Structural Adjustment Policies in the Caribbean: A Feminist Perspective

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> Economic analysis may well be on the track to a total renovation if feminism succeeds in its challenge to conventional interpretation and approaches
>
> —Marcia Rivera

> The word development encourages a wide range of distortions about the meaning of human personality, and the material base that would allow for the cultivation of a critical and reflective self-consciousness which is ultimately the raison d'etre of a human existence
>
> —George Lamming

In this article I employ a feminist perspective to discuss the effects of structural adjustment policies, SAPs, in the Anglophone Caribbean [1] I provide a background for SAPs in the region with a particular concern to point out the gender biases inherent in these policies and in the neoclassical economic paradigm on which they are based

Most studies of SAPs in the Caribbean center on crises and recession in the world economy They point to a major deceleration in economic growth in the early 1980s resulting from several factors, among them the emergence of wide differences in the rate of growth of labor productivity in manufacturing, the sharp shocks due to large increases in oil prices in 1973–74 and 1979, and the stringent monetarist policies adopted by the major industrialized nations led by the United States (Cornia "Economic" 12–13) Giovanni Cornia argues that the crisis was transferred from the industrialized to the developing counties through the mechanisms of trade, capital flows, and foreign aid (13) Dharam Ghai and Cynthia Hewitt de Alcantara disaggregate the decline in Latin American and Caribbean economic performance into "worsening terms of trade, increasing real interest rates, declining external resource flows and capital flight from the region" (397)

Since Ester Boserup's study was published in 1970, researchers have given extensive treatment to the negative impact of the modernization process on women Unfortunately, until the late 1970s, most of them assumed that the development process was generally beneficial It was assumed that where development policies excluded women, they did so out of inattention, a defect that could be corrected by measures designed to integrate the specific needs and circumstances of women in the development process

By the 1980s feminists had become increasingly skeptical of the view that the problem for women was insufficient participation in an otherwise benevolent development process The researchers and activists of DAWN argue that fundamental conflicts exist between women's economic well-being and wider development programs (Sen and Grown 15–16) [2] In spite of DAWN's research, however, much of the contemporary discussion of SAPs in the Caribbean is not situated in the broader context of the gender and development debate

The alternative analytical framework developed by DAWN, represents an improvement on the neoclassical model, although its central emphasis on class leads to an insufficient account of gender as a factor in economic development I propose a postmodern feminist approach that puts the household in place of the market as the core unit of economic analysis Such an approach is particularly necessary in societies, such as one finds in the Caribbean, where market relations are strongly mediated by kinship and sociocultural exchanges

Structural Adjustment Policies

The 1945 Bretton Woods meetings that created the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD or World Bank) were informed by an intellectual and ideological climate dominated by the United States This dominance transcended military superiority to include an intellectual hegemony that has been and continues to be played out in scholarship, research, and policy-making with respect to developing countries (Barriteau Foster, "Review Essay") The IMF and IBRD view nonindustrialized countries as premodern Their goal is to steer these countries to full modernity through Westernization and capitalist penetration They maintain that industrialization and international trade are the keys to economic development (Hunt) Although it is generally accepted that the small, open, dependent, and relatively nondiversified Caribbean economies cannot function optimally according to the theoretical assumptions of the market economies of industrialized countries, Caribbean governments have, historically, struggled to remain faithful to the parameters of the neoclassical economic paradigm, even in the face of severe economic, social, and political dislocations (Thomas) The modernization paradigm is highly problematic for women, children, and men in developing countries At its core is the intent to re-create developing countries according to the demands of capitalist production and Western systems of values and institutions (Hunt)

SAPs are the corrective instruments of the IMF and IBRD They are designed to improve economic performance typically through such mea-

sures as the abolition or liberalization of foreign exchange and import controls, the devaluation of the currency, and domestic anti-inflationary policy specifically targeted at government spending

In the 1960s and 1970s the independent governments of Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, and Guyana experimented with a liberal blend of social welfare policies (Thomas) These policies proved instrumental in expanding the social welfare functions of these postcolonial states and in creating a new black middle class Socioeconomic gains were especially significant in education, health, and infrastructural development For example, life expectancy and literacy rates improved while the rates for infant mortality and the incidence of communicable diseases declined sharply Yet by the 1980s investments in social welfare could not prevent growing conditions of economic crisis A combination of internal and external factors such as recurring crises in the international capitalist economy, the vulnerability of Caribbean states to external shocks, and inflationary spending by governments resulted in the malfunctioning of the market model

When the market approach fails to deliver the anticipated export expansion, economic diversification, higher per capita incomes, lower unemployment rates, and higher GNPs, the neoclassical response is an accelerated program of more stringent policies based on the market As Diane Elson observes, "World Bank and IMF structural adjustment programs are in fact 'high risk' programmes because they increase a country's exposure to the unstable international market" (8)

Instead of correcting the economic performance of Caribbean countries, structural adjustment programs penalize people They produce declining living standards, decaying social services, decreasing food self-sufficiency, increasing levels of violence and social alienation, and the degradation of the environment (McAfee 16) The corrosive effect of SAPs on our lives has received considerable attention (Bolles, Antrobus, Thomas, Safa and Antrobus, McAfee) The observed results include shrinking the government sector by cuts to education, health, transportation, and food subsidies (Stuart, "Housing"), increases in taxation and levels of unemployment, heavy emphasis on the benefits of privatization supported by legislative, administrative, and moral measures and prescriptions to enhance the performance of the private sector, an all-out thrust in the direction of export promotion, trade liberalization, and the streamlining and simplifying of investment policies with a view to making it easier for foreign companies to operate locally, searing of the social fabric by high levels of drug addiction and associated violence and crime, a rise in the general level of crime especially general larceny, shoplifting and burglary (*Advocate News* 7 Jan 1993), increased violence against women, including rising levels of sexual assault, battery, and rape, and rising rates of suicide, including increased rates for women (*Advocate News* 14 Dec 1992)

A 1987 UNICEF study on the impact of SAPs on children notes that during the 1980s child welfare sharply deteriorated (Cornia, "Introduction" 1) and that evidence of deterioration is clearest in the area of nutritional deficiencies and declining educational performance (Cornia, "Economics" 34) In Jamaica and Barbados restructuring in the health sector meant growing health cuts for public and private medical care UNICEF observes that after six consecutive years of decline or stagnation the capacity of individuals, households, and governments to resist economic crises has significantly weakened Additionally, the effect of years of poor nutrition, less accessible health care, and declining educational opportunities has accumulated to the point where permanent damage has already been done to the physical and mental capacity of much of the labor force (Cornia 35) Yet in its commendable focus on the status of children, UNICEF sidestepped those who bear the brunt of economic restructuring processes—women

The high incidence of female-headed households indicates the pivotal positions women occupy in the political economy of our region The regional average for female-headed households is 32 percent It reaches a high of 47 percent in Saint Kitts with eight countries recording percentages of more than 40 percent (Massiah 70) The decline in children's well-being as a function of malnutrition, disease, disability, abandonment, delinquency, and decreasing social achievement (Cornia 35) signals women's inability to deliver quality care

Without intending to do so, UNICEF's study supports feminist criticisms of the development process DAWN's work and the research of Lynn Bolles and of Helen Safa and Peggy Antrobus prove that women bear a disproportionate share of the cost of economic restructuring The health of Caribbean children depends heavily on the health, education, and earning power of women Caribbean women define themselves primarily through their mothering roles (Powell) They construct their identities on their ability to be good mothers (Sutton and Makiesky-Barrow 493), and they put the material and spiritual well-being of their children above all else When children's lives are in jeopardy, women experience the worst state of material and psychological stress (Barriteau 248)

Structural Adjustment and the Middle Class in the Caribbean

A material but overlooked aspect of economic restructuring processes is their effect on the middle class Ghai and Hewitt de Alcantara observe that it is common for students of economic crisis to consider the changing survival strategies of the poor but to overlook the profound implications of crisis for the relatively prosperous (405), and they note "a tendency in the literature to talk of the rich and the poor as if they were internally

rather homogenous groupings" (405) In the Caribbean, however, we cannot speak accurately of a rich, entrenched economic middle to upper class as far removed from the lived experiences of the working poor While there exists a great deal of heterogeneity between classes, historical and cultural circumstances, past and present, nevertheless make for shared conditions of survival

The Caribbean middle class has been expanded and maintained by the broad social welfare and developmental goals pursued by governments during the 1960s and 1970s Casual evidence suggests that the middle-income class does not hold stocks and bonds [3] Middle-class status has been achieved primarily through government investment in human capital formation and the social mobility and income-earning opportunities generated by a high level of education The middle class, which has grown rapidly in the past thirty years, is salaried and depends almost exclusively on government or private-sector emoluments for survival

In several countries many middle-class families still support working-class relatives and in return receive services that they would not be able to afford or would not be willing to buy at market prices Thus households constitute family groupings that transcend class boundaries, and such arrangements are an essential aspect of survival for both groups Inter-household remittances, the provision of quality day and after-school care for children, and the preparation of hot meals for working couples are only some of socioeconomic transactions available through kinship networks These relations are negotiated primarily between working-class women (and sometimes retired or unemployed male relatives), who provide the majority of these services, and middle-class women, who make the remittances or provide other types of resource transfers

Caribbean class structures and relations are much more heterogeneous, fluid, and dynamic than orthodox analyses allow Essentializing the experiences of the working class as the oppressed class in developing countries dispenses with the need to investigate the social relations and processes that challenge the neat theoretical categories of conventional class analysis It also obscures a complex set of economic and social relations originating within households Patrick Emmanuel comments that "the use of the concept class in analyses of Third World societies is remarkable for its neglect of concrete empirical referents" (*Role* 12) He adds "Much of the theoretical confusion that exists in the discussion of classes and state power can be traced to a reluctance to surrender or refine, the original concept of 'ruling class'" (ibid)

The SAPs introduced in Barbados in 1991 have had a devastating impact on the middle class because of the nature of the policies implemented The government instituted an 8 percent cut in salary for all government workers, raised mortgage interest rates from 9 to 11 percent, and imposed a transportation levy, a stabilization tax, and a health levy

It raised the social security contribution while shortening the compensation period for unemployment and other social security benefits It increased the land tax and introduced a schedule of fees for some health services It raised the price of public transportation while taking steps toward privatizing the transportation system It significantly reduced the work force There were daily media reports of workers being sent home The negative multiplier effect within the economy of a shrunken public sector meant that many private-sector companies went bankrupt, further increasing the unemployment level

These measures hit the middle class hard Their purchasing power eroded significantly, and their capacity to maintain mortgage payments and assist lower-income relatives was severely curtailed Again, women bear a disproportionate share of these burdens among the working and middle classes The incidence of female-headed households is higher among the working class but is also significant for higher income groups In Barbados women outnumber men in the ownership of new middle-income homes as a result of the relatively cheap mortgages and other concessionary policies of the 1980s West Terrace Gardens, a new lower-middle-income housing development of some 1,500 homes, is often singled out as featuring the highest concentration of homes owned by single women Peggy Antrobus notes that the reallocation of government expenditures induced by SAPs represents the virtual abandonment of the development goals pursued by governments in the 1960s and 1970s ("Structural Adjustment" 4) The economic hardships caused by these structural changes have abruptly halted efforts toward people-oriented development goals, jeopardized the gains previously achieved, and reduced the quality of life and general well-being of children, women, and men

Besides exposing the adverse effects of structural adjustments, researchers have also documented the tenacity and determination of women to overcome endemic crises Lynn Bolles reports on the sociocultural strategies employed by Jamaican women to ensure the survival of their households and communities in the face of harsh IMF measures Christine Barrow examines the creativity of Barbadian women in devising strategies to survive economic uncertainty I myself have described how the Red Thread Collective of Guyana produced textbooks for children during a period of socioeconomic collapse in that country (Barriteau Foster, "Construct" 29) Kathy McAfee provides a comprehensive assessment of these strategies regionally

Caribbean women keep coming to the fore in analyses of the effects of structural adjustment Their so-called informal economic activity as interisland traders, higglers, or traffickers buttresses the formal economy in critical areas In many countries women supply the larger business establishments with dry goods through a system they have perfected called the

suitcase trade In so doing they do not merely bring goods in They travel intra- and extraregionally, circumventing language barriers, manipulating foreign currencies, battling with customs officers, confronting import regulations, and often undergoing physically stressful situations By absorbing many of the costs and difficulties of importation, they free larger businesses to employ their capital elsewhere All these activities keep households and economies afloat, but they are not accounted for in development plans

The ability of women in developing countries to survive is a factor that is exploited by policymakers Diane Elson observes, "In the context of economic crisis and structural adjustment, women are particularly prized for their ability to devise and implement survival strategies for their families using their unpaid labour to absorb the adverse effects of structural adjustment policies" (1)

More accurate economic modeling for the Caribbean requires that several factors be acknowledged First, that SAPs are gendered rather than gender neutral, they contain gender biases that in our current gender systems place women at a material and psychological disadvantage with respect to men Second, that SAPs accentuate unequal relations of power at two levels They have an asymmetrical impact on the women and men forced to bear the burden of adjustment, and Caribbean governments are subordinate participants in the negotiations to devise these programs As Diane Elson states, SAPs "mask an underlying male bias" (10) The prescriptions for structural adjustment come "couched in macro economic concepts such as GNP, balance of payments, tradeables and non tradeables, efficiency and productivity" (10) that suggest depersonalized abstract analyses and measures These prescriptions obscure "the process of reproduction and maintenance of human resources" (Elson 10) and maintain the artificial dichotomy between household and market-based economic behavior, of informal and formal economic activities, reproduction and production Feminist analyses of households, of informal economic activities, and of the reproduction and maintenance of the future labor force as sites of women's work and subordination reveal the gendered nature of SAPs All areas are glossed over by the macroeconomic variables with which adjustment programs are concerned (Elson 10)

Alternative Approaches to Development: A Feminist Scenario

In opposition to the neoclassical paradigm underlying SAPs, DAWN defines development as improved living standards, socially responsible management and use of resources, the elimination of gender subordination and social inequality, and the organizational restructuring that can

bring these about (Sen and Grown 21) DAWN rejects the implicit assumption, coming out of the United Nations decade for the advancement for women, "that women's main problem in the Third World was an insufficient participation in an otherwise benevolent process of growth and development" (ibid 15) Instead the group maintains that the nature of the development process into which women are to be integrated must itself be examined DAWN argues that the experiences of poor and oppressed women in nonindustrialized countries negates neoclassical assumptions and provides a unique vantage point from which to examine the programs and strategies of an integrative approach (Deere et al 12)

DAWN seeks alternative development strategies that are premised on a commitment to the diversity of feminism and feminist struggles in developing countries as a place from which to begin to seek alternative solutions, a perspective which makes the vantage point of poor "Third World" women central, a holistic approach that integrates economic, political, cultural, and environmental issues into development, the recognition that the process of development is political, the linking of microeconomic units such as the household and the community with macroeconomic policies (Sen and Grown 9–18)

DAWN's research constitutes a significant advance on the part of women from developing countries in theorizing a shared but multifaceted experience under neoclassical liberal development policies The analytical framework that DAWN has devised represents and important first step in the search for alternatives, but I must interrogate certain of its features before I extend the insights it has generated DAWN argues that fundamental conflicts have arisen between women's economic well-being and wider development plans and processes (Sen and Grown 16) In identifying the source of these conflicts, however, DAWN employs the dichotomous dual-systems analysis embedded in the main economic paradigms, thereby subsuming the gender relations that it recognizes under class, which is viewed as the decisive factor in women's oppression This analysis is not sufficiently sensitive to gendered inequalities in development planning, nor does it address how gender relations constrain the manifestations of power and autonomy outside or beyond the limits of class [4]

DAWN separates gender relations from economic processes and then does not perceive the latter as equally gendered It has an abstract view of power, as something one group has and another lacks, as something to be gained or lost through political struggle, but offers no notions of power as existing simultaneously between women and men and among the various institutions of the state in developing countries Finally, although DAWN claims that its visions, strategies, and methods address all women, the researchers focus on, and speak from, "the powerful vantage point of poor and oppressed women " They believe this is the starting point for under-

standing development (Sen and Grown 23–24) Thus DAWN's research does not differ substantially from existing studies of women in development Their applications and illustrations again bear witness to the negative impact of development on poor working-class women only No examples, illustrations, or hypotheses are offered regarding the impact of development on women who do not neatly fit into this category

Still DAWN's analysis offers important insights into the problems experienced by women It accounts for women's ability to mobilize against immiserating circumstances (as Caribbean women have been doing for centuries) and so contributes to overturning the "victim" status of women However, although class relations may compound or mitigate women's experiences of relations of domination, they are not the sole or, in many situations, the decisive factor A postmodernist feminist focus on gender relations of domination examines women's economic exploitation within households as reinforcing their exploitation in the waged economy

DAWN's suggestion to link microeconomic units to macroeconomic policies informs the alternative model of economic analysis I propose I shall go beyond DAWN's recommendations, however, in claiming that the household is the basic economic and social unit in developing countries

The assumption that all economic behavior flows from the market and that structural adjustment should center on the market does not hold Development planners need to address the distortions created by insisting that the market be the core unit of analysis Instead of focusing exclusively on the market, policymakers should target households directly and regard effects on the market as consequence of household behavior Such a shift of focus would not only move economic modeling closer to socioeconomic reality—that is, to the lived experiences of Caribbean people—but disrupt the hierarchical relation between households and market behavior

SAPs are aimed at the market, but market transactions originate in household economic decisions These decisions are made by differentiated, unequal individuals in response to the resources present or absent in households For example, when SAPs create widespread unemployment, households have less disposable income Yet they still have to meet the basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing Two factors are pertinent In the Caribbean at least 37 percent of households are headed by women (see White) This is an average, in some countries the figure is as high as 45 percent Second, even when a male partner is present, research has shown that when disposable income is reduced, men decrease the amount of money they allocate to households, while women decrease what they allocate to themselves in order to maintain household consumption patterns (Blumberg)

As Nancy Folbre has noted, the communal nature of most Caribbean households requires that we problematize the neoclassical and Marxist perceptions of households as sites with joint utility functions or an absence of economic conflict ("Cleaning House" 6) Experiences reveal competing interests and hierarchical relationships Recognizing a potential for conflict enables us to disaggregate and expose the differential effects of macroeconomic policy on individual household members For example, Caribbean governments continually emphasize the importance of a skilled labor force to their development initiatives Our populations are also primarily young When governments insist that attaining development objectives depends on the quality of the future labor force, they are viewing children as public goods Folbre correctly argues that when children become public goods mothers are in a sense publicly exploited (ibid 21)

Nonetheless, Caribbean women continue to raise future generations of workers, taxpayers, and citizens, even as the basic supporting services are being cut SAPs remove or reduce the social inputs that would help equip women and men with the skills and resources necessary to enhance their spiritual and material well-being, what mainstream economists refer to as human capital formation At the same time they continue to expect women to work miracles in producing future citizens Caribbean development specialists must now stop comprehending the household "as though it were an almost wholly, cooperative, altruistic unit" (Folbre, "Hearts and Spades" 245) Instead we must recognize the household as an internally diverse unit of economic relations When through SAPs the state restricts the public sector, it is women within households who take up the slack The state sector appears to save money when it ceases to provide basic service, but in fact the costs are shifted to women within households Increased national productivity and efficiency mask a shifting of costs from the paid economy to the unpaid economy (Elson 11), from governments to women in households

In their research on Caribbean women Sidney Mintz and Constance Sutton and Susan Makiesky-Barrow explore the social and economic interactions that occur within the regional community and examine the household as an internally differentiated form of community I propose that Caribbean feminists themselves employ an analysis of the community as a dynamic site of multiple social and economic relations Our attempts to create alternative methods of development should be grounded in the diversities of our lived experiences Maxine Wilson-Henry discusses the relational and supportive aspects of community in her analysis of Caribbean economic communities begun by George Beckford in the 1970s (see Antrobus, *Strategies for Change* 6) Wilson-Henry defines community to include "a set of practices, institutions, behaviors and relationships in which all encounters are not based on exchange as in

the market model but they are instead strongly stimulated for mutual survival, for protection of each other and for more cooperative relations" (23–24) Wilson-Henry's definition accentuates the importance of interactions within the community, and her discussion isolates features of Caribbean households and communities that are obscured in market-based analyses

Making households the basic unit of socioeconomic analysis should force planners to confront directly the gendered nature of economic relations A significant aspect of the thrust to alternative development involves disaggregating and exposing the conflicts and competing interests within households Contrary to some feminist analyses, the household is not inescapably a site of patriarchy and female subordination It constitutes a space in which women may have more control than is commonly recognized As a locus of cooperation as well as tension, conflict, and struggle, the household has to be examined (Elson 11) and used as a basis for alternative theorizing

My proposal to focus on the household as the basic unit of economic organization should not be confused with earlier, anthropological analyses of households and families Joan Scott observes that some scholars, especially anthropologists, have acknowledged gender only in analyzing kinship systems She notes that they focus on households and kinship systems as the basis of social organization Instead, she argues, they should reorient their analytical approach "We need a broader view that includes not only kinship but also (especially for complex, modern societies) the labor market" (1068)

Nevertheless, as a basis for alternative economic modeling, the household cannot be limited to, or recast as, a familial organization What I advocate is investigating the differential economic aspects and consequences of household behavior in the market The point Scott makes is relevant to the alternative feminist economic framework I propose She indicates that a gender analysis of sex-segregated labor markets would yield a richer understanding of kinship systems Similarly, I contend that a gender analysis of sex-differentiated households as economic units would also deliver a more thorough understanding of the functioning of economic policies in market economies

Constructing economic analyses around households should force development planners to move beyond exploiting the resources of women to costing out the use of these resources It should no longer be possible to speak of market gains while households are suffering, of growth without equity or redistribution Economic growth and a redistribution of income should now be measured at the level of the household

Displacing the market as the relevant economic unit in developing countries would begin the process of altering our responses to Western models of development DAWN and other researchers acknowledge that

women within households and the informal sector bear the costs of failed neoclassical economic policies We also bear a disproportionate share of the burden of surviving economic and political crises Introducing the disaggregated household as a relevant unit for economic analysis is a first step toward ensuring the postmodernist feminist intent of revealing gender in basic economic relations Alternative strategies centering on the principles of self-determination, participation, self-reliance, regionalism, equity, and sustainability (Antrobus, *Strategies for Change* 3) provide the broader environment for the proposed alternative model

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Notes

1 Caribbean in this article refers to the Caribbean countries of the Commonwealth and British Dependencies I am familiar with the research, history and culture of this grouping More important, I do not want to generalize across differing historical and cultural legacies and so construct an essentialist, homogeneous Caribbean experience

2 DAWN is a heterogeneous grouping of "Third World" activists, policymakers, and researchers who critically evaluate the women-in-development discourse and offer alternative socioeconomic analyses The network spans Asia, the Pacific, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean The group was created in India in 1984 and made its first international appearance at Nairobi in 1985

3 Labor force statistics and population data support the conclusion that the middle class has been created by educational mobility There is a paucity of quantitative data on the investment patterns of this socioeconomic group, although they appear to be disinclined to invest For example, in Barbados the government lamented the fact that members of the middle class were not willing to buy the assets of the state during a period of major divestment and privatization but preferred to keep their money in low-risk savings accounts

4 This is changing, however DAWN in its latest work is increasingly aware that the development process is gendered (see Sen)

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