

# Caribbean Women in Economic

BY ROSETTA KHALIDEEN AND NADIRA KHALIDEEN

*Cet article nous raconte comment les femmes des Caraïbes ont été forcées à faire « des petits boulots » pour gagner leur vie, suite à la restructuration économique de la région. Ce commerce informel est vu comme un moyen de survivance et une stratégie de « faire avec » pour ces femmes marginalisées pendant qu'elles se battent pour leur indépendance économique et sociale.*

A few months ago, we attended a meeting in the Caribbean island of Trinidad. We were there on behalf of the University of Regina, Canada to initiate a project in partnership with the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus. Tired of the standard western fare offered by the hotel in which we were staying, we set out one afternoon to sample some of the local cuisine. Our search took us to a local eating establishment that was well recommended for its authentic foods and extremely generous prices. While the food, service and price surpassed our expectations, it was the organization of this informal eatery that drew the most interest. The eatery was located under a bright yellow zinc shed comprised of several tiny makeshift kitchens that were run by women. While the women cooked, cleaned, served and collected the money, their young daughters peeled plantains and filleted fish for the next day's meals. Many of these women confided that they were once teachers and government workers, but had resorted to this type of business in order to make ends meet. One commented that, "the teaching job doesn't pay anymore ... not since the IMF," while another explained, "sitting at a desk doesn't give a big pay cheque. It can't

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fill belly." As the primary breadwinners of the family, they had to put food on the table and ensure that their children had an education. A few complained of "useless" partners who would rather spend time with "good-for-nothing" friends rather than seek employment. They spoke of long working days, the lack of adequate running water, and declining profits due to competition from western fast-food outlets. When we informed them that to our knowledge, Trinidad was considered one of the most economically vibrant countries in the Caribbean due to successful economic reforms, one woman shook her head in exasperation and said to us: "I wonder where you're getting your story from. Go around this island and talk to the women here, they'll tell you a whole new side to that story."

The dominant story in the Caribbean today is one of globalization and its themes center around efficiency, trade liberalization, economic

growth, and global competition. However, this is only one side of the story; too often, the other sides are left out, obscured, or relegated to footnotes. Joan Grant-Cummings captures the untold truths and realities that have accompanied global restructuring:

The globalization of the capitalist system through structural adjustment programs in the South ... as well as economic restructuring in the North has wreaked havoc in the lives of most women and devastated our communities. (6)

Although global restructuring has wide-reaching economic, political, and social repercussions for all segments of developing societies, women's responsibility for reproductive work and their unequal participation in the formal economy suggest that they suffer disproportionately from such restructuring. The story of global economic restructuring for many Caribbean women is not a happy one. It speaks of feminization of poverty, decreased consumption and increased workloads, reduction in access to social welfare, and the erosion of gains in gender equality. But Caribbean women have learnt to survive by relying on their unpaid labour and by increasing their involvement in the informal economy.

## **"Making Do": Caribbean Women Respond to Economic Restructuring**

Although heralded for its ability to create a climate conducive to economic prosperity, greater cultural and

# Globalization and Restructuring

economic integration, and equality between developed and underdeveloped nations, globalization has yet to deliver these promises to the Caribbean. As a precursor to participation in the global marketplace, Caribbean countries have had to take the necessary steps to “shape up” their economy. This has been done through the adoption of explicit neo-liberal economic policies known as structural adjustment programs (SAPs). Conceived of, and imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, SAPs offer Caribbean and other developing countries “healthy” doses of devaluation, deregulation, privatization, and trade liberalization. However, the economic progress and development promised by neo-liberal economic restructuring has yet to be realized. Although some Caribbean countries have experienced modest growths in GDP within the last few years (Central Intelligence Agency), Caribbean countries are in greater debt than ever before and have fallen short in their aim to emulate the economic success of the East Asian dragon (Klak and Meyers). Moreover, neo-liberal restructuring has come with a heavy human price tag. Many Caribbean people have become poorer due to losses in employment, fallen standards of living, continuous and steady depreciation of the currency, and reduced public expenditures in areas of health, education, housing, and nutrition (Harker). This trend, which started in the 1980s, has continued as indicated by many Caribbean states slipping on the Human Development scale. For example, between 1991 and 1997, Haiti lost 31 places, Ja-

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maica 24 and Guyana 15 (Girvan).

Rising unemployment, the retreat of the state, and the deterioration of economic conditions that accompany economic restructuring force Caribbean women into adopting measures designed to cope with recurring economic crisis. The first of these strategies is usually aimed towards reducing the family’s consumption and “stretching” its income. As Olive Senior explains, the concept of “making do” has come to define Caribbean women’s response to loss of income, unemployment, and economic hardships (129). “Making do” is based on the notion that the role of women is to “make do with what they have” or better still, “to make something from nothing” in order to cushion the family in times of economic crisis. One way of “making do” is for the family to change its consumption pattern. However, although the household as a unit responds to economic crisis in this way, all members of the family are

not equally affected. Women are expected to devise creative ways to make ends meet but men are often allowed to retain some of their earnings for the pursuit of “non-essential consumption” (Elson 247). In Guyana, for example, economic crisis has not prevented the proliferation of the “rum shop,” a recognized male-space designed for socializing. This not only results in wasteful spending of valuable income needed for the survival of the family, but also leads to increased domestic violence against women. The increased levels of violence against Caribbean women have been linked to men’s loss of employment, their inability to cope with conditions of scarcity, and resentment against women for their independence and ability to effectively engage in survival mechanisms (Mondesire).

Another “making do” strategy that many Caribbean families use is their reliance on remittances from family members who have migrated to Europe and North America. Migration to the United States, Britain or Canada has become one of the many ways to deal with economic crisis in the Caribbean. Migration, sometimes illegal, presents the easiest escape of poverty for those who can afford it. In its wake, it leaves Caribbean countries with a loss of valuable human resources, while adding to the diversity and wealth of the receiving countries (Segal). For those left behind, remittances from abroad are used to temporarily improve consumption patterns and standard of living. Remittances include both consumer goods and money. Commenting on the relationship between currency devaluations and remittance in Guy-

ana, Gemma Tang Nain notes:

the absurdity of the current wage levels is reflected by the fact that the remittance of 20 U.S. dollars from a relative abroad will provide a greater quantity of Guyanese dollars in the street than from a month of employment in many jobs in the formal sector including many teaching positions. (31).

For some Caribbean women, remittances may temporarily reduce the need to seek local sources of employment. For most, however, economic restructuring usually means increased participation in paid employment, primarily within the informal sector.

#### **A Penny Here, A Penny There: Women's Informal Activities in the Caribbean**

A central survival strategy for Caribbean women in global economic restructuring has become their increased participation in the informal economy. In many instances, informal work is also used to supplement the income of middle-class women in the formal sector, since with economic restructuring comes currency devaluation and severe limitations on the purchasing power of the dollar. Unlike the formal labour sector which may be composed of large capital-intensive enterprises, relatively skilled and well paid workers, protection by some forms of unions and labour legislation, some job stability and possibility for mobility, the informal sector is defined by small labour intensive enterprises and often consists of low-paid, low-skilled, casual work with few career prospects (Scott). In its 1999 report on unemployment in Latin America and the Caribbean, the International Labour Organization (ILO) warned that despite two decades of economic reform, employment in the region will continue to stagnate with over 85 per cent of new jobs created in the

less stable and less rewarding informal sector (ILO). The mass entrance of Caribbean women in the informal sector has resulted from their loss of employment in the formal sector, the inability of the formal sector to provide a living wage, and the necessity of engaging in a multiplicity of survival strategies. By engaging in

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informal employment, Caribbean women are able to take care of their family while still performing activities that will generate an income. Informal activities often include part-time marketing, subcontracting for the formal sector and export-led industries, small-scale manufacturing, retail trade, small-scale transport, personal services, cultivation of small family gardens, subsistence production, cooperative child care, health care and housing schemes, and illegal or quasi-legal activities such as beer brewing, smuggling, prostitution, and drug activities (Gladwin).

Many Caribbean women living in urban areas have turned to informal retail activities as a survival strategy. In Jamaica and Guyana, for example, a high percentage of women work as "higglers" or hucksters. These petty vendors trade in foodstuffs and manufactured goods for profit on a small scale. Some are Informal Commercial Importers (ICIs) who travel to foreign countries with local prod-

ucts to trade in exchange for consumer goods which they sell upon return. Although upper-income categories in higgling compare well with certain professional and white-collar occupations, it is well known that most women become higglers or hucksters as a result of unemployment. However, they try to get out of it as soon as possible because it is a "dead-end" activity with no long-term upward mobility. Besides, higglers like other market women, encounter a multitude of problems in their survival including unavailability of capital, poor sanitation and working conditions, lack of knowledge about rights, conflicts with local authorities, and interference from male partners and other family members. Other women in urban areas may rely on local products and creative skills to "make something." These may include: selling fruits, vegetables, and ground provisions from kitchen gardens; making home-made sweets, preserves, and cakes for sale to locals or tourists; and performing a variety of domestic chores in exchange for money or goods. On our last visit to Guyana in the latter part of 2000, this type of trade was still evident as it was in Trinidad. One innovative strategy used by some Jamaican women involves "hustling" around prisons whereby they buy food for prisoners and/or arrange for visitors parcels to get to them, buy goods from prison staff for resale, and exchange sex for money from prison guards (Klak 1999).

Many of the informal activities performed by women in Caribbean "hot spots" are geared towards tourists, and may include retailing food items and crafts made from local materials, entertaining, and providing domestic services. These tourist-based activities are however unstable and subject to seasonal needs of tourists and the ever changing global political and economic climate. Tourism is often seen as an answer to the economic woes of the Caribbean but there is great concern that for Caribbean women, tourism has led to the

proliferation of prostitution, drugs, and other criminal activities (TransAfrica Forum). Although data is still forthcoming, it is believed that some of the international streams of prostitution exist between the Caribbean and Curacao as well as Latin America and Puerto Rico, to the Mediterranean part of Europe and the Middle East. On the other hand, Caribbean women in legitimate tourist-based occupations often find themselves confined to work that is low-paid, low-status, and an extension of their domestic responsibilities and expected female roles. A Guyanese friend of ours recently hired as a front desk clerk at one of the hotels in Guyana was instructed by her employer to speak with a more pronounced British accent, wear seductive clothes, and "treat the male guests right."

In countries such as Haiti, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, where export processing zones (EPZ) have been established, women constitute a cheap and abundant labour force for the production of garments, plastic goods, and shoes (Klak 1999). While these occupations are considered semi-formal because they are governed by labour and wage regulations, evidence indicates that garment industries are subcontracting to domestic home-workers as a way of cutting their labour costs. The wages paid to subcontracted women, who are paid by the piece, are far below the minimum wage level and do not offer any job security. Working in EPZs allows women to acquire some wages but in many instances, women in these EPZs are often forced to complement this formal employment with additional informal work because the wages from the former are usually insufficient to support the family. For example, by working extra hours and exceeding their production quotas, women in the Dominican Republic in garment industries make an average of U.S. \$178 monthly; however, it requires three such wages to merely feed a family of four. This has resulted in many fe-

male garment workers having to supplement their formal wages by selling cosmetics or participating in "san" or informal credit associations (Safa 297). Women in public service employment also increasingly rely on informal activities to complement their meagre salaries. In Guyana, for example, although free education

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exists at the primary and secondary levels, students preparing for the Secondary School Entrance Examination (SSEE) and the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) school leaving examination are guaranteed success only if they can participate in the extra informal "lessons" given by teachers in after-school hours for a fee. Many of these teachers are women.

**From "Making Do" to "Making Right"**

It has been argued that women's informal sector involvement often acts as a subsidy to the formal sector. As a source of cheap and flexible labour, women can be drawn into production whenever demand is high and then discarded at a later date. Women's reproductive commitments and productive responsibilities make them an ideal "reserve army of labour" that can facilitate the needs of capital within a global economy.

Women's labour subsidizes the capitalist system and their work in the informal sector amounts to double exploitation: they are exploited as part of the proletariat as well as a subordinated gender (Wilson 1998). The result is that while both women and men suffer from the consequences of neo-liberal economic restructuring, women's unequal and subordinate status in society implies that they are more likely to bear disproportionately the burdens accompanying such changes.

Caribbean women left out of the formal economy have been forced to turn to informal labour as the primary means to balance and juggle their productive and reproductive responsibilities. As a result of economic restructuring, women's burdens have gotten heavier as the "double-shift" is replaced by the "triple-shift" of housework, wage work, and informal activities. Unfortunately, most Caribbean women are so busy "making do" that they have little time left for "making right" their subordinate status. Although informal labour may provide opportunities for political mobilization at the grassroots level, most women are too busy with "bread-and-butter" issues to take up the challenges of "woman-and-man" issues needed for a feminist transformation of Caribbean society. If women are increasingly involved in survival strategies, they are unable to strive for the conditions that will bring about the realization of their full potential. As Helen O'Connell states: "women cannot exercise or enjoy their full human right in a situation of continued poverty and insecurity or where day to day survival takes precedence over all else" (27). The challenge for Caribbean women is to move from surviving the effects of globalization to challenging the gender bias inherent in such restructuring.

Such transformation strategies must begin at the household level. Before successfully challenging existing economic and political power relationships that force women to

rely solely on their own labour for survival, women must perceive equality as an entitlement. They need to pursue transformational strategies that will place them as equals within their lived contexts. While they cannot be expected to sacrifice their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters, women need to explore their full development. Power is never given, it has to be taken. But feminist intervention at the household level must be complemented by similar actions designed to undermine patriarchy and challenge gender discrimination at the local, national, and global levels. The core of such strategy demands that the power of the state be harnessed to act in the interest of women. The voice of and action of women will need to be louder in order to make an impact in this new globalized world. Joanna Kerr notes that research and women's activism, in order to take on the enormous challenge posed by a global restructuring has to "deepen its impact, expand its approach, and strengthen its alliances" (22). But there is still a glimmer of hope on the horizon. Wesley Gibbings in his report on the Third Caribbean Ministerial Conference on Women held in Trinidad and Tobago, quoted Joycelyn Massiah, Regional Program Advisor of UNIFEM as being supportive of the removal of obstacles to gender equity in the Caribbean and encouraging the participation of women in the centres of power and decision-making. According to Gibbings, this notion was also fully supported by Guyana's Minister of Human Services and Social Security, Indranie Chandarpal who said that the region was determined that "the days of excluding women from the halls of power and tables of decision-making primarily because of our gender will soon be a thing of the past" (cited in Gibbings 1). While it is hoped that the gap between rhetoric and reality will be closed some day soon, this will not occur unless women continue to challenge the neo-liberal economic policies, the

institutions that perpetuate them, and the interests that sustain them.

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## AJA MCKINNEY

There is something different  
in my winters  
My year long Decembers  
Faced to remember  
I paint my toes three times a  
week  
I cover my whole body in  
peach lotion  
Sensuous motion  
I comb my hair with genital  
care  
My myself I'll have a love  
affair.

*Aja McKinney's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*

## SHIRLEY ADELMAN

### My Father

My father, whose hands I loved, square,  
strong, soft and fleshy, did not touch me,  
except to bathe me in too much hot water,  
in too high a tub. And I feeling very naked  
and fat, with breasts that were not yet  
breasts, was afraid of drowning in a big,  
down under splash.

In that room white and slippery, I stood,  
my father wiping me down like I was some  
other thing, a sink or toilet maybe.  
Hot with shame, I felt my face burning.

My father who took cast-offs from his sons,  
unwanted ties and handkerchiefs, bottles of  
too fragrant lotions, talcs, soaps, and cheap  
cuff links...

Crayons, so many blues: navy blue, violet  
blue, blue-green, turquoise blue, all in a cigar  
box that smelled of tobacco. In my room, I  
drew bright pictures, flowers, parks, houses,  
my name on the bottom right in blue, like the  
ocean and sky. He never saw.

In margins of school books, on envelopes,  
I sketched one house, alone, fenced in,  
shaded by trees, with a great door safely  
closed.

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