**Agrarian Struggle and Food System Injustice in the Anglo-Caribbean: Centering Social Reproduction by (Re)Turning to Creft and Fanon**

# Abstract

This piece offers a critical commentary on the historical-systemic marginalization and food system injustice being experienced by women farmers, agro-producers, and cottage industry owners in the Caribbean. In doing so, we provide an overview of the structural barriers and negligence rural working-class and cash poor women across the Anglo-Caribbean face as a result of the ongoing trajectories of colonialism, neoliberal logics, and patriarchal norms. In addition, the piece details the disproportionate amount of (devalued) socially reproductive labor women perform within the agrarian Majority World. We end by proposing that the radical potentials, emancipatory praxis, and clarion calls for transformative change offered by the region’s very own Jacqueline Creft and Frantz Fanon are revolutionary voices to pay heed to with respect to advancing a sustainable and (gender) just Caribbean future.

# Keywords

Caribbean; food systems; gender justice; postcolonial geography; social reproduction

# Women in (Caribbean) Agriculture: Majority World Realities

Across the Global South/Majority World, its estimated that women are responsible for the production of half the world’s food and represent over 40 percent the world’s agricultural labor force. Whilst not quite constituting a preponderance of workers in global food production, the agriculture sector, nevertheless, remains a key economic arena for women. As Quisumbing et al. (2014) illustrate, ‘of those women in the least developed countries who report being economically active, 79% report agriculture as their primary economic activity.’ This is particularly true for negatively racialized rural and peasant women in postcolonial geographies. As we have contended elsewhere, both the ongoing legacies of imperialism and women’s engagement in socially reproductive labor (unpaid labor that secures the well-being of family members and communities whilst creating healthy [exploitable] workers) must be taken into consideration when measuring economic development indicators and intiating programs that grapple with the world’s ‘global challenges’ (Barry et al, 2020). A recent study by Akter et al. (2017, 270) on women’s (dis)empowerment and agricultural production in the ‘developing world’ drives home this point when the authors note that ‘women invest as much as 10 times more of their earnings than men do in their family’s well-being, in areas including child health, education and nutrition.’

What this statistic represents, in terms of quotidian lived experience, is that working women from the agrarian Majority World who participate in subsistence farming, the informal sector of food production, or temporary transnational worker schemes are met with nearly impossible structural barriers apropos accessing vital social welfare services and/or starting sustainable small-medium sized businesses themselves. The upshots of systemic impediments like these carry negative health repercussions––disproportionately experienced by women––and include malnutrition, enervation, infection, and chronic fatigue, as well as higher maternal death and infant mortality rates. Seldom paid attention to as well, are rural women’s experiences of time poverty, emotional distress, detrimental mental health issues, and reductions in psychological well-being (e.g. anxiety, despair, angst, stress). Revealingly, as a U.N. report evidenced less than a decade ago, ‘with only a few exceptions, rural women fare worse than rural men and urban women and men for every Millennium Development Goal indicator for which data are available’ (United Nations, 2012).

Exacerbating reductions in resilience for rural women in the Majority World, and more specific for our focus, the Caribbean, are risks they are exposed to as a result of the environmental fallouts and political conflicts associated with corporate extractivism and anthropogenic climate change (Carr and Thompson, 2014). Effects here––as we have learned during our conversations and fieldwork with hundreds of Afro-Caribbean, Indo-Caribbean, and Indigenous rural farmers from Belize, Guyana, Dominica, Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados––take the form of ecological destruction, loss of arable land, deforestation, rising sea levels, and even spikes in ill-health, sexual assault, and rape. This is addition to the attendant crop loss, soil acidification, resource clashes, potable water shortages, famine, ecosystem failures, species endangerment, and undue hardship that are resulting from increasingly extreme weather events and land grabs/encroachments. Clearly, liberal-capitalist modernity, especially within the Majority World, is neither ecologically sustainable nor economically just––not to mention even safe––for rural women.

Despite the fact that local agriculture and family farming is credited with the ability to contribute to poverty reduction, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO, 2015) reports these sectors are either underperforming or compromised across multiple countries in the Global South. The Caribbean, despite its history of resistance and present-day heterogeneity, is not immune. That the region was targeted for dispossession, enslavement, and extraction, as well as forged into a plantation archipelago by colonizers and the driving forces of capital accumulation for centuries on end has not come without lasting consequence. Correspondingly, over the past half century, the region’s food system has been rapidly neoliberalizing (Thompson, 2019). Ever-growing food import bills, rising rates of food insecurity, and increasing reliance on foreign loans and investment have been the outcome––with the continued results being insurmountable sovereign debt, erosions of public health, and persistent dependency. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM), for a stark example, currently carries a food import bill of more than US$4.5 billion per year (FAO, 2015).

Moreover, of the countries that comprise CARICOM, the vast majority import over half their food, with 11 states (Trinidad and Tobago, Dominica, Jamaica, the Bahamas, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Barbados, Antigua and Barbuda, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, Suriname, and St. Lucia) importing approximately 80% of the total food commodities they consume. The bulk of these foodstuffs are high in calories, sugar, trans fats, hydrogenated oils, and sodium, all of which contribute to the region’s increasing rates of obesity and higher prevalence of non-communicable disease. The Caribbean’s food import dependency also negatively affects the development and innovation of domestic agriculture products and the growth of local agro-processing enterprises (Best and Levitt, 2009). This is due to the inability of the regional sector to compete with foreign-sourced commodities. Here, it must be noted that the region’s experience and ongoing aftermaths of imperial violence, racial animus, and patriarchal plantation relations continue to carry enduring material and marginalizing effects (Beckford, 1972; Green, 2001).

# Structural Barriers and Social Reproduction

Women producers and agri-business owners in the Caribbean primarily operate small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) or cottage businesses at national levels. A report generated by the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) Secretariat (2003) highlights that, across the sub-region, the foundation of food security is largely reliant upon these types of semi-commercial food producers and SMEs. Furthermore, the World Bank (2017, 14) has recently reported that across the region ‘some 80% in the craft and agro-processing sub-sectors are female,’ with most of these enterprises taking the form of cottage industries. Based upon this evidence, it is clear that agricultural production and rural development in the Caribbean are economic domains in which women are highly active. These are also economic domains where women face disparate structural barriers, which is why we advocate for committed action and policies that respond to the unjust realities faced by women within the region’s agricultural sector. That said, it is paramount that the political agency of rural women amidst these seemingly impossible circumstances must not go unacknowledged.

Notably, gender and social reproduction are vital to consider when offering a historical-material analysis of the Caribbean (Green, 2001). There are a growing number of women-headed households across the region, which means families have a higher rate of dependency on women’s waged work and income. As of 2017, women-headed households in the OECS consisted of nearly more than half of all the households in the region (World Bank, 2017). Conspicuously, these are also the households most likely to be cash poor. In instances in which women are not the primary contributor to household income, it is crucial to note that they still add a considerable percentage to their household’s joint and total income. For example, Caribbean women who are not a home’s sole provider contribute roughly 33% to household income. Meaning, the idea that men in the region are sole breadwinners is a myth. The ongoing role and increase in the significance of Caribbean women’s contributions to household incomes cannot be ignored, particularly in light of how much their financial support mitigates poverty across agrarian contexts and hinterland households throughout the region. Undeniably, rural development policies and programs in the region must be structured to acknowledge that when it comes to farming and being able to sustain an agricultural-based business––gender, namely being a woman, matters.

While the Caribbean’s agricultural sector underperformance has partially been a result of limited state capital and farming families being resource poor, another causal factor is because women do not have equal access to supplies, assets, and opportunities that would enable them to be more ‘productive.’ Despite this, the contributions women make as farmers, producers, and agro-processors to their respective agricultural industries and rural economies remain substantial. Nonetheless, as we have discovered in our research, women continue to face distinct barriers vis-à-vis agribusiness growth and development throughout the region. These barriers include subordinating socio-cultural statuses, untenable gender essentialisms, and the concomitant asymmetrical power relations and hierarchies that ensue as a result of patriarchal cultural mores and male-dominated institutions.

In addition, an absence of gender-responsive extension service programs to supply women with information and assistance applicable to their unique circumstances––coupled with a lack of access to capital, collateral, concessions, and land––are major obstacles. Other barriers include a lack of opportunities to gain experience in management, marketing, and innovation; and repressive social/cultural norms (e.g. the belief that women are naturally responsible for household duties, the home, and domestic spaces). In reflecting upon the realities detailed above, Cynthia, a farmer in her early 50s living in an OECS island, encapsulates the sentiment shared by the vast majority of over 150 rural women farmers and agro-producers we interviewed across the Anglo-Caribbean when she states:

Most of the ladies do not own the land, we lease or rent it. Sometimes you apply for land and they (the government) refuse. There’s no land use policy, it is a barrier to the country. If we (women) were involved in policy development here I think they [state officials, extension agents] would have a better knowledge of what we are going through. …women are multitasking all the time, it’s a headache and red tape to get approval ...but you know, they always have them men in their discussions.

Indeed, it goes without saying that neither the plantation nor patriarchy has ever done anything other than profound damage to the Caribbean––its economies, ecosystems, cultures, histories, social relations, mentalities, psyches, and people. It is patently obvious that more culturally appropriate, democratic, and just models and ideas must be developed and advanced in order to breathe life into livable Caribbean futures. Admittedly, this is all easier said than done. But this assertion necessarily prompts us to ask pressing questions about where we can find solutions to the continued challenges posed by patriarchy, capitalist logics, and ongoing colonial-plantation relations. That is, to whom can the region can look to for insight and ideas about how to carve out and travel down an emancipatory path––be it in the realm of development, agricultural production, gender relations, or goverance (not that any of these can even be cleaved from the other, especially in the Caribbean)?

# Calling Back to Creft and Fanon

To reflect upon the agrarian realities faced by women in the Caribbean mentioned at the outset, it is undeniable that the historical trajectories and inextricable links of colonialism, racial capitalism, plantation relations, and patriarchal worldviews continue to present systemic obstacles for women farmers. Of remark here, is our recognition that the institutionalized barriers and burdens embedded within Caribbean food systems adversely affect men, women, and others––undoubtedly so. That said, gender disaggregated data emerging in the region continues to demonstrate that women are disproportionately impacted, negatively, by a host of structural impediments (Barriteau, 2001; Barry et al, 2020). These impediments include, inter alia, lack of access to land and capital; the inability to acquire collateral towards securing credit; a dearth of support programs and organizations tailored to the specific needs/wants of women agro-producers; negligence on the part of government ministries in relation to providing gender-responsive training; state corruption; and a general non-acknowledgement and devaluing of the work women do socially reproducing households, families, and communities.

Tellingly, whilst there exists extensive evidence that these are difficulties women meet disparately, state efforts across the region have not been focused on remedying them either nationally or locally. It is critical for political officials, administrative units, and state entities to commit to––and put into actually-existing practice––socialist and gender just agricultural extension services and national policies that support the businesses of women. Our argument here, to be clear, is not that entrepreneurship (on capitalism’s terms) is a panacea for the deprivation and suffering generated by ongoing-colonial and ever-neoliberalizing socio-economic relations and capitalist markets. Rather, we see the agency and initiative being exhibited by small-scale farmers and agro-producers in the region as one of the creative and tactical ways in which working women across the Caribbean are negotiating day-to-day life locally; navigating plantation legacies regionally; responding to state abandonment (nationally); and surviving patriarchal colonial-capitalism (globally).

Similarly, allocating and investing time, resources, and effort into gender-responsive extension services for women, along with the implementation of gender just policies across the Caribbean, will improve the health, well-being, and material conditions of Caribbean communities, families, individuals, and countries alike. This is not to mention the viability and strength the region’s economy will gain writ large if gender justice is prioritized in agriculture. Admittedly, our proposals for gender-responsive extension services and explicit gender just national policies will neither wholly ensure nor even necessarily put the Caribbean on a path to food sovereignty and economic independence, but we believe it is one step in a possibly sovereign and at least more survivable direction.

Long-term solutions and goals, from our standpoint, which can be sourced from the Caribbean’s own storied tradition of emancipatory praxis, are offered by Jacqueline Creft and Frantz Fanon. Creft (1981, 51), a socialist revolutionary with the New JEWEL Movement (Joint Endeavour for Welfare, Education, and Liberation) and Minister of Education for Grenada’s People's Revolutionary Government, in her speech at the First International Conference in Solidarity with Grenada spoke of the vital role that free, anti-colonial, agrarian-based education plays for self-determined countries across the Caribbean when she boldly asserted:

Right from the beginning of our struggle we called for an education system which services all our people, secondary schools which would *freely open the doors to all our people without the constraint of fees*, but also a curriculum which would eliminate absurdity from our classrooms and focus our children's minds upon their own island, their own wealth, *soil and crops*, their own solution to the problems that surround them. For too long we had been brainwashed to think that only Europe and America held the answer. [emphasis added]

And finally, in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon (1963, 142) presciently noted the significance of social reproduction and gender equality as necessary sites of political struggle over half a century ago when we wrote:

Women shall be given equal importance to men, not only in the articles of the constitution––*but in the life of the everyday*––at the factory, in the schools, and in the assemblies [emphasis added].

We would, with affinity for the passage above, add ‘in the fields’ to Fanon’s list. Accordingly and in closing, we propose that if Caribbean states, societies, social movements, communities, and neighborhoods want to achieve the liberated, democratic, and sustainable *tomorrow* that it has been denied for centuries on end by colonialism, patriarchy, and racial capitalism––then we all must take seriously and put into action *today* the radical potentials for gender justice, political education, and class struggle that were rightfully being called for by Creft and Fanon some half a century ago.

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