



**CENTRE FOR GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES**  
**University of the West Indies**

*Working Paper Series (Cave Hill)*

**Engendering Local Government in the  
Commonwealth Caribbean**

*Violet Eudine Barriteau*

**Working Paper No. 1**  
**April 1998**

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**ISBN: 976 8083 07 5**  
**Centre for Gender and Development Studies**  
**University of the West Indies, Cave Hill**

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Undertaking the research for this paper proved to be a challenging exercise. A theme such as "The Experience of Engendering Local Government in the Commonwealth Caribbean" assumes information on local government exists and what is perhaps lacking is how women have fared in local government structure. Instead I found there is a paucity of information on local government in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Very little documented, accessible information exists. Library searches and different types of consultations and referrals reveal inadequate sources of information on women and local government. I was forced to modify the title of the paper because at this phase we do not yet know the experiences of women and local government.

Attempting to find material to write this paper underscored the negligence accorded to this aspect of political participation by political scientists and other researchers. Feminist researchers, political scientists and historians have yet to address the area of women and local government. To do justice to this inquiry, investigations into primary sources are required. Information on women and local government must be unearthed and analysed. This requires visits to countries for archival searches, assessments of original documents and interviews with key players. In the absence of all of these, I have attempted an outline of the profile and experiences of women in local government drawing on the experiences of women and political participation at the national level.

I wish to thank my staff for their generous assistance in putting together this paper. They are Mrs Veronica Jones, Ms Sherry Asgill, Ms Rhonda Walcott and Mrs Catherine Gibson. I appreciate your dedication and professionalism.

# Engendering Local Government in the Commonwealth Caribbean<sup>1</sup>

*From the feminist point of view  
the questions of women's collective reality  
and how to change it merges  
with the question of women's point of view and how to know it<sup>2</sup>*

*The feminist struggle to reconfigure identities  
and gender relationships is an essential moment  
in the reconstruction of the institutions of civil and  
political society... Indeed conventional gender roles  
are so deeply entrenched in our identities that  
they blind us to the political injustices which  
are only graspable with the shifts in these roles<sup>3</sup>*

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Commonwealth Caribbean comprises twelve independent countries of Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago. It includes four British dependencies with limited self government. These are Anguilla, The British Virgin Islands, The Turks and Caicos Islands and Montserrat. The two remaining full British dependencies in the Commonwealth Caribbean are Bermuda and The Cayman Islands.

The Commonwealth Caribbean is geographically a small region with a total population in 1992 of just over five and a half million people. Only Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago have populations that exceed one million. See Table 1.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally prepared as the regional background paper for The Commonwealth Caribbean Regional Symposium on Engendering Local Government in the Commonwealth Caribbean, St. Lucia, June 30 - July 3, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Catharine A Mackinnon. Towards a Feminist Theory of the State (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 241.

<sup>3</sup> Johanna Meehan, "Introduction" in Feminists Read Habermas Gendering the Subject of Discourse, Johanna Meehan ed., 1 - 20. (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 8.

**Table 1**  
**Basic socioeconomic indicators for**  
**Commonwealth Caribbean countries**  
**1989-92**

	Population 1992	%F	%M	GNP/Capita (US\$) 1990	External debt service ratio (%) 1990	Life expectancy at birth (years)1991	Infant mortality rate per 1000, 1990	Daily calorie intake 1989
The Bahamas	255,095	51.0	49.0	11,510	2.3	69	25	2,761
Barbados	262,653	52.1	47.9	6,540	13.7	77	10	3,279
Antigua & Barbuda	85,700	n.a	n.a	4,600	4.7	73	19	2,222
Trinidad & Tobago	1,283,000	50.1	49.9	3,470	19.0	71	25	2,853
St.. Kitts and Nevis	41,800	n.a	n.a	3,330	2.5	69	36	2,609
Grenada	91,200	n.a	n.a	2,120	7.3	70	31	2,706
Belize	189,392	49.1	50.9	1,970	4.1	67	45	2,656
Dominica	71,500	50.2	49.8	1,940	1.6	75	16	2,810
St.. Lucia	135,975	51.5	48.5	1,900	2.8	71	19	2,595
St.. Vincent & the Grenadines	107,600	51.0	49.0	1,610	31.0	70	22	2,604
Jamaica	2,460,000	50.9	49.1	1,510	-	73	16	2,609
Guyana	717,458	50.8	49.2	370	-	64	51	2,710
Turks & Caicos	12,300	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	74	2	n.a
Anguilla	9,700	n.a	n.a	n.a	1.0	75	5.3	n.a
British Virgin Is	17,000	48.7	51.3	n.a	n.a	69	29.8	n.a
Montserrat	11,000	50.3	49.7	n.a	4.7	71	11	n.a

Source: Towards Equity in Development: A report on the status of women in sixteen Commonwealth Caribbean Countries [Mondesire and Dunn 1995].

The United Nations 1995 Human Development Report classify Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, St. Kitts and Nevis and Trinidad and Tobago as having high Human Development Indices [UNDP 1995: 226]. Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, St. Lucia and St Vincent are ranked with a Medium Development Index. The majority of countries are ranked as middle income with a per capita GNP between US\$696 - 8,625.00. The exceptions are The Bahamas which is the only Commonwealth

Caribbean country ranked with a high per capita income US\$8,625 or greater; and Guyana listed as low income with a per capita income of US\$695 or lower [UNDP 1995].

## **RACE AND ETHNICITY**

Socio-economic and demographic features merge with racial, ethnic and cultural characteristics that are relevant to understanding women's political participation in the region. A racially mixed population is one of the legacies of our history. Afro Caribbean people dominate in the populations of The Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica and the Eastern Caribbean countries. In Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana the population is almost equally composed of Indo Caribbean and Afro Caribbean people. Forty nine to fifty one percent of the population of each country is of Asian, East Indian ancestry. In Trinidad and Tobago East Indian women were 39.6% of the total female population in 1980 [Mohammed 1988: 382]. However, East Indian labourers are also part of the migration legacy of Grenada, Jamaica, St. Lucia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. If Indo Caribbean women constitute a significant percentage of the population of Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, can we expect their proportionate participation for women involved in local government? If not, how does culture and ethnicity complicate political participation and skewed gender relations? In Barbados, Barbadians of European origin form about 4% of the population [Barbados 1992]. There are also Caribbean citizens of Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish and French descent [Mondesire and Dunn 1995:13].

Belize is probably the most diverse country ethnically. Its population comprises Creoles, Mestizos, Garinagu or Garifuna, Mayan and Ketchi Mayan, and Mennonites [Mondesire and Dunn 1995: 13]. The population of African ancestry accounts for 36.4%, but the Mestizo population is the largest single segment, at 43.6% [Belize 1991].

Indigenous peoples constitute small but significant numbers in the population of Guyana, Belize, Dominica and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. See Table 2. In all these countries they are among the poorest of the population. They suffer from shortages of basic infrastructure and have marginal access to the resources of the state [Mondesire and Dunn 1995: 15].

These populations include constituencies of women we know very little about. We need dialogue and research with indigenous women so that their concerns can reshape the political agenda. For instance, the Carib territory in Dominica represents one of the oldest forms of local government in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Its functioning and the place of women within it is extremely critical to our understanding of local

Table 2  
Amerindian population  
1994

COUNTRY	POPULATION
Guyana	40,619
Dominica	3,400
St.. Vincent/Grenadines	6,000
Belize	26,000
Trinidad/Tobago	400
TOTAL	76,419

Source: Towards Equity in Development: A report on the  
the status of women

government. Its existence simultaneously blends issues of race, ethnicity and gender with the rights of indigenous Caribbean people.

## CONCEPTUAL ISSUES ON GENDER AND GOVERNANCE

Commonwealth Caribbean countries have political structures derived from the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy. Elections are held regularly and changes of government are relatively peaceful although Jamaica has experienced some political violence during campaign periods leading up to general elections. The 1996 general elections in Guyana have been followed by political protests, street demonstrations, a CARICOM investigation and a rejection of the election results by the opposition PNC because of alleged widespread irregularities, some of which have been documented.

By the 1950's many of the structural obstacles to Caribbean<sup>4</sup> women's participation in the political processes of classical democracy had been removed<sup>5</sup>. At the

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4

Caribbean in this paper refers the Anglophone Caribbean countries and the British dependencies of the Commonwealth.

5

Jamaican women had a limited franchise based on property qualifications in 1919. While women had the right to vote and to stand for elections in St. Lucia in 1924, in Jamaica in 1944 and Trinidad and Tobago in 1946, women gained universal adult suffrage in the majority of British Caribbean colonies in the 1950's starting with Barbados in 1950. The Bahamas was last in 1961 with all restrictions to political participation



beginning of that decade the British colonial authorities widened the narrow franchise of earlier decades to give the vote to all women and men 21 years and over [Emmanuel 1979:1].

Yet possessing a *de jure* right to vote and to stand for elections has not produced a *de facto* inclusion and representation of women at all levels in Caribbean political systems. It has not transcended national government structures to be a common feature at the level of local government. Women in commonwealth Caribbean countries continue to experience a combination of subsystemic material and ideological barriers that thwart their full participation in the practices of governance nationally and at the community level.

Women and men committed to participatory democratic structures regard local government as one of the main institutions for reconstructing civil and political society. Bishnu Ragoonath defines local government as self government involving the administration of public affairs in each locality by a body of representatives. According to him it is a tier of government separate and distinct from central government but working in close partnership with it [Commonwealth Secretariat 1994: 2].

There are conceptual and ideological points of departure in those views of local government. In reality local government functions in the Caribbean to achieve several objectives. Where elections are held it maintains the presence of competing political parties at the constituency/community level. Through local government, parties can attempt to ensure their bases of support are not eroded while they pursue more global developmental policies. Local government also manages delivery of public goods and services and is presumed to do so more efficiently than central or national administrations. However local government in the Caribbean has not yet realised its potential for introducing more participatory, democratic processes.

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removed in 1964. See Inter-parliamentary Union, "Men and Women in Politics, Democracy Still in the Making: A World Comparative Study" (Geneva: Inter-parliamentary Union, 1997):28; Maxine Henry-Wilson, "The Status of Jamaican Women, 1962 to the present" in Jamaica in Independence Essays on the Early Years, Rex Nettleford ed., 229-239 (Kingston and London: Heinemann Caribbean and James Currey, 1989).