

INEQUALITY IS GENDERED:

Reflecting on Caribbean public policy realities

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For regions such as the Anglophone Caribbean, the elimination of societal inequities and inequalities is fundamental to national and regional development. Public policy that is consistent with good governance, must be committed to the creation of access for wide cross-sections of populations. Historically, public policy in our region has been a persistent driver of inequity and inequality, being products of colonial and postcolonial blind spots and erasures. These inequalities and inequities are experienced by populations via gendered, coloured, racialized relations of power, that render some pockets of populations invisible, centralize other groups, and relegate others to positions of intermittent marginality. The level and nature of visibility to the public policy process is an important determinant of who are able to capitalize on the gains of public policy decisions. Gender is a significant driver of inequalities within populations. These inequalities are not limited to simple notions of the differences experienced between men and women. Instead, gender analysis must be cognizant of the ways in which the compounding old and emerging social classifications and categorizations (including race, geography, age, ability, sexuality, and socioeconomic standing), must form part of analysis of public policy towards the framing of governance committed to an elimination of persistent inequalities. Producing visibility, and managing the lived realities of the fallout from public policy premised on concepts of *ceteris paribus*¹, must be central to the work of the social science disciplines grounded in an interrogation of broad questions of social justice, and the need to build societies and institutions concerned with the advancement of human security, equity and equality. Therefore, although all things being equal, may be necessary for some economic modeling; all things are never equal in any given society. Unavoidably, public policy steeped in concepts of efficiency, rationality and the leveled playing field, become significant drivers of gendered inequities and inequalities between men and women, and among diverse groups of men and women. The diverse socio-cultural, socio-economic,

geographic, and racialized realities within populations as they interface with public policymaking, can either entrench inequities or eliminate them. Frequently, the result entrenches rather than eliminates inequalities (inevitably gendered).

In the 1980's in the Anglophone Caribbean, when the role of Government became articulated as the facilitator of business, the language of efficiency, free trade, and the value of the free hand of the market, compelled feminist scholars re-imagined the regional development path. At that time, work of Caribbean feminists like Peggy Antrobus, Joan French, Mariama Williams and Judith Wedderburn, reminded us of the gendered, socio-cultural and socio-economic cost of efficiency, fiscal austerity, and adjusted government spending. At the macro-level, these women reminded governments of the woeful inadequacies of the gendered assumptions underpinning the models of austerity. At the sectoral level, as governments sought to make our hospitals more cost effective by reducing recovery time spent in the hospital, resulting in the stretching the care economy, extending the hours of women's work, and the overall depleting of the social sector spending in many territories, regional feminist scholarship provided a necessary analysis for an alternative framing of development. As many Caribbean governments reduced social sector expenditure, women, who made up the bulk

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1. "All other things being equal"



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of public sector and service sector workers, disproportionately carried the burden of such 'necessary shifts' to more efficient, market-oriented government. Inequalities and inequities grew, and the growth was gendered.

That neoliberal brand of economic efficiency, and growth exemplified by the operation of the unbridled hand of the market, does not seamlessly trickle, to eliminate socio-economic and gendered inequalities. Inevitably, those with less power within the market, such as regional women, are disadvantaged by economics of "trickle down" that undergird these economic models. Equitable, sustainable development is never solely a market driven exercise. Long-term, agentic, people-centred, gender-sensitive development is a carefully designed, consultative process. The market-centred, efficiency-driven operation of market forces, as exemplified by the work of regulatory frameworks such as Standard and Poor's, and Moody's, and the World Trade Organization's work unfolds as drivers of inequalities in societies like ours. They cling to gendered invisibilities, and create economic winners and losers in a manner that severely exacerbates existing gendered inequalities and inequities.

In 2021, as we grapple with the

impact of COVID-19 on our economies, and our lived realities, the impact of growing inequalities and inequities must be of increasing concern. The COVID-19 pandemic has levelled regional tourism sectors, service industries, and other segments of the labour market, largely occupied by women and lower-income men. The impact of COVID-19 on the informal sector, domestic workers, sex workers, micro enterprise operators, and other feminized, traditionally invisible, facets of the labour

Inequalities and inequities are experienced by **populations via gendered, coloured, racialized** relations of power

market will present long-term development challenges for most of the region, for many years to come. In the context of these long-term challenges, regional governments must recognize the compelling opportunity for an ideological reset of public policymaking presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Regional, post COVID-19, people-centred recovery does not lie in the promise of the operation of the unfettered hand of the market. Good governance and sustainability in the Anglophone Caribbean must hinge on public policymaking focused on an un-layering of the intersectional nature of our human existence, as we interface with policy decisions. This is necessary for the recasting of our development, towards the emergence of a more gender just society, equitable society.



Dr. Deborah McFee has worked in the area of gender and development since 1998. She holds a BA in History and Political Science from The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus in Trinidad and Tobago, and an MA in the Politics of Alternative Development from the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague. Dr. McFee holds a PhD in Global Governance and Human Security from the University of Massachusetts (Boston). Deborah's experience includes research on the impact of small arms and light weapons on women and girls, as well as traditional gender norms as drivers of emerging human security vulnerabilities experienced in Small Island Developing States in the Caribbean. Deborah has worked extensively throughout the English-speaking Caribbean developing national policies for gender equity and equality. She is also an Outreach & Research Officer at the Institute for Gender and Development Studies (IGDS), University of West Indies St. Augustine.