested only in marriage and controlling men, and as objects to be assaulted both sexually and physically. Many of Rose's calypsos portray women in an assertive and forthright manner (Haniff 1988:66).

> "I could understand why a woman must have a outside man
> I could understand why a woman must have a outside man
> A man does want to run like rat
> And have his wife to abide by that
> And every night he is having a ball
> And when he reach home he aint kissing the wife at all."

Rose states that her calypsos are written from stories she heard from other women. She tries to write about the sufferings of women as much as she can. She recalls (Ibid.) "When I first started out it was women who criticized me most. Now look

how time change eh. Women's clubs and so invite me to speak. When my calypsos don't make a hit it is as if I am lettin them down." In a certain sense, Rose's lyrics are similar to that of the male calypsonians because she sings and writes openly about sex. A key differential centers on how the double standard, sexual inequality and hypocrisy in relations are recounted and acted up from a woman's perspective.

Housed in the performing world of men, Rose succeeded in the business all the while she turned it around. Calypso Rose won the National Women's Calypso Queen competition five times, but importantly. As marker of ground breaking efforts, she also won the prestigious National Road March twice and the National Road March Monarch Crown. The later two competitions are most significant as they occur during Trinidad's Carnival, the epicenter and culmination of the musical year. Carnival commences a week before Ash Wednesday and is a national holiday. Calypso competitions begin months beforehand and lead to the final events. Furthermore, Rose has been a producer, director and manger of calypso tents (production sites/theaters) and recording studios. In an interview, when asked how she feels about the large number of women being involved in the calypso, Rose states the following:

"I'm feeling proud! I feel proud to know that I've set a standard. I've set a stage for them so that they could get on that stage now and prove themselves. Thanks to the mother of calypso, here we are today where we can gain all the respect that we could get out there. Right now I know an organization want one female calypsonian for the month of August, so I am proud to know that I've opened doors for these my children and I do hope that they could continue what I started out doing although I am not leaving the stage for now, ah have plenty years to go, but I do feel happy and proud.

One of the young women calypsonians who benefited from the tutelage of Calypso Rose is Marvellous Marva. In true calypsonian fashion, here is one of

Marvellous Marva's biggest hits, a calypso written in honor of Calypso Rose, called "The Woman of Calypso."

> "Where is the woman
> Where is the woman....I want to know
> Where is the woman of calypso
> Is she neglected
> Is she rejected in Trinbago
> Why she leave an go
> Ah find the way we treat our great men and women
> When they right on top how we press them
> They fame reaching far and wide
> But when the start to decline
> And they no longer sublime
> We cast them aside
>
> CHORUS
> Calypso Rose
> Calypso Rose
> What have done to commemorate
> Our Calypso Rose
> Give her a home in Trinbago
> Honour her in Calypso
> She is great an shining start
> She promoted a great culture
> Calypso Rose
> You must learn to honour we own heroes
> Whereever she goes/people must honour Calypso Rose
>
> Like it was shameful
> If a woman sing Calypso
> Ah talking bout many years gone by
> or probable disgraceful
> if she even climb on a stage, good
> Lord and just make a try
> But now we have Twiggy, Sandra
> De Tigress, Lady B and Denyse Plummer
> Women who are capable
> Lady Wonder and Francine, Little Natasha
> You can't forget Easlyn, Marvellous Marva
> Tell me who is responsible, I say
> Calypso Rose, Calypso Rose

Calypso Rose has performed throughout North America and Europe. She regards her art as cultural work, because calypso is essential to Trinidadian identity and spirit.

<u>Conclusion</u>

There is no doubt that Caribbean women from the English-speaking areas have contributed much to the better understanding of women's status and role in society in their homelands and in the wider Latin American region. It is obvious that three women discussed are truly exceptional, and dedicated their lives to their work and to their countries. Referring to the model of social construction of gender, the women represented here used various variances to un-end certain strictures for their political success. For example, Phyllis Shand Allfrey worked against the grain, and also used it for a purpose and a positive result. Her work on behalf of the University of the West Indies is an example of this political act. Let us consider the notion of motherhood, and whether the phrase was a part of their work.

Motherhood as a symbol was used by only one of the women represented here, Calypso Rose. As a matter of fact, she is called the Mother of Calypso, particularly by the numbers of young women who are now in the music business. Why has Rose taken on the symbolic gestures of mothering in the very still male dominated field of calypso? Part of the answer has to do with timing. Calypso Rose was not “the mother” until she had done the nearly impossible -- won the road march twice and named monarch. It was “safe” to put on the cloak of motherhood because Rose was mentoring and others were following her example. Motherhood was not seen as a nurturing role,

but one that demonstrates how to provide for your art and for your cultural identity. The fact that under the public persona of Calypso Rose, McAtha Lewis was a wife, a mother, and a grandmother. However, these personal facts have little to do with the symbol, because as Rose candidly remarks, “I don’t have a family life because I live on a plane more than I live in my house” (Ottley 1992:16).

In a similar fashion, Jane Phillips Gay and Phyllis Shand Allfrey disdained from any references to motherhood, because the arena in which they operated would hold that against them. As Phyllis Shand Allfrey’s life illustrated, politics causes havoc in one’s domestic life, particularly because of how society is constructed, and the perceived role that women should play. National political work by women is not on the model. A 1940s calypso warned men to watch to out that if things kept on going as they were (women demanding work in war time factories) they might wind up being President of the United States -- the ultimate source of male power even in Trinidad. Can calypsos be prophetic?

Women politicians in the English-speaking Caribbean are still a rare breed, as there are only a dozen female M.P.’s across the entire region. Nonetheless, women’s political groups use interpersonal networks and other strategies to circumnavigate the Westminster model, out maneuver the status quo to meet certain needs, and continue to do the extraordinary to get things accomplished on behalf of women, children and men in society.

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