

## **Inaugural Dame Nita Barrow Lecture**

### **Are Caribbean Women Taking Over? Contradictions for Women in Caribbean Society**

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Dean Michael Fullan, Chair, Barbados' High Commissioner to Ottawa, Her Excellency June Clarke, Mr Errol Humphries, Mr Louis Tull, Dr Hall, Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, sisters and brothers from the Caribbean, good evening. I am very honoured and humbled to deliver the inaugural lecture of the Dame Nita Barrow Women In Development and Community Transformation Visitorship. On behalf of the University of The West Indies and the Centre for Gender and Development Studies I take this opportunity to congratulate OISE and the University of Toronto for establishing this Visitorship to honour the memory of Dame Nita. I hope our policy makers have noted your initiative and are in fact working on a significant and relevant means of honouring the regional and international public service of this remarkable, outstanding woman. I anticipate and look forward to this.

#### **Are Caribbean Women Taking Over?**

Let me say by Caribbean I refer to the countries of the Anglophone, Commonwealth Caribbean which share a similar historical, cultural, political and economic legacy even though there are varying expressions of that legacy within this grouping. With the topic of my lecture, "Are Caribbean Women Taking Over? Contradictions for Women in Caribbean Society" I draw your attention to the changing nature of gender relations in the Caribbean and what these changes mean for women. Sharp, polarized divisions now exist in the ways in which Caribbean people interpret these evolving relations. I want to discuss the surfacing and expressions of currents of misogyny in our societies. I also want to explore why some men and women are expressing outrage, and in some instances, hatred, at women and blaming many negative developments on the changing economic and social roles of women. A common theme running through their criticisms is a questioning of the ideology of gender equality and a challenge to the work of feminists and others to promote gender equality. Public commentators now often typecast Caribbean women as the witches of medieval Europe. We are responsible for the destruction of families (but I am happy to report not crops as yet), high rates of divorce, male economic and social marginalisation, and the comparatively poorer performance of boys and men *at every educational level*. Repeated newspaper articles and editorials warn of the damage being done to boys by being raised in female headed households, attending coeducational schools and being taught primarily by female teachers (Barriteau 1994:283) According to this type of analysis Caribbean countries are, and I quote, "*Slowly but surely becoming matriarchal societies, women outnumber men, make up most of the work force, own most of the homes*" (Advocate News March 6 1996). In the first part of my address I briefly examine what I regard as the ideological underpinnings for this tendency to blame our

women for adverse developments. In the greater part I share with you evidence and analysis of the belief, that women are taking over and the situations that contradict this.

I argue that one source of this blaming of women for almost every negative situation is located in the legacy of liberal ideology. There are particular complications for women in the legacy liberal ideology bequeaths to Caribbean society. One aspect of this legacy, is the approaching of social life as if it occurs in two mutually exclusive spheres; the private world of the family, kinship groups and intimate relations, and the public sphere of the state, the economy and civic society. A belief in this public\private divide makes the experiences of social life more complex for women. Liberal ideology creates and maintains a hierarchy of the public over the private and locates women firmly in the private. The needs, interests and concerns of the sphere of family and kinship groups (which are viewed as a women-only zone) are recreated as inferior or secondary to the needs, interests and concerns of the spheres of the public. I argue it is this public\private conceptualization of society, this privileging, or ranking of the public over the private and seeing women as naturally belonging in the latter that produces contradictions in women's experiences of gender relations.

I will evaluate and reveal the paradox in the belief that women and men can participate equally in the public sphere on the principles of individual freedom and equality but that women are naturally subordinated to men in the private sphere of civil society. Part of the problem that is created is that policy makers and the public assume that Caribbean states can introduce and manipulate changes in material relations without repercussions in the ideological relations of gender and also that they do not need to pay attention to these repercussions.

Caribbean states attempt to construct or facilitate new roles for women only in the public sphere of society, and they do this primarily through altering access to the resources of the state. However when these new roles create either unintended or unanticipated outcomes, some men and women begin to question seriously the whole idea of women's relevance as equal citizens with a right to make equal demands on the resources of the state. I view these increasing currents of misogynous behaviour as nostalgia, a longing, for women to return to their proper place in society. The people who oppose women's expanded public sector participation and visibility, in non traditional areas, imagine women's proper place as located within the private world of the family and kinship groups.

Before independent states introduced equal access to resources, those opposed to women's citizenship could take comfort in a "sexual division of labour" informed more by unequal power relations of gender than any biological functions. Among other outcomes, that division of labour ensured women received fewer financial and other rewards, for the same and often greater levels of output. That sexual division of labour denied women access to more rewarding and remunerative types of employment. Altogether a gendered division of labour reinforced an unequal distribution of political, economic, and social power.

To support the claims I make about the contradictory nature of women's experiences I analyze and juxtapose the UNDP's (United Nations Development Program) relatively high ranking of Caribbean states but especially the Barbadian state in promoting gender equality, and the misogynous currents simultaneously existing within Barbadian society.

When Caribbean states intervene in the public ostensibly on behalf of women their primary area is in the economy. As the economic expression of liberal ideology, capitalism requires a critical mass of both skilled and unskilled workers -- women and men. The industrialization by invitation variant of development so popular in our region, requires cheap, easily manipulated sources of labour. In the Caribbean that translates into women workers. As the foundation of capitalist production, the market requires equality of access to

whatever labour is necessary. States investing in maintaining the market will also invest in enhancing women's participation in the market, and they have done so.

In the process of wanting to use women's labour, our states make a key assumption that is flawed. They believe that they can 'modernize' Caribbean economies by following the conventional approaches to development, and yet retain a pre modernization cultural\ideological purity of rigid gender roles for women and men. At some point ruptures will appear and they have. States cannot willfully alter material relations of gender and assume ideological relations will remain static and frozen in some 19th century, Victorian, ideological fantasy. I maintain that the deep divisions that now exist are the rupturing of traditional ideological relations of gender.

For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century Caribbean women experienced a subordinate status in both domestic life, and the public life of the economy and political participation. Although this situation was detrimental to all women at every level of the state and civil society, material and ideological relations of gender supported each other and reinforced the inferior status of women. Early twentieth century Caribbean society did not allow the majority of women to vote, did not permit equal access to educational resources, nor allowed women to participate equally as workers in the economy.

Caribbean states now alter material relations of gender for women in the public, without either wanting or attempting to address the subordination of women in the private. Policy makers also disregard how ideological aspects continuously complicate attempts at material change. It is difficult to maintain a society premised on hierarchy and subordination in domestic, family, conjugal and sexual relations, when there are ongoing moves toward equality of participation in the economy, public discourses, and political institutions.

### ***Contradictions for Women in Contemporary Caribbean Societies***

What are these contradictions for women and how do they play out in Caribbean societies? How have changes in women's access to resources in the public destabilized existing gender relations and instituted further complications in their lives? The experiences of Caribbean social life are riddled with disparities and paradoxes for women and men.

The 1995 Human Development Report published by the UNDP singled out several commonwealth Caribbean countries for their comparatively better treatment of women. The report contained for the first time, an index and analysis of how women and men fare in countries world wide. The tools the UNDP uses are the Gender Development Related Index (GDI), and a Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). To construct the index the UNDP measured women's and men's share of: earned income, life expectancy, adult literacy rates and combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrollment ratio. For the Gender Empowerment Measure, the UNDP measured seats held in parliament, administrative and managerial positions, professional and technical workers, and share of earned income. The GDI is simply the Human Development Index (HDI) discounted or adjusted downward for gender inequality. Countries may have a high HDI and fall in ranking on the GDI and this happens for the Bahamas and Trinidad and Tobago.

**Table 1**  
**RANK OF CARIBBEAN COUNTRIES ON GENDER DEVELOPMENT INDEX**

<b>COUNTRIES</b>	<b>RANK IN CARIBBEAN</b>	<b>RANK IN THE WORLD</b>
<b>BARBADOS</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>BAHAMAS</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>TRINIDAD &amp; TOBAGO</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>CUBA</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>JAMAICA</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>SURINAME</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>DOMINICAN REPUBLIC</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>GUYANA</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>HAITI</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>105</b>

According to the UNDP some Caribbean states ranked high in their treatment of women. Table 1 shows the comparative ranking within the region and world wide of selected Caribbean countries with the GDI. From this chart one might conclude that women in Barbados, The Bahamas, Trinidad and Tobago, Cuba and Jamaica have very little to worry about. Barbados's rating is singular and most outstanding of all so called developing countries in the world. Barbados is ranked at number 11, on the GDI, ahead of industrialized societies such as New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland, and the Netherlands and only just behind other countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Do not treat these columns as mere statistics. The propaganda value of this has not been lost on our governments or international funding agencies.

The UNDP's analysis substantiates and reflects the positive, overdue, material changes some Caribbean states have introduced to benefit women. It also confirms that Caribbean states target altering material relations of gender in the public as the means of correcting women's historic subordination in societies. We have a reality that some Caribbean countries look very progressive in their moves towards gender equality because of their ranking on the Gender Development Index.

But if things are so wonderful for Caribbean women, (and some material conditions are much better than in other parts of the world), why is there such an outpouring of violence, ridicule, contempt and fear of the gains that women have made? The comparatively high ratings of Caribbean countries on the GDI and GEM have not altered gender ideologies that view women as subordinate to men and that have become openly misogynist.

What is another reality? I won't bombard you with statistics. Instead, as an example of this other reality let me share some headlines from newspapers in Trinidad and Tobago between July 3 to September 13, 1996, a nine week period.

*Two charged for girl's murder;  
Headless woman found;  
Maid killed;  
Mother of four stabbed to death;  
Man killed himself after shooting girlfriend;  
Confessions of a batterer;  
Woman chopped to death.*

We have on the one hand the documentation of material improvements affecting the lives of women and on the other we have an outpouring of violence, outrage and in some instances hatred towards women. In every Caribbean country that keeps records of violence against women the recorded cases seem to grow. For example the Bahamas recorded 170 cases in 1981, 150 cases in 1987 and 436 in 1993. Anguilla jumped from 37 cases in 1987 to 317 cases in 1993. **Are Caribbean Women Taking Over?**

What of Barbados the Caribbean country with the highest ranking of all countries in the South? It has the best rating of all countries in the South on both the GDI and the GEM. On the GEM Barbados ranks ahead of Luxembourg, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Ireland, Spain, Japan, Portugal, and France (UNDP 1995: 84-5). Yet there are vast chasms, (deep gullies as we would say in Barbados) between the ideological climate of gender relations in which Barbadian girls and women exist and the officially recorded material gains women have made as reflected in the UNDP report. Let us take a closer look at Barbados.

In 1996 a calypsonian composed a song whose lyrics capture this contested, unstable ideological climate. He struggles to be balanced or even fair in his assessment of the current state of gender relations but he has inculcated the ideology that when women gain economically, men lose, and women are to be blamed for adverse circumstances in men's lives.

#### SAVE OUR SONS

*It is with a heavy heart that I come to warn  
The young men of this country on the road to damnation  
Gang wars, HIV, drugs, violent crimes  
Make their lives more worthless than a nickel or a dime  
What have they done to deserve this fate?  
Are they really to blame for this sorry state?  
We must reverse this trend at any cost  
The manhood of this country must not be lost*

#### *Chorus*

*Save our sons  
There is no self respect if they cannot find jobs  
Save our sons  
Don't be surprised if they turn to choke and rob  
Save our sons*

*No man should be forced to live off his parents  
Save our sons  
From my own experience I can understand their plight  
The training by their parents didn't prepare them for this fight*

*They treated their daughters with tender loving care  
While the boys are left alone to roam 'bout everywhere  
They are not taught responsibility  
How they can act differently when they become men  
And be proper fathers to their children?*

*I am happy for the progress Bajan women have made  
But is it worth the high price our sons have paid?  
Women now play the role of mother and father too  
But when you check the schools male teachers are few  
In every circle females now dominate  
No role models for boys to emulate  
A rooster cannot teach a fowl to be a hen  
It wasn't God's plan for women to teach boys to be men*

( Adrian Clarke 1996: a4).

The lyrics of this song alone can generate a thesis on contradictions in Caribbean gender systems. The lyrics also echo the view of a cross section of the Barbadian public. The calypsonian is reflecting, and at the same time influencing public opinion on women's roles. He acknowledges that most women are forced to be mothers and fathers. Yet without giving them credit he blames them for doing this, and invokes religion (God) as not sanctioning the raising of boys by women.

The concept of women 'fathering' is not new in Caribbean society. Barbadian author, George Lamming, addressed this in his novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, forty five years ago. There was no public outrage at women raising boys forty eight years ago, because women had very little presence and visibility in the public then. If they had to be responsible for both parenting roles this was merely an extension of their 'natural' roles in the private sphere.

The calypsonian holds the so called progress of women accountable for the problems men experience and in some cases create for themselves. Caribbean men do face serious economic and social problems, some different to that experienced by women. But recognizing that men like women have problems does not mean the existence of these difficulties can be reduced to women's existence.

There are huge unproblematized spaces between the obvious crises in personal, social and economic relations that many men experience and conflating these to be the fault of women. When we seek to explore these gaps we should ask?:

What are the choices our men make in the construct of their masculinity?  
How does the state relate to men?  
What are the gender ideologies men subscribe to?  
What are the contents of the concept and construct of Caribbean masculinity?  
Does the former include a definition of masculinity as total control and power over women?

These are some of the conceptual issues on Caribbean masculinity we should examine in order to understand how men affect relations of gender and in turn how it affects them. This may also prevent the more hysterical forms of analyses that hand to Caribbean women all the ills of our contemporary society.

What is this progress that Bajan women have made for which men are paying a high price? A release of the Report of the National Commission on the Status of Youth registers the many examples of discrimination, gender subordination and exploitation experienced by young Barbadian women. This was reported in a news story entitled, "Young Women Most Affected: Report Shows Females to be Worse Off Among Youth in Barbados" (Advocate News, February 24 1995: 3). Ironically the study of the youth (commonly used in the Caribbean to mean young men) was commissioned by the government because of the plight and alleged marginalisation of the young, black, Caribbean male. Many awaited the publication of the Report to provide the evidence for the widespread argument that Caribbean women had gained too much at the expense of Caribbean men. Instead the report concluded the following:

*Young women attempted more suicides;  
They are the lowest income earners;  
They are affected by sexual harassment at the work place;  
They are more likely to be unemployed than young men; and  
The young poor are primarily female* (Advocate News, February 24 1994: 3)

Another argument targeted against women in Barbados but shared throughout the Anglophone Caribbean is the alleged damage being done to boys in co-educational schools. I quote from a newspaper editorial of February 6, 1996:

*And so, with precious few exceptions, the boys are left to languish in that desert of academic uncertainty which empowers rapidly increasing numbers of females without so much as a backward glance to appreciate the human devastation that is taking place. . . . Such is their confusion that they will even take to the soap box spouting co-ed propaganda, completely ignoring that a school system in which, for example, 75 per cent of head teachers are female is unlikely to produce any assessment favourable to boys. Not in academic studies. Not in the humanities. Not in socialization. Not in physical education.*

As conspiratorial as this contention may sound there is merit to investigating the comparatively poorer performance of boys if that is indeed the case. (In fact at the Centre we have just begun to map out the contours of a regional research project to look at gender differentials in educational performance at the secondary and tertiary level). What is objectionable are the other charges the editorial goes on to make. It questions and undermines the professional integrity of female principals. It states, as part of a school system where seventy-five percent of heads are women, that these women will not produce any assessments favourable to boys in academics, the humanities, in physical education or in socialization.

If these public commentators had phrased these arguments in terms of race instead of gender there would have been a national uproar. Instead this was followed by another news story some weeks later proclaiming the establishment of a new private school for "Boys Only." The news item stated the school is being established for boys because the coeducational structure of secondary education "is generally believed to have disadvantaged the boys" (Advocate News, March 16 1996).

This hysterical conviction that feminists have a deliberate plot to damage the educational opportunities of young men has been around for some time. Three years ago a columnist addressed his concerns to the then minister of education:

*Sir, I fear a great upheaval of this society may be upon us, in which women will try to usurp authority over the man. As I see it the feminists have two hurdles left -- how to reproduce without men; and how to deny men positions of authority in the society. . . . Education is the vital conduit to better jobs and social advancement; and women are taking it over. Most teachers are women, and some of these expect boys to behave like nice little girls, or be considered rebels and troublemakers. And while girls are lauded for good results, boys are labelled "nerds." And so we end up with boys on every block turning to crime; 500-odd men in prison mostly young and uneducated: only 12 women. This then is your golden opportunity to save our young males from illiteracy, crime and unemployment and perhaps save man-kind itself. Take my advice and: end coeducation, that miserable experiment. Wherever possible let male teachers teach boys. . . .(Richard Hoad, "Those Femme Fatales" Daily Nation September 17 1993: 9).*

It is impossible to present all the articles and news items dealing with this theme in the print media but some headlines will underscore the resentment and fear about women and girls' academic performance. "Too Many Men on Sidelines, says Niles" (*Barbados Advocate* May 6 1993: 7); "Co-ed Classes may not be best for boys," (*Daily Nation* July 16 1993: 32); "Will Girls Continue Dominance: Co-education and Scholarship Performance," (*Barbados Advocate* September 23 1993: 12); "Co-education Benefitting Girls," (*Sunday Advocate* 31 October 31 1993: 16); "Co-education could be the cause of boys' Poor Performance," (*Barbados Advocate* April 7 1993: 7). If women are taking over why do women always experience higher levels of unemployment than men? The next table presents the most recent unemployment ratios in Barbados for women and men for a four year period.

**TABLE 2  
UNEMPLOYMENT RATIOS IN BARBADOS**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Nat'l Average</b>
<b>1991</b>	<b>21.4</b>	<b>13.2</b>	<b>17.1</b>
<b>1992</b>	<b>25.7</b>	<b>20.4</b>	<b>23.0</b>
<b>1993</b>	<b>27.6</b>	<b>21.5</b>	<b>24.5</b>
<b>1994</b>	<b>25.7</b>	<b>18.2</b>	<b>21.9</b>

**Source: Barbados Statistical Services 1991-1994**

Female labour force participation has never equaled that of men. The UNDP notes that although the gaps between women and men in access to education and health care have been closing, the gaps in income have remained wide and in some cases have increased (UNDP 1995: 74).

Ironically the virulent antifeminist stance of a female journalist who, by the way, says she is feminist, underscores the limitations of arguments explaining women's "oppression" as originating in biological determinism. This woman uses most of her columns to castigate feminists and women in national organizations who call attention to existing negative situations for women. Her level of contempt for other women whose positions she does not agree with is so strong that her choice of language as well as the content

of her arguments are abusive. ( I do apologise for the language but I want to give you a sense of what can be published ). I quote:

*Instead we have the pressure of the fast-track career push. The I can do anything males can do better. The slut eat slut attitude that is now defining the modern female. Why is it that so many 'feminists' seem to think that one has to be a subservient female or an overpowering dictatoress. . . Instead of being sensitive, and loving and generous, many have become asexual or mock lesbians. Then swift on the heels of hating men for being money-grubbing, lots of women seem to be using their vaginas as cash registers. They use the very core of their biological femaleness to profit from the core of male sexuality. And the males resent being used so brashly and indiscreetly, so they make sure they get their pound of flesh for the dollar (Dawn Morgan Advocate News March 8, 1996).*

Are Caribbean Women Taking Over? This journalist released this column as her contribution to the celebration of International Women's Day. She states 'many feminists' perceive there are only two choices available to them, dominate or be dominated. She paints a picture of 'many' feminists as motivated by hatred of women and men. She skillfully attempts to establish a causative, reductionist link between lesbianism, a sexual orientation or preference for women, with feminism, a political stance to expose conditions of domination or subordination for women. This she does in a society where there is both an articulated homophobia and a day to day tolerance of male homosexuality. The purpose of her tirade seems devoted to painting feminists as despicable in every aspect of their lives. It seems she raises the charge of lesbianism to derail the issues raised by feminists and to have discussions instead focus on speculations about their sexuality.

To Conclude I argue these contradictions exist because liberal ideology cannot accommodate women's participation as equals in the arenas of the public. Caribbean states have to begin to address what the World Bank calls institutionalized norms and biases that influence the organization of life and the allocation of resources within households (The World Bank 1995). Caribbean states should acknowledge how ideological relations of gender in both the private and public spheres structure and complicate material relations of gender. Correcting biases against women to ensure access to the market through public policy does not eliminate or reduce prejudices existing against women within domestic life or the extension of these biases into many areas of women's public sector participation. Guaranteeing equality of access to the public does not necessarily mean equality in conditions of participation, that is equality in wages and benefits received or other conditions of employment. Creating conditions for equal access to the resources of the state through altering material gender relations will not automatically eliminate or reduce relations of domination in the private domain. Instead it often exacerbates adverse relations of gender in both the public and private. In spite of expanded opportunities for women to participate in the public, archaic and ideological relations of gender prevent the majority of women from exploiting these. Some women also subscribe to maintaining antiquated notions of appropriate roles and gender identities. However the greater degree of resistance comes from masculinist, ideas, structures and practices that adhere to a belief in an innate inferiority of women. Without a willingness to examine how their emphasis on changes in some arenas of public life may alter domestic life, Caribbean states, the public and liberal ideology contribute significantly to the increasing resentment of women in the public sphere. **Are Caribbean Women Taking Over?** Ladies and gentlemen I thank you.