**Food System and Social Reproduction Realities for Women in Agriculture across the Caribbean: Evidence from Grenada, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines**

# Abstract

This article provides evidence of the food system challenges and structural barriers faced by women farmers and food producers in the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States. The aim of the piece is to add to critical literatures on political economy, development, and food systems in the Majority World via recognizing the political agency of rural grassroots women in the Caribbean. To do so, we focus on the role that social reproduction has in the lives of working Caribbean women who are engaged in agricultural production. The analysis we offer was generated via a mix-method project that included 111 farmers and agro-processors from Grenada, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. We deliberately center the perspectives of Afrodescendant rural women. Our study reveals the main barriers faced by women in agriculture are lack of access to land, concessions, and capital; non-gender responsive Agricultural Extension Services; an absence of national and sectorial gender policies; and ongoing dismissals of the time and effort that goes into unwaged socially reproductive labor. In illustrating these realities, we cast light on how the barriers faced by women food producers in the OECS are inextricably linked to persistent colonial-plantation relations, patriarchal social norms, and liberal-capitalist logics.

# Keywords

Caribbean food systems; gender and agriculture; Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States; political economy; rural transformation; social reproduction

# Introduction: Food Systems and Social Reproduction in the OECS

The Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) is a sub-region of the wider Caribbean comprised of 11 member states (seven official members: Antigua and Barbuda, Commonwealth of Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines; and four associate members: Anguilla, The British Virgin Islands, Martinique, and Guadeloupe). According to the OECS Secretariat (2003, 4), agriculture is an essential sector for the economic and social development of the sub-region. Despite this, the region’s agricultural sector has been marred with “declines in the traditional export crops” such as bananas, sugar cane, and cocoa, all of which have been major contributors to the OECS economy (OECS Secretariat 2003, 5). Reports from the OECS Secretariat over the past two decades state that while there have been attempts to diversify the field of agriculture, the expansion of value-added products has been limited (OECS 2003). This was reiterated more recently by the World Bank (2017, 6), which notes that the region’s “agro-processing industry is not well developed.”

The OECS continues to assert that agriculture in the Caribbean can no longer be approached as merely a primary goods sector since the changing nature of the demand for food in the region is increasingly seeing consumer focus shift from the “availability of primary foods to value-added products” (OECS 2003, 9). Numerous researchers argue entrepreneurship (ACS, 2012) alongside gender sensitive Agricultural Extension Services (AES) are crucial factors in ensuring that small and medium-sized farming enterprises are successful and can effect regional food and nutritional security (Khan, 2012; Marlow and McAdam, 2013). Research complementing these assertions show that gender sensitive AES and business training can, in some instances, serve as catalysts for advancing efforts in food security and the empowerment of women (Tumusiime et al., 2013).

Other critical voices, which are championing gender justice and food sovereignty whilst also advocating for more gender responsive support for grassroots women farmers, contend that entrepreneurial capitalism, the patriarchal-colonial economy, and a neoliberal corporate food regime that “*responsibilizes”* individuals (as opposed to the state) for food security and social welfare will not provide a pathway out of the structural oppression and deprivation experienced by rural farmers, particularly women in the Global South/Majority World (La Via Campesina, 2013; Mies, 2014; Shiva, 2016). Related scholarship on the systemic marginalization encountered by rural women demonstrates that women food producers in countries being most affected by climate change are rendered especially vulnerable (e.g. Small Island Developing States [SIDS] in the OECS) (Jost et al., 2016; Mehar, Mittal, and Prashad, 2016; Nelson and Huyer, 2016). Moreover, as a host of Caribbean researchers and theorists have established, the region continues to be marked and marred by patriarchal social relations, racial hierarchies, and class divisions that foreclose the life chances of women and overdetermine their material conditions; participation (or lack thereof) in political processes; and (in)ability to both define and shape local economies (citation-removed; Green, 2001; Hosein and Outar, 2016; Momsen, 1993).

In addition, yet not necessarily mutually exclusive from the abovementioned critical sentiments on global colonial-capitalism and lasting patriarchal orthodoxies, organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2010) and Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) (CTA, 2017) emphasize that local small business ownership can at least legitimize women’s control over resources and access to land. The ILO (2010) and others (Meinzen-Dick et. al, 2017; Panda and Agarwal, 2005; Rocheleau and Edmunds, 1997; Sachs, 2018) reveal that, in general, positive outcomes emerge vis-à-vis food security, nutrition, and health when women control resources and land given their disproportionate investments in time, effort, and energy towards socially reproducing families, children, and communities (e.g. carework, providing and preparing food, informally educating children, tending to the illnesses and ailments of relatives). Indeed, the role of social reproduction, as well as the ways in which it is (de)valued and continues to be privatized across a wide array of differing contexts, is pivotal for rural grassroots women (citation-removed; Bergeron, 2011; Bhattacharya, 2017).

In attending to the function social reproduction has in the survival, resilience, and development of any given society, Moser (1989) posits that women are regularly tasked with performing a “triple role,” which compromises their prospects apropos business ownership and entrepreneurial/enterprise growth. The “triple role” entails oft-unpaid socially reproductive labor, economically productive labor, and the taken-for-granted (care)work women perform in community-building and cohesion. Moser (1989) argues the triple role often distresses women in low-income and resource-poor households most. Research also indicates that women who are able to engage in local agriculture and cottage industries have been able to secure an increase in food supply for their families by transforming what is generally perceived as a quotidian activity (i.e. producing and preparing food) into an income-generating process that simultaneously serves family needs (e.g. buying school books, medicine, clothing) whilst attenuating household poverty levels (Heierli, 2000).

Additional data from literature on women in Majority World agrarian contexts shows that income generated from non-farm activities by rural working-class and peasant women in Africa account for 42% of household incomes, with Latin America and Asia clocking in at 40% and 32%, respectively (ILO 2010). Here, scholarship from problematically labelled “developing” regions reveals that whilst allocating and investing time, resources, and effort into gender responsive AES and support for women will improve the lives and material well-being of families on local day-to-day levels, it is by no means an all-encompassing remedy to gender gaps and asymmetrical power relations that plague the global food system (Buehren, et al, 2019; Quaye, et al, 2019). All these studies illustrate that while entrepreneurship may not be a panacea for the poverty and suffering generated by ongoing colonial and ever-neoliberalizing socio-economic relations––not to mention the corporate-industrial food regime––it is one of the complex and imaginative ways in which rural grassroots women both navigate and survive globalized racial capitalism (Hawthorne, 2019).

Accordingly, in taking full stock of the structural impediments faced by women farmers in the OECS, this article aims to offer a more comprehensive and critical understanding of the regional dynamics surrounding the realities women food producers face vis-à-vis the nexus of neoliberalizing food systems, top-down technocratic state policy, persistent gender inequality, and sustaining micro- and small-scale businesses in the Caribbean. It does so by presenting empirical evidence offered by grassroots rural women from the OECS. More specifically, this paper casts light on institutionalized obstacles encountered by women farmers and food producers via a mixed-method, multi-country dataset collected via fieldwork, participant engagement, and policy analysis across three Caribbean SIDS: Grenada, SVG, and St. Lucia.

# Context: Agriculture in the OECS

The OECS constitutes approximately five percent of the population of the Caribbean Community. Its total land area amounts to about 2900 square kilometers and it has total of GDP of nearly US$3 billion. Historically, OECS islands have been highly reliant upon agriculture for economic stability, a sector that is comprised of relatively few commodities. Emanating from the colonial era (Best, 1968), the agricultural sectors of OECS members were and continue to be characterized by capitalist rationalities, dependency, and plantation relations (Girvan and Girvan, 1973; Levitt, 2005). Enduring racial and class hierarchies linked to white supremacist and colonial worldviews (citation-removed) have correspondingly led to exploitative extraction, unsustainable monocropping, import dependency, and an overreliance on service-based tourism in the region (Beckford and Rhiney, 2016; Timms, 2008).

Indeed, across the Caribbean, the plantation was and remains an influential socio-cultural, political-economic, and even environment-altering institution (Beckford, 1999; Mintz, 1985). The region’s agricultural sector has not been immune to these processes, which means that the social hierarchies, class divisions, respectability politics, and economic logics that defined the plantation era are re-instantiated as the food system status quo. More specifically vis-à-vis plantation relations, the marginalization and dismissals of the knowledge and acumen of rural landworkers, peasants, and farmers––in particular working-class women, as we will see in the evidence to come––persists. In addition to European imperialists, present-day technocrats of the post-independent national bourgeoise and credentialed ruling class remain culpable for the contemporary neoliberal and ongoing colonial state of things (citation-removed).

Since the early 2000s, overreliance upon single or minimal crops across OECS islands has been highlighted in their export commodity percentages. According to a joint report by the FAO and the World Bank (Lucani, Wolf, and Castejon 2005), bananas represented nearly 70% and 50% of export crops in St. Lucia and SVG, respectively. Grenada’s agricultural production, too, revolves primarily around its nutmeg production. Specifically, nutmeg, mace, and cardamom were in excess of 57% for Grenada. These statistics and trends have effectively held steady apropos crop overreliance for more than a decade (World Bank, 2017). Research in the region by Saint Ville, Hickey, and Phillip (2015, 1333) notes that these developments are partially related to the “authoritarian, top-down, technocratic, state-led agricultural production institutions enacted by parliament that dominate the Caribbean.” That being said, dependency upon single crop exports and imported products in the region has been evolving over the years with more and more local farmers opting to build adaptative capacity and diversify their production with vegetables, root crops, and plantain, which are mainly utilized in domestic markets. Efforts in diversification has subsequently included an expansion in local agro-processing that includes jams, preservatives, condiments, spices, pepper sauces, seasonings, and canned fruits and vegetables (Bissessar, 2019). Notably, the labor driving these growing trends is comprised of a significant portion of farmers and food producers who are grassroots women.

A report generated by the OECS Secretariat (2003, 5) underscores that food security in the region is heavily dependent upon small, semi-commercial food producers, micro to medium-sized food processing enterprises, and a core group of smallholder farmers. Gender disaggregated data on the sector is therefore crucial. National statistics across several Caribbean countries reveal that women represent less than 30% of registered farmers, with most their business ventures being micro- to small-scale cottage industries (Best, Perkins and Bromfield, 2014). Women in the Caribbean, in particular the OECS, are significantly involved in agricultural related activities, both formally and informally, and “play a key role in small family run businesses and enterprises” (Melanie and Zuniga, 2007, 5). Studies on women’s involvement reveal there are nuanced and unique factors at play in determining the extent to which women’s family farms and small businesses thrive and become sustainable (Neider 1987). Despite this, research reports on the Caribbean and OECS note that, regionally, “few countries have national policies and strategies intended to support small businesses and institutions and assist them in their endeavors” (Melania and Zuniga 2007, 5). Furthermore, across the region, the instruments used to support and assist women in the development of their family farms and small businesses are male-biased (Melania and Zuniga 2007). The provision of gender responsive AES for women who have taken up farming as a livelihood strategy and business will ensure that all members of differing Caribbean societies can benefit from AES (Manfre et al., 2013, 13).

Lashley and Smith (2015) surmise that women and men start agriculture-based enterprises for different reasons. They argue men become entrepreneurs because they recognize an economic opportunity and chance when it arises, whilst women start businesses with the aim of meeting the basic needs of their families or as a way to create employment for themselves when they are otherwise unable to find a job. Reports also suggest women in the Caribbean who engage in entrepreneurial development activities do so mainly “to complement and generate income for their families” (Association of Caribbean States 2012, 20). These assertions, however, have been considered misconceptions for decades, both regionally and globally, by researchers like Berger et al. (1984) and Maertens and Verhofstadt (2013) who emphasize that there are far more complexities at hand in the stories of why women start businesses. That is, women across the Majority World are involved in agricultural production as both an income-generating undertaking and because they find it to be meaningful work, rather than labor that is innately exploitative toil. Put differently, women become farmers and food producers not simply because they are relegated to domain of shoring up subsistence or are passively responding to external market forces as a last resort. This is of course noting well that the global value chains of the corporate food regime have been taken to task for being unsustainable (Duncan and Bailey, 2017); overdetermined by the experiences of men (McCarthy, Soundararajan, and Taylor, 2020); preying upon and co-opting the desired agrarian work and aspirations of rural women (Thompson, 2019; Wilson, 2011); and both exploiting and compromising the wellbeing of rural farming women and their families (Amanor, 2019). As our results in the sections to come will exhibit, women themselves attest to the varying reasons why they engage in farming and enter agricultural-based businesses, which provides evidence of their initiative, creativity, political agency, and market acumen as food producers.

With this reality as backdrop, our empirical research sought out the perspectives of grassroots farmers involved in agricultural production to document the food system realities of food producers and agro-processors across three islands in the OECS: Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG), and St. Lucia. Our initial objective was to identify the most significant barriers farmers and producers from all gender identifications faced regarding starting and sustaining micro-medium sized enterprises, cottage industries, and family farms via a mixed-methods framework. Given the resulting scope and scale of the study––and pressing need for gender disaggregated data on women’s realities across the Caribbean––however, for this particular article, we are focusing on the experiences of grassroots women farmers and food producers. Our aim with this piece is to at once offer further evidence of, whilst proposing solutions to, the systemic barriers grassroots women face in the region with respect to practicing sustainable localized agriculture as a viable livelihood strategy. We do so by documenting the lived experiences of participants contributing to regional rural economies and amplifying the voices of working women from the agrarian Caribbean.

# Methods

Although the topic of women’s empowerment in “developing” regions, agrarian contexts, and agricultural entrepreneurship has been receiving increased attention since the 1970s, studies on these themes have primarily centered on Sub-Saharan Africa (Akers et al., 2017; Peterman et al, 2014). Whilst necessary and not to be argued against, this trend has led to what Akers et al. (2017, 271) identify as a geographical bias that has resulted in “incomplete knowledge of region-specific gender gaps in agriculture.” Consequently, there currently remains a dearth of available information and insight pertaining to other rural Majority World geographies, particularly regions that fall outside the focus that has been placed on Sub-Saharan Africa. In their appraisal of this research landscape, Akers et al., (2017, 271) elaborate:

If region-specific information on gender gaps and gender needs and constraints remain unknown and unaccounted for, the commonly utilized gender intervention frameworks­––designed based on existing knowledge and conventional narratives––will be incompatible with realities in less studied regions, and ineffective to bridge the gender divide. To ensure that development efforts are channeled in the right direction and in the right form, research focus needs to shift to regions that have been insufficiently explored in the past.

The Caribbean, and more specifically the OECS, is one such insufficiently explored region where a lack of research, especially gender disaggregated data on women, is hampering both national social policies, regional economic development, and struggles for economic justice.

To partially remedy this, our research included customized surveys, individual interviews, and focus group discussions that took place in every island represented in this study. The target population for the survey consisted of varying farmers and agro-processors from each of the three countries, with the sample population consisting of 111 regional food producers in total (45 from Grenada, 33 from St. Lucia, 33 from SVG). Participants were chosen from a list of agricultural producers and business operators provided by the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA). Some of the names on the sample frame provided by the IICA were unavailable given a handful of potential informants had since went out of business, thus, chain referrals were used to solicit and confirm additional participants. A total of 24 people (11 in Grenada, six in St. Lucia and seven in SVG) participated in the focus group discussions, all of which were facilitated by the IICA. Focus group attendees were members of the Caribbean Network of Rural Women Producers (CANROP).

The survey instrument, which consisted of a questionnaire that was handed out to participants and included follow-up interviews, was crafted around parameters taken from development literature on fostering a supportive environment for women food producers, cottage industry owners, and business operators (Ettl and Welter, 2010; Langowitz and Minniti, 2007; Yousafzai, Saeed, and Muffatto, 2015). The design of the survey instrument and data generation, including the questionnaire and interview script, were also guided by the ILO’s (2007) integrated framework assessment guide for evaluating what constitutes an enabling environment for sustainable enterprises. Notably, the survey instrument was designed by Author 1––who is from and continues to reside in the Caribbean––to best accommodate the local-regional specificities and situated cultural dynamics of each island. The questionnaire was designed to capture information for a wider study consisting of five (5) domains, which include: (i) demographic context; (ii) training and advice for existing farmers in business development and group involvement; (iii) agricultural advisory services as a support system; (iv) contributing factors to business development and sustainability; and (v) barriers to business development and sustainability. This article reports exclusively on domain five: “barriers to business development and sustainability,” with a committed focus on the lived experiences and perspectives of women farmers, food producers, and cottage industry owners.

The questionnaire for domain five (“barriers”) consisted of 19 statements related to barriers paired with a visual analogue scale. Specifically, respondents were asked to respond, on a 4-point rating scale, the degree to which each statement was thought to be a barrier. A rank of 1 indicted no barrier; 2 was low, 3 was moderate, and 4 was high. Upon completing the questionnaire, each participant was interviewed and allowed to further expand upon the themes in the questionnaire. After the questionnaires and interviews were concluded, participants were invited to focus groups held at times that were convenient to those who volunteered. The overarching research design and tailored survey instrument were reviewed for efficacy by subject matter specialists including senior level staff at the University of the West Indies, the Ministry of Agriculture in two islands (Grenada and St. Lucia), and IICA associates with expertise in agricultural economics and rural development. That is, regional specialists provided insight on the utility and appropriateness of the survey instruments and our methodological approach. Content validity was reviewed to ensure that the theoretical interest was successfully operationalized and that the instrument was properly designed to generate the intended conclusions. The instrument was reviewed and edited based on the recommendations made and feedback given by the respective specialists before final approval. Cronbach alpha was used to measure reliability coefficient or internal consistency of the survey items. The recorded score was 0.84. These values are consistent with the standard requirements of 0.70 and above (Trobia 2008).

The individual interviews and focus group discussions included questions developed around focal areas related to what both facilitated and impeded sustainable agricultural production and local businesses, one of which required participants to discuss what they considered barriers and constraints faced specifically by women in food production and agro-processing. Qualitative dependability was triangulated via follow-up contact and cross referencing with participants to ensure we interpreted their statements fairly and accurately. That is, participants were given the chance to review what they communicated and evaluate the accuracy of our interpretations of their statements, reflections, and assertions. Participants were thereby able to review the data that was generated and confirm or reconcile our representations of their responses, feedback, and perspectives as a means to ensure that our analysis corresponded with what they were intending to communicate during focus groups and interviews. This method of establishing trustworthiness of qualitative data is consistent with approaches offered by Creswell and Clark (2011).

The data was initially collected from June 2017 to August 2019 with the assistance of district extension officers in each of the islands and subsequently analyzed iteratively from September 2019 through January 2021. During the data generation phase of the project Author 1 conducted multiple site visits, travelling to each island to administer the questionnaires face-to-face and conduct focus groups and in-person individual interviews. In instances where Author 1 was unable to meet with participants personally, interviews were conducted via telephone (landline, whatsapp, etc.). The focus group discussions were managed in the field but were completed after the questionnaires were administered and interviews took place. Descriptive analysis was completed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 24. The qualitative data was transcribed and thematically coded using in vivo coding (NVIVO version 11), in line with Saldano’s (2012, 2011) approach, as well as analyzed via iterative narrative analysis (Fereday, J. and Muir-Cochrane, E., 2006). The hybrid abductive analysis allowed us to capture popular and emerging themes, relationships among concepts, and both check and test any a priori suppositions, expectations, and theories we had going into the study based upon our previous research experiences and engagements with differing development literatures. Over the course of our participant engagement and subsequent data analysis, the differing structural barriers faced by women emerged as the most pressing topic for the participants we spoke to, hence, our focus on these themes and the perspectives of grassroots women in this paper.

# Results

Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the farmers, food producers, and agro-processors who we surveyed, 76.6% (n = 85) of whom were women with 23.4% (n=26) being men. Approximately half (50.4%) of the participants surveyed were single, with 30.6% (n = 34) being unmarried and another 19.8% divorced (n = 22). This is an indication that the region still has a high percentage of single-headed households, the majority of which, according to informants, had women as the main provider and caretaker. The number of years of experience spent conducting business operations presents an intriguing picture; 22.5% (n = 21) of the participants indicated they were in business for less than five years, with the same amount (22.5%) of participants reporting they have been in business for more than 20 years. Just over one-quarter of the participants, 27.9% (n = 31), had been in business between 5-11 years.

Nearly half of the participants (45%, n = 50) were over the age of 50, which is consequential given several viewed age as a barrier in accessing credit, especially when it was for the start-up of a business. “Based on your age, they tellin’ you it is too risky,” said a participant from Grenada, which was a statement that was reiterated by several other informants. The fear of women passing-away before their loans were paid in full, according to the participants, was a moderating issue for lending agencies. This is not atypical of lenders, in general, in other areas of financing for commercial activities. Education levels of the respondents shows that approximately 30% (n = 33) had attained primary and secondary education, respectively. Just over one-quarter of the participants had received tertiary level education either in a non-university (12.6%) or university (12.5%) setting. The survey also revealed that more than half of the participants (57.7%, n = 64) operated their businesses without employees, suggesting that businesses have not grown to a point where additional labor is required, which is instructive and aligns with previous OECS reports noting lack of business growth and stagnation in the sector.

Table 1: Demographic Data of Participants (Farmers, Food Producers, Agro-processors)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Parameters** | **Categories** | **Percent (100)** | **Frequencies (n=111)** |
| Gender | Women  Men  Alternative | 76.6  23.4  0.00 | 85  26  00 |
| Age Range | 20 – 30 years  31 – 40 years  41 – 50 years  >50 years | 10.8  18.9  25.2  45.0 | 12  21  28  50 |
| Marital Status | Married  Divorced  Single  Other | 43.2  19.8  30.6  6.30 | 48  22  34  07 |
| Years in Business | <5 years  5 – 10 years  11 – 15 years  16 – 20 years  >20 years | 22.5  27.9  9.90  17.2  22.5 | 25  31  11  19  25 |
| Education level | Primary  Secondary  Post-secondary  Tertiary (non-university)  Tertiary (university) | 29.7  29.7  15.4  12.6  12.6 | 33  33  17  14  14 |
| Employer | Yes  No | 42.3  57.7 | 47  64 |

When examined in aggregate and coded, responses from the focus groups, questionnaires, and interviews that were related to barriers faced by women fell into four major categories. These include barriers that are: 1) infrastructural (e.g. lack of finances, land, collateral, business support services); 2) educational (e.g. lack of specialist education or access to training opportunities); 3) socio-cultural (e.g. time lost to social reproduction, carework, family roles/obligations); and 4) legal (e.g. obstacles related to accessing concessions and business registration, difficulty navigating policies and formalizing businesses). An overview of the statistics, as well as detailed discussion inclusive of participant voices, related to each barrier is offered below.

Table 2: Barriers to Business Growth and Development According to Gender

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Barriers | No | Low | Moderate | High |
| Lack of access to credit and financial services | m=3.8  w=7.1 | m=7.7  w=9.4 | m=11.6  w=12.9 | m=76.9  w=70.6 |
| Inability to meet collateral or security requirements | m=3.8  w=10.6 | m=7.7  w=9.4 | m=15.4  w=17.6 | m=73.1  w=62.4 |
| Lack of gender responsive business training opportunities | m=42.3  w=17.6 | m=19.2  w=24.7 | m=23.1  w=28.2 | m=15.4  w=29.4 |
| Lack of gender responsive training available or provided to agricultural extension officers | m=26.9  w=17.6 | m=26.9  w=16.5 | m=26.9  w=36.5 | m=19.2  w=29.4 |
| Lack of gender responsive business support services and business information from extension service providers | m=23.1  w=12.9 | m=19.2  w=17.6 | m=42.3  w=43.5 | m=15.4  w=25.9 |
| Insufficient extension officers trained in giving business development advice | m=19.2  w=7.1 | m=0.0  w=15.3 | m=34.6  w=34.1 | m=46.2  w=43.5 |
| Non-existence of a women’s entrepreneurship association | m=23.1  w=21.2 | m=34.6  w=12.9 | m=26.9  w=30.6 | m=15.4  w=35.3 |
| Few initiatives to help women food producers identify new markets and/or expand existing ones | m=23.1  w=12.9 | m=11.5  w=14.1 | m=34.6  w=20.0 | m=30.8  w=52.9 |
| Lack of national gender policies | m=15.4  w=15.3 | m=30.8  w=16.5 | m=23.1  w=29.4 | m=30.8  w=38.8 |
| Lack of sectorial policies (example agricultural sector policies) | m=15.4  w=9.4 | m=11.5  w=23.5 | m=38.5  w=28.2 | m=34.6  w=38.8 |
| Lack of the use/implementation of national gender policies or sectorial policies | m=11.5  w=18.8 | m=19.2  w=18.8 | m=30.8  w=23.5 | m=38.5  w=38.8 |
| Little or no support for women in business registration and formalization procedure | m=23.1  w=17.6 | m=11.5  w=18.8 | m=46.2  w=24.7 | m=19.2  w=38.8 |
| Triple role of women (economic production, social reproduction, community cohesion) | m=23.1  w=24.7 | m=26.9  w=18.8 | m=19.2  w=22.4 | m=30.8  w=34.1 |
| Inability to separate small business from family life | m=23.1  w=15.3 | m=15.4  w=17.6 | m=19.2  w=21.2 | m=42.3  w=45.9 |
| Lack of recognition by government institutions that women have a key role to play in economic development | m=11.5  w=18.8 | m=23.1  w=8.2 | m=26.9  w=37.6 | m=38.5  w=35.3 |
| Lack of follow up advisory services | m=11.5  w=11.8 | m=3.8  w=11.8 | m=34.6  w=29.4 | m=50.0  w=47.1 |
| Lack of opportunities to recognize and celebrate achievements of women producers | m=7.7  w=16.5 | m=23.1  w=15.3 | m=34.6  w=34.1 | m=34.6  w=34.1 |

## Infrastructural Barriers

Highlighted in Table 2, the vast majority of participants, both men (76.9%) and women (70.6%), specified that a lack of access to credit was a high barrier. In addition, most men (73.1%) and most women (62.4%) indicated their inability to meet collateral or security requirements were equally high barriers. Across the focus groups held in all three islands, these barriers were reiterated multiple times within numerous discussions as being major barriers. However, women respondents believed that it was more of a barrier for them, as women, because they were typically operating smaller businesses and managing their dealings from inside homes and kitchen spaces due to the domestic and community cohesion duties they also performed. A participant from Grenada noted that “financial institutions say this is not big business,” emphasizing the fact that micro- to small-enterprise and cottage industry operators experience higher difficulty accessing business loans from financial institutions given they were viewed as “a less sound investment.”

Women participants from all islands further denoted that financial institutions require them to have title deeds for lands and other properties in order to access the necessary financing for expansion. One agro-processor from St. Lucia stated, “They don’t want us to operate out of our kitchen, but they givin’ us trouble to get land.” Another farmer went on to explain “a lot of women do not own the land, they rent the land.” In following up on a similar point during a focus group in SVG, one respondent explained that the reasons women require loans and financial assistance in the first place is because women do not have the necessary funds required to both own land and start/expand an existing business idea. Nearly all the participants who were women noted this was partially due to the amount of time they spent performing (unwaged) socially reproductive labor. A participant from SVG stressed, “they [banks/lenders] see you have no money, but they tellin’ you that you need some money (to access a loan).”

Close to all the focus group and interview participants noted that small lending agencies made it difficult for micro-business owners and family famers to access loans to either start or grow their business. Nearly all the focus group members and interviewees across all three islands, both men and women, reported this was especially the case for women. A Grenadian farmer summed up the overarching sentiment of the focus groups when she stated, “None of the credit unions want to give you loan as a start-up to a business ...they don’t facilitate (micro) small businesses.” It is important to note that the majority of the focus group participants across all three countries stated that both men and women agro-processors who were small operators experienced similar difficulties in accessing credit. “There are issues for both men and women,” emphasized a participant from SVG. Of note amidst both the quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to small-scale farmers, nevertheless, remains the fact that the vast majority of participants stressed that these obstacles disproportionately impact women.

## Educational Barriers

With reference to business training opportunities that were sensitive to gender differences, 43.3% of men indicated that a lack of gender responsive business training was a low barrier, which contrasts with the response of most women, over half of whom indicated it was a moderate (28.2%) to high (29.4%) barrier. The results surrounding the availability and provision of gender responsive training for agricultural extension officers also proved instructive. Agro-processors who were men reported this was either not a barrier (26.9%) or that it was only a low barrier (26.9%). Two-thirds of the women, on the other hand, indicated non-gender responsive AES and extension officers were moderate (36.5%) to high barriers (29.4%) for their small business endeavors. With respect to a lack of gender responsive support services, 42.3% of men and 43.5% of women indicated this absence as a moderate barrier. Nearly half of the participants reported that not having enough extension officers trained to offer useful economic development and planning services was a high barrier; 46.2% of men and 43.5% of women. This is telling apropos the level of self-assurance women have in their abilities and acumen in the face of the structural barriers they encounter, i.e. women demonstrate more confidence than men when it comes to running and managing a family farm and/or business, despite the systemic forces they are up against.

During focus group discussions across all three countries, participants expressed that training in business development was important for them to keep their farms and enterprises running, as well as help them grow as business operators. A constant refrain, issued from numerous participants across all three research sites regarding extension services, was, “We don’t get business advice, training, and support needed from the government.” Rather than taking these assertions on the part of the participants as the discrete lamentations of individuals, we are of the standpoint, as are other critical scholars (Girvan, 2015; Quinn, 2015), that their respective words illustrate the hierarchical (Westminster-modelled) state’s inability to serve its constituents and provide civilians with the public services they are entitled to. Participants in the focus group held in SVG specified that they receive training predominantly from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which often conduct two- or three-day workshops and are oriented towards record keeping and financial accounting. One participant from SVG, identifying the ever-increasing tendency of “development” work by well-intentioned NGOs to take the form of neoliberalized, parachute-in/out, box-checking exercises (Sheppard et al., 2009), stated, “most of these organizations come in and do these training then pack up and leave.” Similarly, participants from every island expressed their adamancy for a need of both consistency and long-term commitment with respect to business advocacy on the part of AES and NGOs. That is, business training, whether it be from the state or an NGO, must account for local knowledge, include a curriculum that is broader than record keeping, and be approached as a reciprocal *process* and *relationship*, not event(e.g. one-off workshop).

Participants, across the board, expressed a high need for training in how to prepare documents for accessing concessions, contracts, and subsidies as small business operators. The inability to access duty free concessions, as well as the absence of information as to how and what these respective “red tape” processes require and entail, proved to be a major barrier within the OECS. Nearly all of the agro-processors we spoke with articulated that accessing concessions, subsidies, or loans for operating equipment and transport to facilitate the maintenance and/or growth of their businesses was extremely difficult. One participant captured this reality quite vividly when she noted, “As small business operators we can’t get concessions on vehicles cause is only ‘sketel’ we could afford, they have concession for brand new and we can’t afford this.” “Sketel,” in local parlance, translates to used, previously owned, and/or worn-out. The vast majority of the agro-processors explained that to access concessions on vehicles they had to purchase new vehicles but given the micro- to small-size scale of their operations, they were unable to afford brand new vehicles because of the higher cost. Many participants, in eschewing fashionable overconsumption, contended that purchasing a brand-new vehicle was not necessary for the nature of their farming operations, and that a used, reliable vehicle would suffice. In turn, many participants missed out on the opportunity to access concessions and simply had to either grin and bear it or make do with what they already had. Markedly, grassroots women were disproportionately impacted by this systemic Catch-22.

## Socio-cultural Barriers

The socio-cultural barriers identified by participants from all the islands, broadly, included a general lack of assistance from community groups and associations (for agro-processors), an either tacit or explicit dismissal of the need for gender responsive support that is situated in agrarian contexts, and what can be seen as patriarchal norms and androcentric worldviews (see Table 3). For example, when separated according to gender, there were contrasting views on the question of having a women’s entrepreneurship association. According to one-third of the men (34.6%), this was perceived as a *low* barrier for women, whereas over one-third of the women (35.3%) indicated that having no women’s association was a *high* barrier. The vast majority of the women believed that a strong organization would be helpful in lobbying for opportunities to assist them in development and growth of their cottage industries and small businesses, especially since, on the whole, women held less land, capital, and faced more difficulty accessing loans. Participants, both men and women, also noted that currently existing business groups were not functioning adequately, which they identified as a hindrance to the development and success of family farms and small enterprises across the board. As one participant from Grenada explained, “There is a lack of unity among entrepreneurs.”

Work-life balance and social reproduction were significant factors regarding sustaining farms, families, and business. 42.3% of men, and even more women (45.9%), indicated that the inability to separate business responsibilities from family life proved to be a high barrier for them personally and professionally (i.e. with respect to managing/sustaining a business). Interestingly, over one-third of the women (37.6%) indicated that whilst their respective government institutions lacked awareness of the key role women play in economic development, they (women food producers) only considered this a *moderate* barrier. Contrariwise, 38.5% of the men who responded to the survey considered the state’s lack of recognition of the role women play a *high* barrier towards developing successful businesses.

With respect to social reproduction, while there were varying views as to whether the triple role (Moser, 1989) played by women was a barrier to sustaining a business; nearly one-third of both men (30.8%) and women (34.1%) considered the triple role for women a high barrier. Of note, is that 23.1% of the men and nearly one-quarter of the women (24.7%) indicated that the triple role was not a barrier at all. A key distinction that emerged in focus group discussions, which is important to bear in mind, is that women who did not consider the triple role a barrier did not perceive it to be a burden because they have been able to adjust to their workloads. Put differently, the women we spoke to view the disproportionate amount of social reproduction, community-building, and carework they are doing––as women––as something they can handle. It is vital to signpost this reasoning given that socially reproductive labor is often dismissed and devalued as work, and because women are often cast as not being as capable/strong as men. That is, women wholly noted social reproduction and carework was indeed taxing and time-consuming, but those who said it was not a barrier expressed this because unpaid domestic labor and community-cohesion is something they see themselves as capable of performing and is necessary work they have been doing all along. As one participant in Grenada stated about women farmers and food producers, “We do what we have to do to get there, even if it means getting up and organizing at 2 am.”

## Legal Barriers

National policy and state institutions proved to critical areas for *potential* support according to participants, albeit to varying degrees. While nearly half the agro-processors who were men thought the lack of respective national and/or sectoral gender policies presented no to a low barrier, nearly one-third (30.8%) of men also thought it was a high barrier. Over two-thirds of women agro-processors (67.7%) thought the lack of gender conscious policies was a moderate to high barrier, with just over one-third of the women (38.8%) indicating it was a high barrier. A lack of general sectorial policies related to agriculture and economic development was indicated by men (38.5%) to be a *moderate* barrier, while an equal number of women (38.5%) viewed it as a *high* barrier. A lack of gender responsive sectorial policies, however, according to nearly 40% of both men and women, was viewed as a high barrier. With respect to state policy, participants regularly expressed frustration with the many difficulties they faced regarding access to land, concessions, and even information about how to navigate government bureaucracies as rural farmers and business-owners. One focus group participant from Grenada, with whom the vast majority of other interviewees agreed, explained, “There is too much headache and red tape just to get one little piece of paper for a concession.”

Furthermore, across each country, party affiliation, officialdom, and political brokerage/cronyism was widely seen as a major factor affecting one’s (in)ability to successfully navigate or be stonewalled by bureaucratic red tape and paperwork processing protocols when attempting to gain approval for land, loans, or concessions. One participant from Grenada summed up the sentiment of a focus group by asserting that “a lot of political *mamaguy* [deceit, flattery, empty words]” was what farmers experienced, as well as what it took to get things done. Governmental corruption and party bias were further reiterated by another participant from St. Lucia who stated, “when they know which party you support, then politics is a problem.” Regarding the lack of initiatives offered to assist farmers and food producers in identifying new markets and expanding existing ones, over one-third of the participants who were men viewed this as a moderate barrier, compared to most women (52.9%) who indicated it was a high barrier. Half of both men (50%) and women (50%) specified that a lack of follow-up advisory services was a high barrier. As one participant from St. Vincent explained, “We see them [advisory agents] today, then they take more than four months before you see them again.” This sentiment was shared by numerous focus group members across all the islands, with numerous interviewees offering comparable comments.

In sum, the majority of men and women agreed that infrastructural barriers like a lack of access to finances and the inability to secure land and/or collateral were high barriers. Despite this, there were differing views on whether gender mattered and/or made a difference. The lack of 1) gender responsive business training, 2) lack of national and/or sectoral gender policies, and 3) lack of women’s networks and associations were viewed by men as either not a barrier whatsoever, or a low barrier. Notably, however, most the men from all three research sites viewed their respective government’s lack of recognition of the key role women play in agricultural and economic development as a high barrier. There is seemingly a contradiction here, but one that is not uncommon across each country. That is, broadly, whilst most men realized that the state does not acknowledge the contributions of women––they also were not going so far to suggest that policy- or government initiatives would rectify either this neglect or the ongoing devaluation of contributions made by women. Conversely, most women indicated the lack of national and sectoral gender policies, gender responsive training, and women’s associations across the OECS were high barriers. This is a reflection of how women, as a group, are often systemically disadvantaged and institutionally marginalized by both state policies and the decisions that are made within high-level (male-dominated) government offices (Barriteau 2001).

A major dynamic to bear in mind vis-à-vis our findings above is that even though we have represented each of the barriers (infrastructural, educational, socio-cultural, legal) as discrete categories unto themselves, these domains are interconnected and inseparable. That is, the structural barriers that grassroots farmers and food producers in the OECS face are relational and interlocking, meaning that what occurs in one domain effects and influences the others. This is expressly the case with socio-cultural and legal barriers, and more precisely, the social norms, cultural mores, and state processes that are operating in any given context or country within the Caribbean, which have been demonstrated to be exclusionary, male-dominated, and neoliberal (even if inclusive of some middle-upper class women) (citation-removed; Mohammed, 2016). Select qualitative evidence offered by focus group participants illustrating the reciprocal and co-constitutive relationship amongst patriarchy, androcentrism, and the state is presented below in Table 3.

Table 3: Women’s quotes demonstrating the nexus of patriarchal norms, state negligence, and socio-cultural and legal/policy barriers. *(Age approximations used for confidentiality)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Country and**  **Age Range** | **Quote** |
| St. Lucia  Mid 50s | *“They [extension agents] do listen you know, but our views are not considered in policy development.”* |
| St. Lucia  Early 40s | *“We don’t get an opportunity to be involved in planning discussions with government.”* |
| St. Lucia  Late 30s | *“They [extension agents] ask us many things, what are our problems, but they do not really use the things we tell them.”* |
| SVG  Mid 50s | *“If we were involved in policy development here I think they [extension agents] would have a better knowledge of what we are going through.”* |
| SVG  Early 30s | *“They [extension agents] want to put a structure that says this is good for you, but they don’t listen to what you know about it”* |
| SVG  Mid 40s | *“...but you know they always have them men in their discussions”* |
| Grenada  Late 20s | *“They [state agents and officials] don’t consider us in their policy things.”* |
| Grenada  Early 40s | *“They don’t involve the persons [women farmers] that it would affect.”* |
| Grenada  Mid 50s | *“Well, we get no visits from extension when it comes to running and improving our business.”* |
| Grenada  mid 50s | *“I never hear them [extension agents] talk thing about gender na”* |

# Discussion

Based upon our findings, it is clear that grassroots women play a critical role in agriculture in the OECS and will continue to be instrumental in developing a food secure future for the Caribbean. The structural barriers identified by the participants in Grenada, St. Lucia, and SVG are, by and large, consistent with what is stated throughout development literature related to the realities of rural women in postcolonial societies across the Majority World. That said, it is crucial to be ever mindful that all geographies, regions, and cultural contexts are dynamic and heterogenous, both internally and comparatively. Undoubtedly, the historical trajectories and mutually constitutive natures of racial capitalism, plantation economies, Westminster systems of governance, and patriarchal worldviews converge in the Caribbean to present unique and differentiated challenges for grassroots farmers and food producers within SIDS across the region. And whilst the structural barriers identified in this research adversely affect men and women across the board, our disaggregated data demonstrates that women are disproportionately impacted, negatively, by a host of systemic and institutionalized obstacles, which they primarily face because they are women. These include lack of access to land and financial resources; the inability to secure appropriate collateral towards obtaining credit; a lack of initiatives tailored to women in identifying new markets and expanding existing ones; a lack of conscious regard on the part of state ministries and AES agents to offer gender responsive training; and an overarching dismissal and devaluation of the socially reproductive labor and carework women perform in sustaining economies, societies, and local communities.

In turn, our study determines that the lack of national and sectoral gender policies––along with the absence of political will on the part of governments and extension agents to push for and implement gender responsive services––prove to be substantial hindrances for not only the enterprises of women food producers, but for the overall development of the Caribbean at large. More readily, it is paramount that gender just policies––and political consciousness––be developed and mainstreamed nationally and across the agricultural sector. Moreover, gender responsive AES and trainings must emerge as concrete commitments from respective OECS administrations. The majority of participants also recommended the installation of support programs and business units that prioritize land and capital access, gender responsive programs, local agroecological production, and redistributive economic policies to resource-poor food producers, which are not wholly different than the agricultural and women’s programs implemented by Grenada’s former New JEWEL Movement some forty years ago (citation-removed). From our standpoint, this evidence means that it is critical for state officials and administrations to commit to and effectuate a more pluralistic, actually existing democratic, and arguably socialist-feminist approach to agricultural policy, advisory services, and national economic “development” agendas.

Relatedly, Caribbean critical theorist and political economist Barriteau (2001, 96) points out that across the region “the state sets the parameters within which women *exist* and women entrepreneurs do business.” Barriteau’s overarching assertions vis-à-vis gender, power, and the state in the region, which have been echoed by other scholars conducting work on state power and gender relations in the Caribbean (Collins, 2016; Momsen, 1993), further bolsters the argument that agricultural ministries and extension offices must account for and respond to gender differences when it comes to serving their constituencies. Likewise, a joint FAO-World Bank report (Lucani, Wolf, and Castejon, 2005, 27) indicates that individuals involved in the agro-processing sector face difficulties in accessing “up-to-date technical knowledge,” which is often a deterrent for micro- and small-scale farmers, in particular for cash poor groups and women. Incidentally, our research shows that grassroots Caribbean women in agriculture, while up against obstacles unique to both the regional agricultural sector and their respective socio-geographical island contexts across the OECS, face similar barriers experienced by peasant and working-class women in rural economies worldwide.

As articulated by the women who have been heard throughout this article, national policies should respond to, be inclusive of, developed with, and guided by the needs and desires––as well as acumen and insights––of local farmers and food producers who are, as one Grenadian woman stated, “on the ground, doing the work.” The reality is that land and business ownership, as well as political representation, state power, and the discourse of development in the OECS, remain both overwhelmingly male-dominated and neoliberal, which is an upshot several critical theorists argue is an ongoing vestige of colonial-patriarchal social institutions and worldviews (Hosein and Outar, 2016; Mohammed, 2016). Here, the work of social reproduction proved to be a major time- and energy-consuming factor in the lives of the women we spoke to. And while most the women participants in this study view their triple role (in particular the labor they do in the domain of social reproduction and community-building) as either no or a low-to-moderate barrier regarding sustaining a family farm or business, it is imperative to recognize that this is because they find ways to adjust to the various roles they are performing in an effort to ensure that the requisite work of socially reproducing their families and communities is not a barrier. Put differently, women must do more (unpaid) work and spend more (uncompensated) time strategizing to have a chance to start a successful agricultural enterprise or sustain the micro to small-scale business they are running.

Based what we discovered as a result of this project and participant engagement, women have the tendency not to even mention just how much they are compromised by the time and energy they lose to social reproduction. Here, as Bhattacharya (2017), Federici (2012), and Fraser (2016) all argue, there are no (neo)liberal solutions to the challenges and oppression posed by patriarchal colonial-capitalism. We would also contend, as the Caribbean revolutionary thinkers Creft (1981), Thomas (1988), Girvan (2015), and Andaiye (2020) all have, that there are no neoliberal solutions to the persistent coloniality of the corporate food system and ongoing plantation relations (e.g. classist/credentialist hierarchies, dismissals of grounded local knowledge, marginalization of landworkers and women) that still characterize both the Anglo-Caribbean’s regional economies and Westminster systems of governance. The Caribbean’s very own anti-imperialist revolutionary and guerrilla intellectual, Frantz Fanon, warned newly independent “Third World” colonies over half a century ago that mere lip service to gender equality and the failure to co-create actually existing gender just social relations “in the life of the everyday” (Fanon, 1963, 142) was neither revolutionary––nor emancipation.

# Conclusion

This article aimed to share with readers evidence of the structural barriers and insights into the lived experiences of grassroots farmers and food producers in three Caribbean islands of the OECS, in particular rural Afrodescendant women. Rather distressingly, the vast majority of the women farmers we spoke to as a part of this research noted that when trying to overcome and/or remedy the systemic obstacles they face as women in agriculture they are either ignored or simply told to “be guided accordingly.” Here, the fact that rural women in the Caribbean (and beyond) experience more time poverty, work more hours each day, make less income, hold less land, and expend more energy than their counterparts in the realm of agricultural production, economic development, and the food system at large is an injustice. Notably, this injustice is inextricably linked to socio-cultural norms and institutionalized conventions that can be traced back to colonial power, plantation-capitalist extraction, and Euro-imperialist racialism, as well as present-day patriarchy, classism, corruption, and cronyism.

In the immediate moment, *some* of these enduring injustices can be mitigated, to some degree, via open, inclusive, and good faith policy consultations, outreach sessions, transparent processes, and democratic decision-making. Whilst this is admittedly only a start, it is imperative that state ministries, rural advisory services, and high-level officials take gender, social reproduction, local producers, and the vital roles women play in carework and community-building into consideration when planning and implementing agricultural development policies and legislation. The onus of navigating and rectifying structural barriers related to agricultural production and regional food system injustices should not be on placed on women. The decision to choose local farming as a livelihood strategy and vocation in the Caribbean, especially for women, should not constitute a foreclosure of life chances and result in systemic marginalization, chronic exhaustion, and be a detriment to they and their family’s wellbeing.

Based upon all the evidence at hand, our final contention is that regional research on farming, agricultural economic development, and national policies all need to move away from taking global corporate power and capitalist logics for granted––and move towards collectivity, local agroecology, and effecting food sovereignty. For far too long, state administrators, development experts, and researchers from the credentialed professional class have prioritized global value chain analyses and recommendations that are fixated on notions of “development,” “growth,” and “upgrading” linked to industrial agribusiness, top-down technocratic intervention, and neoliberal entrepreneurialism. A shift in focus, political consciousness, and even research towards community-based projects and grounded praxis that centers local grassroots knowledges and movements, the social relations of production, and the role of social reproduction and unpaid carework is urgent. In sum, numerous Caribbean communities across the OECS are being sustained and reproduced by women engaged in farming and food production. The region’s food security––and ultimate sovereignty and self-sufficiency––is directly dependent upon grassroots women food producers, family farmers, and small business owners, yet their concerns, realities, ideas, and solutions are either habitually dismissed or considered purely peripheral. Indeed, across the Caribbean, dependency-inducing economic policies linked to imperial powers, colonial-capitalist logics, and political-social institutions defined by lasting patriarchal norms and plantation relations persist. This is not only comprising the rural grassroots women in the region who contributed to this project, but also the Caribbean’s potential to break free from enduring dependency and chart a course towards both a sovereign food system and economically just future.

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