Equal Access to Resources Undermines Patriarchy

“W
hile we accept that ‘patriarchy’ is fundamental to contemporary feminist thought, whatever its strand, and recognise its liberal usage and complexity in definition, our research has revealed that ‘patriarchy’, as a pure concept, is not always useful as a conceptual tool of analysis in understanding or explaining gender arrangements. In this regard, we also agree that gender relations can, indeed, be transformed, redefined and renegotiated. However, such gender relations, while subject to redefinition, renegotiation and transformation, are not necessarily subject to contestation under particular socio-historical conditions and in specific cultural contexts. It is also our view that the “existence of set rules and scripts regulating gender relations”(Kandiyota: 1997, p. 97) assumed to be socially constructed by a ‘patriarchal’ society, can also be reversed or negated in favour of more palatable ‘rules and scripts’ which govern the relations between women and men. This, however, is, dependent on the existence of particular historical and social circumstances. Our argument finds support in the findings of our recent interrogation of social life in a small rural and remote community in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Fancy. The findings indicate that the concept, ideology and practice of ‘patriarchy’ do not dominate social relations between women and men. In this community, where there are no male hierarchical relations and where there are expressions of men’s solidarity with women, and women’s solidarity with men, men agree that women are, in fact, their equals and that “women and men have the same rights” (Interview: 2008).

Within the body of feminist thought, this appears as an anomaly and out of keeping with any feminist theorising on the unequal relations of power which are said to characterise gender arrangements. The expression, then, of “men and women having equal rights” and ‘men’s equality with women’ points to the need to reconceptualise or to rethink ‘patriarchy’ and to draw within its ambit, the more subtle distinctions which can give more meaning to general theories as the combination of the specific and the general provides a more meaningful picture of social phenomena. This is important because the case of Fancy provides an interesting theoretical and practical situation, precisely because within the wider Vincentian community, the ideas and practice of patriarchy have resulted in the exclusion and marginalisation of women in a system which operates on male dominance, male hierarchical relations and male solidarity. These ideas have not penetrated the community which has preserved relatively equal social relations.

In attempting to explain the unique social relations being experienced in the farming community of Fancy, we note that gender relations were not just transformed, but were redefined and not contested within a particular socio-cultural and historical context and on a particular material base. This material base is a land tenure system which has passed from generation to generation. In addition, the pattern of landownership, one in which the land is communally and collectively owned, having being bequeathed to the women and men of the community to be owned as common property, eroded the ideology and practice of ‘patriarchy’ by erasing lines of social demarcation which has encouraged the absence of a gendered division of labour. (Cont’d...p.2)
Equal Access...Patriarchy Cont’d

It was, therefore, not difficult for the women and men of Fancy to embrace the practice of ‘gender equality’, for, with this pattern of landownership came the transformation of ideas of male dominance and women’s subordination held in the collective consciousness of a people who feel that women, like men, should control their own destiny.

This pattern of communal land ownership is much akin to the natural economy of the early native peoples, the first residents of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. In this communal existence, there is no vertical stratification of the community, and the division of labour is close to being socially symmetrical. Both women and men are engaged in small crop farming (and fishing to a lesser extent) as partners and as individual owners of land which gives them free, unencumbered access to the main means of production. Arable farm land, therefore, became available to all those (women, men, families) who wished to be involved in farming as a means of subsistence. Anyone, woman, man or family can farm any piece of land as long as it is not being farmed by anyone else. The rules of engagement for the “management” and “distribution” of this social property, as a collective enterprise and as a cooperative community of citizens, were inherent in the nature of the transfer of such property. However, the dominant system of social and economic existence is one of cooperation and partnership. Therefore, the issue of a gendered division of labour does not arise. Nor do the issues of socially constructed gender roles and gender rules. The women of Fancy agree that there are no set gender roles or gender rules for women and men in the community because equal access to land, their main means of survival, gives them equal status with their men. Because of this social relationship, men are not in a position to exercise power over their women and they do not. Like the women, they claim that equal access to the resources in the community means equal status and equal rights”. (Excerpt from “Rethinking Patriarchy in a Rural Context” authored by Judith Soares and Cecelia Batson-Rollock).

Tutor/Coordinator Presents at Conference on Religion in the Caribbean

Tutor/Coordinator, Judith Soares presented the paper, “Interpreting Mary: A Symbol of Justice, Peace and Solidarity for the Caribbean”. The conference, organised and hosted by the Department of Behavioural Sciences, UWI, Trinidad and Tobago, was held on September 17 & 18. In her paper, Dr. Soares argued that “Mary symbolises the politics and socio-economics of change and invites all people, as well as the Church, as an institution, to pay attention to the imperfections in the human condition brought on by hundreds of years of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation, and the subsequent failure of the body politic to provide the objective conditions of social justice” in a region where a project of social justice is urgently needed. Specifically relating to women, Dr. Soares pointed out that Mary who represents the human condition of the majority of women in the Caribbean, compels women, particularly those of the Christian community of believers, to locate themselves at the centre of theological interpretation as she arouses their critical reason to allow them to be effective agents of change.

"I am a Woman Phenomenally. Phenomenal Woman, that's me."
— Maya Angelou