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Changing Gender Roles: West Indian Migration to the United States and Canada

Introduction

Migration is embedded in West Indian¹ history to such an extent that international movement has become a part of the consciousness of the people. Emigration from the West Indies and the transnational flows that have developed between the islands and their primary destination countries have become not only an economic strategy for West Indians, but also a culturally and socially desirable practice. Evidence of this is reflected not only in the large numbers of West Indians who emigrate annually, but also in the large percentage who express the desire to emigrate. Migration has become a channel through which Caribbean people have been able to achieve socioeconomic mobility.

Patterns of emigration have changed over the course of West Indian history, and have usually been related to such factors as the colonial past as well as contemporary economic opportunities. While there has been constant demand for West Indian labor in the United States and Canada throughout the second half of the twentieth century, this demand has shifted among sectors. Much of the labor demand has been concentrated in low-skilled fields such as agriculture or domestic work, particularly during earlier stages of widespread movement from the Caribbean to North America. More recently the trend has shifted toward health care to such an extent that there is an overrepresentation of

¹ While West Indian is used here in reference to people from the Anglophone Caribbean, it is also used interchangeably with Caribbean.

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West Indians, particularly women, in health care professions in the United States and Canada. While health care professions are not gender-specific, most West Indian nurses and nurse's aides tend to be women. Farm workers are predominantly men, while domestic workers are almost exclusively women. This paper examines the changing roles of men and women in West Indian migration to the United States and Canada during the second half of the twentieth century. A central question of this paper is: to what extent do West Indian women adopt leadership positions when they migrate to the United States and Canada? What are the implications of this shift in domestic power relations? Does the changing role of migrant women stimulate greater autonomy for women in the household? To what extent do gender dynamics and immigration policies of the host societies influence the gendered patterns of West Indian migration?

Immigration Policies

During the mid-1950s female West Indian migrants to Canada were employed as domestic workers under a program through which they were obligated to work for a one year period, after which they could apply for permanent residency and sponsor close relatives. Beginning in 1955, the Canadian government admitted 100 Jamaican and Barbadian domestic workers annually. These workers were all single women age 21 to 35 years. Under this policy, West Indian domestic workers were required to work for one year as domestics, and they were eligible to apply for citizenship after living in Canada for five years. They were also able to sponsor close relatives to join them in Canada (Winks 1997). This system proved to be a means by which young West Indian women, many of them educated, were able to enter Canada and provide their families with access

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to Canada and its wealth of opportunities. After their mandatory year of domestic work, many of these women sought training and employment in professions such as nursing. By 1960 the number of West Indian women permitted to enter Canada as domestic workers was raised to an annual total of almost three hundred, and women from other West Indian islands were also included in the program (Winks 1997).

Major changes in Canadian immigration policy in 1962 enabled more non-white foreigners to enter the country. In contrast to previous policies that emphasized national origin, the new policies emphasized education and employment potential, and proclaimed that each immigrant would be judged “entirely on his own merit, without regard to race, colour, national origin, or the country from which he comes” (Winks 1997:443).

Following these policy changes black immigrants, especially West Indians, began to arrive in large numbers. The employment opportunities available in Canada were attractive to both single and married West Indian women who took advantage of the high demand for women in domestic, child care, and nursing or nurses' aide positions.

Although in some cases the women were joined by their families, this livelihood strategy in some cases led to the fragmentation of the family. In other cases the power dynamics within the family changed as women became more independent of their partners (Safa 1995). Consequently, among West Indian immigrants in the United States and Canada women are numerically dominant. For example, of Jamaicans living in the United States, 56.3 percent are female and 43.7 percent are male.² In contrast, among the total American population 50.9 percent are female and 49.1 percent are male.³ In Canada, 58 percent of

² U.S. Bureau of the Census, Public Use Microdata Sample, Florida, Five Percent, *2000 Census of Population*, Washington, D.C. 2003.

³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Public Use Microdata Sample, Florida, Five Percent, *2000 Census of Population*, Washington, D.C. 2003.

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Jamaican immigrants are female and 42 percent are male,⁴ while the Canadian population is comprised of 51 percent females and 49 percent males.⁵

Although there was no identical policy in the United States, the combination of immigration policies and the demand for domestic workers in U.S. cities created a very similar context for West Indian women. The availability of domestic work provided employment opportunities for both undocumented women and those who were legally authorized to work in the U.S. West Indian women were, in many cases, sponsored by their employers. The relative ease with which both legal and undocumented women are able to secure domestic employment in part contributes to the dominant role that women play in West Indian migration to the U.S.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of gender encompasses many themes that are relevant to migration. Gender influences the dynamics of the migration process in many ways, some of which are relevant to this research and will be discussed here. First, the role of gender in the decision to migrate is salient, particularly as it pertains to the shift in migration theory away from the male-centered models toward models that recognize the decision-making roles that both single and married women play in the process. Second, gender roles in sending countries help to determine who migrates, and as such shape the gendered distribution of immigrants. Third, gender roles or perceived gender roles in the receiving countries serve as attractive alternatives for women who live in male-dominated

⁴ Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, CO-0851, Target Group Profile – Population born in Jamaica, Montreal, 2001

⁵ Age and sex for population for Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2001 Census – 100% Data

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Caribbean societies. Fourth, gender biases in the labor markets of receiving societies create opportunities for immigrant women, while contributing to changes in the distribution of male and female immigrants in receiving countries.

Migration scholars have increasingly recognized the relevance of gender in the range of processes of migration encompasses. Migration processes, from the decision to migrate, to the alteration of family structures to compensate for the loss of family members, to the development of formal and informal institutions that facilitate immigrant adjustment in the receiving society, are all far more complex than traditional, male-centered models suggest. As more scholars become engaged in research that includes and highlights the role of women as leaders of and partners in migration processes, a more inclusive and realistic understanding of the migration experience can be developed.

Motivation to Migrate

Weeks (2002) and Massey et al. (1998) identify seven basic models of international migration. Four of these perspectives, neoclassical economics; the new household economics of migration; dual labor market theory and world systems theory explain the initial stages of the migration process. Although this list is not comprehensive, it includes the dominant models that are cited in much of the literature on migration.

The motivation for Caribbean emigration can be explained through a variety of approaches, many of which overlap. One of the most fundamental and widely used models is Lee's (1966) model that explains migration as the result of an imbalance between negative and positive issues in the sending and receiving countries. Push factors

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include concerns such as unemployment, crime, and political instability in the country of origin, while pull factors include the attractive qualities of the destination country, such as improved opportunities for education and the possibility of socioeconomic advancement. In addition, there are intervening obstacles, such as the availability of visas and the cost of travel, as well as personal factors such as emotional ties to the home country. According to this model, the potential migrant makes the decision to migrate based on the combination of these factors (Lee 1966). However, this model has significant limitations, as it offers a simplistic portrayal of the migration process, which is far more complex than the ideas of push and pull factors suggest. In addition, this model assumes that individuals are rational actors. The push-pull model also emphasizes external factors and downplays the individual's role as the primary agent in his or her decision.

The **neoclassical economic** approach to migration is rooted in Lee's push-pull model. It is based on the assumption that migration is a response to global differentials in labor supply and demand. Limited job availability, lower wages, and an abundant work force in developing countries, in contrast to more advanced countries' higher wages and greater opportunities for employment, encourage movement from the former to the latter (Massey et al. 1998:19; Weeks 2002:261). This approach is applicable to the case of migration from developing countries such as those of the Caribbean to more developed countries such as the United States and Canada, as employment opportunity is often cited by West Indian immigrants as a reason for leaving their home (Jones 2005). Fluctuations in the number of emigrants leaving the Caribbean often reflect the social, economic, and political climate in Caribbean countries rather than economic circumstances in the

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destination country, although critics of this perspective argue that the economic “pull factors” have been more influential on West Indian migrants (Cooper 1985). This suggests a sense of confidence and optimism in the economic stability of the more developed destination countries. Such beliefs are perhaps rooted in the contrast between the dismal economic situation in many Caribbean countries and the robust North American economies, such that even during periods of economic recession, migration to the latter appears to be the more reasonable option for upward socioeconomic mobility.

While this model can serve as a useful basis for understanding migrant decision-making processes, it has been criticized for its assumption that the migration process is directed by men. Implicit in the literature of that period is the idea that women primarily accompany men, as opposed to being independent decision-makers. This view has more recently been criticized by scholars who recognize the increasingly influential role of migrant women both within the family and as individual migrants (Pessar 1999).

The **new household economics of migration** is based on a similar premise of economic inequality between the sending and receiving countries. However, this perspective asserts that the decision to migrate is not made by individual actors, but by households, families, or in some cases communities (Massey et al. 1998:21; Weeks 2002:262). This model is particularly palpable in the common practice in which Caribbean women migrate in search of employment, leaving spouses and children in the care of other family members at home (Foner 1985:710). Remittances are sent home to support the children and their caregivers, who are usually aunts, uncles, or grandparents. Although this is often initially a temporary move, many of these migrant women remain permanently, later sponsoring their children and spouses to migrate once they have

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settled in the destination country. Women, particularly those from the Caribbean, have tended to lead the family migration process because of the relative ease with which they find employment. The demand for female-dominated professions such as elementary school teachers, nurses, and domestic workers also facilitates this gender bias, as discussed below. It was often in the best interests of the family to support women's decisions to migrate.

The **segmented or dual labor market** theory claims that migration is not caused by problems or push factors in the sending country, but by pull factors or the demand for migrant labor in the receiving country (Massey et al. 1998:28; Weeks 2002:262). According to this perspective, migration is caused by the international division of labor (Pastor 1985:401) and the incessant demand for low-cost foreign workers that is characteristic of developed economies. The dual labor market refers to the division in the labor market that causes some occupations to be characterized and stereotyped as jobs for immigrants. In Miami, for example, hotel and agricultural workers are often immigrants (McCoy and Wood 1982). While this approach ignores the relevance of conditions in the sending country it underscores the importance of the demand for labor, and also sheds some light on the gender bias in Caribbean migration to the United States and Canada, as there has traditionally been a significant demand for women in positions that have been dominated by immigrants.

The **world-systems** approach assumes that international migration is the result of unequal relations between core and peripheral countries, and a response to the human displacement that accompanies capitalist development and its exploitative nature through its intrinsic demand for resources, cheap labor, and lower production costs (Weeks

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2002:262; Thomas-Hope 2002:9). The dual labor market model differs from the world-systems approach because the former involves the domestic labor market of the receiving country, whereas the latter involves the global labor market. While there is some truth in this perspective, it is a simplistic portrayal of the migrant decision-making process, particularly because of the increasing mobility of production facilities. Migration remains a decision that is based on individual, familial, and sometimes community needs. While the disparity between the sending and receiving countries certainly plays a role in the decision-making process, a range of other factors are involved in this complex process.

These various approaches to migration offer useful perspectives on the determinants of migration. The approaches are not mutually exclusive, and many of them overlap, creating a potentially useful set of models for understanding the motives and challenges of international migration. However, none of them offers a comprehensive theoretical framework. Instead, international migration may be understood as a combination of the forces that these various paradigms address. Some scholars criticize the singular use of these approaches for their myopic interpretations of the decision to migrate (Thomas-Hope 1998, 1999, 2002; Gale, 1973). Such scholars advocate construing the process as a series of decisions, combined with changes in social or economic circumstances (Gale 1973:25). Original motivations for migration may vary, but they are maintained, "...when the predisposition or propensity to emigrate is accompanied by the impetus and opportunity to do so" (Thomas-Hope 1999:185). However, reasons for migrating are important to this research, as they indicate the significance of gender in migrant decision-making processes.

Gender Roles in the Caribbean

Helen Safa's (1995) assertion of the "myth of the male breadwinner" embodies some of the contradictions of contemporary gender relations in the Caribbean. On the one hand, Caribbean societies remain patriarchal. Domestic violence is widespread, and traditional perceptions of women's household duties are generally upheld. Misogyny in the Caribbean is articulated through the prevalence of domestic violence, sexual harassment in the workplace that goes with impunity more often than not, as well as through blatantly sexist, yet popular, dancehall and calypso lyrics. On the other hand, women are very much engaged in economic activities both inside and outside of the home. The Caribbean has a remarkably high rate of female participation in the labor force (Lim 2002). However, women's economic activities are often under-recognized because much of it is based in the informal economy. Several Caribbean states have been led by women, including Dominica and Guyana, and Jamaica will instate its first female Prime Minister on March 30, 2006. Still, Caribbean society remains patriarchal in many ways, and especially so for rural women. The patriarchy that is rampant in the Caribbean belies the reality that women are very much involved in the household economy, and are in many cases solely responsible for the welfare of their children.

Safa (1995) defines patriarchy as "male control over female labor and sexuality," or in other words, "[male control] over women's productive and reproductive role" (Safa 1995:38). She argues that male control over women is evident in the home, the workplace, and at the state level. In the home, women are charged with child-rearing and domestic responsibilities. In the workplace, they are overrepresented in unstable, low-wage jobs, while at the state level policies reinforce female dependence (Safa 1995:39),

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while institutionalized support for women's rights is lacking in many Caribbean states. This observation can certainly be applied to many Caribbean nations, where patriarchy operates at different levels to keep women dependent on male spouses or family members. However, the contradiction lies in the pervasive, yet under-recognized role that Caribbean women play in these same arenas that Safa describes, although the lines between home, work, and society become less defined. Historically, Caribbean women have creatively devised livelihood strategies that enable them to straddle the public and domestic spheres simultaneously. Christine Ho (1999) cautions against the assumption that this dual role that Caribbean women play creates equality between them and their male counterparts. She argues that female participation in the labor force does not necessarily produce gender equality, in part because women continue to be relegated to low-wage jobs (Ho 1999:42).

Migration for Caribbean people has become a channel through which they have been able to achieve socioeconomic mobility. With the development of a capitalist economy headed by the elite, migration, according to Thomas-Hope (1998:190), "was one of the few means open to the masses to improve their material circumstances and thereby also enhance their social status." Migration provided a means by which they could escape the hierarchical structure of the Caribbean's post-emancipation era and realize higher socioeconomic status through improved opportunities for education and employment. Similarly, migration enabled Caribbean women to escape their restrictive and sometimes oppressive domestic lives, choosing instead to live and work abroad. Of course, work conditions abroad, especially in domestic jobs, were sometimes equally restrictive and oppressive. To borrow Ho's argument, increased participation for women

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in the workforce does not necessarily lead to increased equality with men. However, even under harsh working conditions and with the dual responsibility of the working in the private and public spheres, Caribbean women in many cases gain freedom and independence when they migrate.

Gender Roles in the United States and Canada

Women in the United States and Canada have made much progress in establishing their rights. However, there remain significant inequalities between North American men and women, particularly in the context of employment and socioeconomic mobility. Yet in comparison to women in the Caribbean, North American women have better access to resources and services, including legal and financial, which enable them to protect their rights. Of course, there is much variation among North American women, depending on their race, ethnicity and class. Although the United States and Canada are by no means models of gender equality, women arguably have more freedoms in these countries than they do in the Caribbean. As such, they are attractive to Caribbean women as options for escaping the positions of subjugation that they occupy in their home countries.

Furthermore, the anonymity of living in a much larger society enables Caribbean immigrant women to avoid the guilt that patriarchal societies often place on them when they develop lives that are independent of their children, families and what is assumed to be their household duties.

As increasing numbers of North American women began working outside of the home during the second half of the twentieth century, the need for domestic workers grew. For working class American and Canadian women, there were ample employment

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opportunities in factories and offices, which seemed to be more desirable than domestic work (Silvera 1989:7). This led to an increased demand for women from developing countries to fill the need for domestic workers. Countries such as Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and the Philippines were among the more popular sources of the U.S. and Canadian domestic labor force (Parreñas 2001, Silvera 1989). The increased availability of immigrant domestic workers facilitated the movement of North American women into the labor force, as they had access to convenient and relatively inexpensive childcare. However, this phenomenon placed immigrant women in a complex and contradictory position, where they were escaping their patriarchal home societies, yet their new occupations often placed them in similar predicaments as those from which they had escaped. In addition to being subjugated in the domestic sphere, many of them faced the added hostility of racism (Silvera 1989). In her study of migrant Filipina domestic workers, Parreñas (2001) describes a system in which women are able to migrate because their female relatives or other less privileged women take over their household and child-rearing responsibilities. The migrants, in turn, assume these same responsibilities for their employers in the receiving county. These migrants, as Parreñas asserts, “are in the middle of the three-tier hierarchy of the international transfer of caretaking” (Parreñas 2001:73). Similarly, female Caribbean migrant domestic workers are able to leave their patriarchal societies because there are other women to adopt their household duties, which is particularly important if they have children. Although women were in many ways able to improve their lives through migration, their power to effect systemic change was limited by their reliance on other women to fill the positions that they escaped.

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Migration for Caribbean women was in many cases a double-edged sword, as it offered them an opportunity for upward socioeconomic mobility, while it proved to be a sacrifice for several reasons. First, many migrant women with children often left them behind at least temporarily while they worked abroad. Second, working conditions in the receiving country were in many cases poor, and immigrant domestic workers felt confined as they lived with their employers and were for the most part dependent on them (Silvera 1989). Third, migrating to the United States and Canada exposed West Indian women to forms of racial discrimination that had previously been foreign to them. Fourth, migration simultaneously enabled women to escape from their traditional, male-dominated lives, yet offered them a new position in another male-dominated society, as the same social structures and policies that allow Caribbean migrant workers to enter the United States and Canada also oppress them. The difference, however, is that Caribbean migrant women become even less visible in North America than they were at home, as the focus in North America is on North American women who, with the under-recognized contribution of immigrant women, develop the freedom to progress outside of the home.

Gender Composition of Caribbean Immigrants in the U.S. and Canada

Different types of patriarchal societies in the sending and receiving countries, combined with gender-biased immigration policies, have resulted in a gender imbalance among Caribbean immigrants in North America. There are more female Caribbean immigrants in the United States and Canada than there are males, as reflected in Table 1 below. Although there are also more women than men in both the U.S. and Canadian

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populations, there is a significantly wider gap between men and women among West Indian immigrants. Immigration policies and the labor markets of the receiving countries facilitate that gap. Females account for 54 percent and 57 percent of the West Indian-born populations in the United States and Canada, respectively. In contrast, both the United States and Canada have female populations that comprise 51 percent of their populations. Furthermore, this imbalance is not a reflection of West Indian populations, which, like the U.S. and Canada, have only slight majorities of females. In Jamaica, for example, males and females comprise 49 percent and 51 percent of the population respectively.⁶

Population	Total	Females		Males	
		Number	%	Number	%
West Indians in the U.S. ⁷	1,852,874	1,002,830	54	850,044	46
Total U.S. Population ⁸	281,421,906	143,368,343	51	138,053,563	49
West Indians in Canada ⁹	294,050	166,265	57	127,785	43
Total Canadian Population ¹⁰	30,007,090	15,300,240	51	14,706,850	49

⁶ Statistical Institute of Jamaica, *Jamaican Statistics*, retrieved from <http://www.statinja.com/stats.html#1>

⁷ Census 2000 Demographic Profile Highlights, Selected Population Group: West Indian (excluding Hispanic origin groups) (300-359).

⁸ United States Census Bureau, Summary File 1, 100 percent Data, QT-P1. Age Groups and Sex: 2000

⁹ Citizenship, Place of Birth of Respondent, Sex and Period of Immigration for the Immigrant Population, for Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2001 Census - 20% Sample Data

¹⁰ Age (122) and Sex (3) for Population, for Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas¹ and Census Agglomerations, 2001 Census - 100% Data.

Conclusions

Scholars have long advocated discussions of migration that include the considerable role and involvement of women. This paper contributes to the debate in two main ways. First, it examines the extent to which immigration policies determine the centrality of women in migration flows from the Caribbean to North America. Second, it explores the ways in which the labor markets of the host societies facilitate the creation of the space that Caribbean women have come to occupy in the United States and Canada. In her discussion of migrant Filipina women, Parreñas (2001:69) states that patriarchy is “a hidden cause of migration for women.” She also argues that gender inequality in receiving countries also influences patterns of female migration. This paper argues that the patriarchy, as it concerns West Indian migration, is not limited to the sending countries, but also involve, in large part, the receiving countries. Gender-biased immigration policies, compounded by labor markets that favored immigrant women, resulted in gender imbalance among the West Indians in the United States and Canada. Although Caribbean women in some cases abandoned the patriarchy of their homes, they encountered patriarchal societies in North America. Although North American women challenged these social structures West Indian women were, for the most part, unable to enjoy the benefits as long as they remained employed in the domestic realm. Fortunately, many Caribbean women who migrate to the United States and Canada as domestic workers later advance to other occupations such as nursing or home health care. Although the latter may be considered domestic work, it often requires a higher skill level and consequently greater autonomy for the worker.

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Migration to North America enables and forces West Indian women to adopt leadership positions within their families, particularly when their means of migration is not dependent on males. Although they may find themselves in other positions of dependency, perhaps on their employers, West Indian women arguably develop a greater sense of self-determination. Although this shift in the family power structure, can potentially result in the fragmentation of the family, it may alternatively result in a more equitable relationship between the male and female heads of the household. This is not merely because of increased formal employment among women, but mainly because of the autonomy that women develop as a result of being actively involved in and leading the family's migration. While labor force involvement alone does not spur equality, the compound effects of being involved in the decision-making process and being responsible for the family's move may, and the added advantage of financial independence may contribute to greater autonomy for Caribbean women.

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