

Women in Seychelles

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Summary and Keywords

Seychellois society is generally perceived to be matrifocal. This is because women's influence is considered all pervasive, from the family unit to church and political activities and public service institutions. Since its social revolution in the last quarter of the 20th century, Seychelles has been considered very avant-garde in its promotion of women in responsible positions. It is important to note, however, that though this promotion of women has not specifically targeted any social class, it is working-class women who have benefited the most from it. In the first place, the working class in Seychelles has always been a much larger majority. The landowning and merchant class have, since the early settlement period and throughout colonial history, been restricted to a few but very influential people. Thus, though women in these classes have also benefited from social reform and emancipation, it has not been the norm to assess changes within their ranks simply because their numbers are negligible compared to the working class. Second, social reform in Seychelles was led by a socialist government, which emphasized a classless society, with the intention of leveling the field for working-class people. Thus, women's emancipation has almost always been seen from a working-class perspective. If there is an economic middle class in 21st-century Seychelles, it has emerged from the working class. Thus, this article tends to focus on the working class.

It is also important to note that a result of women's emancipation and accession to prominent positions in government and middle management has been the perceived tendency to emphasize the failures of the male population. With no less than ten women's associations in existence and the current global push for promoting women's causes, Seychellois men have begun to feel marginalized and have formed their own associations to promote their cause and image.

However, the matrifocal nature of Seychellois society might indeed be just a perception. In effect, men still hold the top positions in key domains of power such as the Cabinet and Parliament. Women ministers are often perceived as having been promoted through the benevolence of a male presidency. In fact, there is a certain amount of gender power conflict in Seychelles, which might result from (a) the clashing of patriarchal and matriarchal systems imposed by colonialism, (b) male subjugation and female exploitation during and after slavery, and (c) female emancipation during the socialist era.

The Slavery Period and Its Aftermath

Male Subjugation among the Working Classes

A strong characteristic of Seychellois society in the early 21st century is the prominence of single-parent families headed by women.¹ Previous studies in this area attribute this trait to the double disempowerment of male slaves during the slavery period, where their female counterparts were given the responsibility of children born from their relationships and the men had no say over what happened to either their female partners or their children (Benedict, 1981; Chang-Him, 2010). A study by V. C. Borilot on the absence of the male figure in Creole families in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean corroborates this fact.² Borilot and Chang-Him make specific reference to the laws that imposed this male disempowerment—notably, the *Code Noir*, established by the French Crown in 1724, ostensibly to regulate the management of slaves in the colonies, was in fact designed to maintain a supply of slaves through reproduction. The code made male slaves nothing more than the material goods of their owners, for economic profit. Articles XII and XIII of the code stipulated that children born to slave women would have the same status as their mother, regardless of their fathers' status.³ This also applied to children of liberated mothers. The role of the father here was simply relegated to that of progenitor. The situation was further complicated by the fact that slave women legally belonged to their masters, who exercised their “droits du seigneur” upon them.⁴ Thus, beyond their labor value, women's sexuality represented an added value to their masters, inclusive of their reproductive values, as this guaranteed a free supply of “homemade” slaves. However, it is important to note that if this situation represented a moral and psychological degradation to male slaves, to female slaves it represented both a moral and a physical degradation.

The disempowerment of males continued well after slavery had been abolished (perhaps as late as the 1950s) by virtue of the ruling landowning class having already established a system of patronage over females issuing from the slave class. In his dissertation on the Seychellois woman, Antoine Abel discusses the “tradition” of male patron issuing lodging to a woman from his domain who has pleased him and borne him children. When his eye was caught by another, probably younger and fresher from his plantation, he would find a docile male to “take care” of the first woman and her household but reserve the right to have relations with her whenever he wanted. In such cases, within the household, the economic power would rest with the woman since she was the one to whom the lodging had been given.⁵ Thus, the status of the man would be subordinate, both economically and psychologically. Such men were ridiculed by society, as illustrated by the derogatory names given to them (*anatol, lendor, makro, nannar*), which as Abel points out, still remain in the Seychellois creole vocabulary.⁶ Very often, when the woman's patronage had stopped, the man installed by the patron would either just opt out or stay on the periphery of family affairs, even if he had by then acquired children by that woman.⁷

Female Sexuality and Economic Empowerment

Male disempowerment during and after slavery may be one of the reasons for the general perception that Seychellois society is matrifocal.⁸ Economically, a tradition emerged among the working classes of the female matriarch controlling the family finances, and generally running the household, either because of the absence of a male patriarch or because the family revenue required strict control for the basic subsistence of the family—something assigned as the role of the matriarch.⁹ However, as Abel points out, property among the working classes often belonged to the woman, which had been bestowed upon her by the plantation master during his patronage.¹⁰ This ostensibly gave her an upper hand and made her queen of her domain. It was not unknown, however, for property to be in the hands of a working-class male, very often because the plantation master for good services had bestowed it upon him, or because he was the master's illegitimate son.¹¹

Thus, property ownership and economic subsistence among the working classes in the period just after slavery and up to the end of the 19th century was closely linked to the sexual dimension of the female slave or ex-slave. The *Code Noir* forced her to become responsible for her household by virtue of her male counterpart's marginalization; however, it also left her with a social stigma. Marion Benedict's introduction on gender power and financial relationships in Seychelles lists among the three most common things people "have heard" about the Seychelles (apart from the island's beauty and its people's superstitious nature), that "the women were to be had for the taking."¹² This was in the late 20th century, just after the establishment of the Second Republic in 1977. She further qualified which class she was talking about, that is, "dark skinned, laughing beauties whose only desire was to bed a white man and have a white baby."¹³ These remarks epitomize the degree of the stigma and stereotyping attached to female slave descendants in the colonies whose ancestors had already suffered sexual debasement during the slavery period. It does not consider the suffering imposed on this class of women, who had indeed been "taken" by force. In reference to the liberated slaves who were dumped on the islands by British anti-slavers in the 1860s, Burton Benedict says of the women that most of them were pregnant upon arrival or soon after.¹⁴ This suggests that the men who had access to them were systematically abusing them. The tradition of seeing the slave woman and her descendants as sexual objects was established from that period—and has been exploited at times by women themselves, if only as a means of survival.¹⁵

The Ruling Classes and the Patriarchal System

In spite of all the assumptions that Seychelles is a matrifocal society, the family unit has since its establishment in the early settlement period (18th and 19th centuries) been styled in the norm of the European patriarchal family system, with a male heading the household (Articles 389 and 214, Civil Code).¹⁶ Among the landowning and merchant classes, as late as the mid-20th century, the patriarchal system reigned supreme, as Deryck Scarr humorously illustrates through reference to a visiting journalist in 1949 who found the attitudes of the landowning class in particular "almost medieval."¹⁷ In fact, the British governor installed in 1947, Dr. Percy Selwyn Clarke, renowned for his social

conscience, reformed an old French legislation that made married women “completely subservient to their husbands.”¹⁸ As for the Indian and Chinese minorities in the merchant class, they came from patriarchal societies anyway and simply fit into the patriarchal culture imposed by the dominant landowning class from the early settlement period of the islands, similar to the situation in Mauritius, which had initially governed Seychelles until it became a Crown colony in 1903.¹⁹ Though the working classes in Seychelles have always been in the majority, the so-called matrifocal system, enforced by the poverty of that class, is a substrate to this traditional patriarchal system common to the European heritage.²⁰ The clash of the two different family systems is inevitable as the white plantation masters had power over the slaves and laborers, and of course expected their own norms to be held as the correct norms. Furthermore, this white minority had the means of enforcing these norms, which has had a lasting impact in Seychelles and in other ex-colonies. As R. E. Reddock puts it,

a significant measure of the global gender dynamic is a result of the “export of the European/American gender order to the colonised world” through institutions like the church, the military, Western education, the modern state, transnational corporations and the worldwide media (Connell 1995, 199).²¹

Of course, the single most important medium of the European patriarchal system in Seychellois society is the Catholic Church. As mentioned previously, one of the most important edicts of the *Code Noir* was that slaves and their descendants were to be baptized and instructed in the Catholic faith.²² By the same law, fornication was sanctioned and relationships could only be deemed socially acceptable through marriage. Thus, in traditional Seychellois society, marriage was, and to a certain extent in the early 21st century is still, seen as the most desirable thing that can happen to a woman, especially a church marriage.²³ The traditional married woman in colonial Seychelles was expected to submit to her husband’s rule and desires, as illustrated in the Benedicts’ study: “CM doesn’t sleep with her husband anymore because she doesn’t want any more babies. However, she says it is against her religion as it is her duty to sleep with her husband, just as it is a sin to take contraceptives. ‘A woman must bear her cross.’”²⁴ Thus, the concubinage system that was imposed upon working-class women by men of the upper or ruling classes automatically made them pariahs of accepted society.

Female Hegemony in the Working-Class Family Unit in the 20th Century

Since the establishment of family units, working-class women in Seychelles have always held a very important position. They are responsible for looking after the family affairs, including the welfare of the children, controlling the household provisions, and ensuring that the household ran as smoothly as possible (this was true even during slavery). The reasons have already been discussed in the section “FEMALE SEXUALITY AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT.”

Women as the Family Financial Comptroller

The typical Seychellois matriarch from the working classes of the 20th century was also traditionally the family financial comptroller. It is probably for this reason that 21st-century Seychellois women are perceived as dominant in the family unit. In the Benedicts' case studies of the late 20th century, it was typical for husbands to hand over their salaries at the end of each month and receive what they needed and when they needed it in return. Such women also typically managed their husband's properties, if he owned any.²⁵ This financial control extended to the children as well, as they became earners.²⁶ However, the matriarch's duties extended to the well-being and financial stability of the family in the long term. For example, Marion Benedict's description of her informant as the one who sought jobs for her husband and sons is corroborated by Burton Benedict's description of the enterprising matriarch who creates a network of contacts and acquaintances in order to obtain opportunities for her children or other members of her family.²⁷ However, Burton Benedict questioned the so-called matrifocal households of the working classes by pointing out that if women controlled the family income in these households, it was simply because virtually all the money had to be spent on subsistence, and women just happened to be the buyers of this subsistence.²⁸ In fact, he dismissed arguments that Seychelles had a matrifocal system inherited from Africa, arguing that "matrifocal arrangements are not confined to peoples of African origins."²⁹ Referring to Shorter, he compared the Seychelles system to working-class Europe and America in the 19th century.³⁰

Thus, Seychellois working women, from the period of slavery to the post-slavery period of indenture up to the 21st century, have generally been forced to become enterprising simply because they were the ones traditionally left with the responsibility of ensuring that their children were fed and their families stable. Seychellois men of the working class, on the other hand, were traditionally regarded as "indolent" and reluctant to work, an attitude probably going back to Abolition in 1839 when indentured laborers "abandoned their workplaces," questioning the need to labor for a pittance when they could work for themselves at their own pace. This meant a few days of laboring hard to earn just enough to cover their needs until the end of the month.³¹ The tradition of fathering children and leaving the mothers to raise them has further contributed to the Seychellois woman's enforced responsibility. The result has been the continuous decline of masculinity as women became dissatisfied with their men's inability to provide, due to their perceived indolence or the scarcity of jobs for artisans of limited skills.³² This search for economic subsistence was characterized by the emigration of hordes of Seychellois women in the 1970s and 1980s to enter domestic service in the Middle East and Italy, leaving their children behind to be cared for by their grandmothers.³³

Women's Economic Emancipation from the 1960s

If in the post-slavery period working-class women in Seychelles "used their sexuality and domestic labour" as Burton Benedict stated, "to get money in a way that a man does not," this was not prostitution, but rather an exchange of domestic labor and conjugal obligations for the stability and security of a home and family.³⁴ This was because in spite of be-

Women in Seychelles

ing the family financial managers, women were dependent on men's earning power. In fact, Seychelles has a long tradition of women being financially dependent on men. This tradition was established after Abolition up to the 20th century when men's labor power could be more easily converted into money or property than women's labor power.³⁵ This also underlines the physical difference between men and women, as illustrated by Marion Benedict's informant when she commented about a couple of women (mother and daughter) who were attempting to make a living on their own, saying that this situation wouldn't last long as their cassava production enterprise required a man's labor. "No woman can manage alone," she said.³⁶

Education would eventually emancipate the working-class women and create a new middle class across the gender spectrum. However, when the colonial government, in the 1960s, decided that Seychelles needed to move from being "a happy backwater" to a country that needed to embrace mainstream economic development, the required technical education was not extended to girls. A sixth form was created for boys, and the few girls from the convent school who opted for further university education through the overseas training scheme had to join the boys' sixth form. It was only in the late 1960s that a Nursing School and Secretarial College were introduced, but there again, the schooling system was elitist and did not favor working-class people.³⁷

However, toward the 1970s, after the opening of the international airport and new opportunities created in tourism and other service industries, there was a structural shift in employment, with women mostly moving away from the agricultural sector toward the tourism sector.³⁸ This increased their economic independence and, consequently, their social status. From then on (1970s to 1980s), women who had probably been previously shackled to the home, at the mercy of their partners' financial benevolence, streamed to take up the new opportunities. This is illustrated by the fact that female employees in the public service increased thirteenfold, compared to males, which only doubled. Similarly, in the wholesale and retail sector, female employment increased eight times, and male employment again only doubled. In the hotel and catering industry, female employment increased by fifty-eight times, whereas male employment increased by twenty-seven times.³⁹ The matriarchal extended family again plays an important role in this transformation in that working mothers could rely on this network for childcare during their working hours. They could not rely on government social protection since whatever services existed in that era were more or less limited to public servants and those in formal employment.⁴⁰ On the eve of independence, Seychellois women were already set to play an important role in the country's nation-building process, as educational and other opportunities became more available to them. This applied to all women, since the social transformation through political changes would also affect the remnants of the landowning class, which had never at any time constituted a significant portion of the population (9 percent in 1948, according to Ostheimer).⁴¹ As for the middle class, apart from the few merchants who were prominent in business, this would only be created from the working classes through education, after independence.⁴²

The Socialist Era and Gender Equity

The decolonization period during the socialist revolution was an historical period that had a greatly influence on the condition of women in Seychelles. Before this revolution, women's importance was due to practicality, but during and after this period, women played a critical role as the equal of men in production and in the process of nation-building.

Liberation and Professional Careers for Women

The socialist revolution in Seychelles can also be said to be the women's liberation movement that freed Seychellois women from the limitations of class-imposed patriarchal domination. The leader of the left-wing liberation movement, France Albert René, called for revolution on the basis of extreme poverty among the working classes, and the need to eliminate all types of social injustices and discrimination.⁴³ Probably influenced by the Marxist ideas in the 1960s, which was common to many newly independent countries, he saw women as an important pillar of his revolution. As Leon Trotsky said, "In order to change the conditions of life, we must learn to see them through the eyes of women."⁴⁴ René's party (created in 1964), the Seychelles People's United Party (SPUP), called for women to join in the struggle for independence.⁴⁵ However, it is to be noted that his party is cited as having imposed "its own peculiar interpretation of Leninist ideas of democratic centralism and vanguardism." More importantly, he is condemned by non-supporters and the media, especially foreign media, for having "institutionalized the one-party state and for having removed the liberal Bill of Rights of the First Republic (which is seen as having enshrined civil and political freedoms)."⁴⁶ Nevertheless, a majority of René's party support base were women, from its creation in 1964 to the present.

Two very important cornerstones of SPUP's political agenda that appealed to women were its actions against the high cost of basic commodities and rent.⁴⁷ A majority of the working classes were of slave descent, and with this came a legacy of landlessness and limited income options.⁴⁸ Being the ones responsible for the welfare of their families, women were motivated to join the struggle for food and shelter. Second, in the SPUP's agenda to eliminate the class system and racism, women saw the possibility of better opportunities for their children. In this, René's government, established by a coup d'état in 1977, made good its word by introducing a zoning system which ensured that all children, irrespective of their color or background, went to the same schools, followed by a two-year National Youth Service for teenagers.⁴⁹ The gender equity of this new system ensured that the next generation of girls had wider career choices and a better social status than their mothers and grandmothers who had been limited to domestic work, laboring, and, more recently, the service industry. This of course resulted in a more assertive and status-conscious female population.

The most important aspect of the socialist era which has influenced women's development and assertiveness in Seychelles, however, is the conscious association with international movements for the protection of women's rights, especially human rights, and the

Women in Seychelles

promotion of women's development, especially concerning executive power. For example, International Women's Day was given national importance, as is illustrated by a special 1984 edition of *The People*, the left-wing journal, which declared that March 8 was given much importance in Seychelles because women's emancipation is recognized as a fundamental condition for the human and social promotion of a nation.⁵⁰ Correspondence between the Ministry of External Relations and the left-wing Party Headquarters (Seychelles People's Progressive Front) show that there was an agenda for women's development as per the United Nations Directory of National Machinery for the Advancement of Women.⁵¹ There were also efforts to associate with regional organizations to achieve such goals.⁵² These efforts in the left wing are reflected in all the constitutions of women's organizations, from the 1970s to the early 21st century, which state as their concerns and objectives, rights and liberties of women; their social, educational, and economic empowerment; and particularly, their executive empowerment and advancement.⁵³ Concrete action took the form of the inclusion of women in voluntary work projects in the community as part of the national effort to improve community life.⁵⁴ Women were also encouraged to join the People's Militia, created just after the 1977 coup, to "safeguard the revolution."⁵⁵ The Cultural Revolution that asserted the creole identity of the Seychellois people was led by women.⁵⁶ Having worked alongside men to sustain the socialist revolution, and having benefited from the education and training opportunities offered to them, Seychellois women became conscious of their worth and took action to become socially and economically independent. One side effect of this gender revolution was that it gradually undermined Seychellois men's self-confidence, and many became more and more removed from their partners' community activities.⁵⁷

Women's Influence in Political Outcomes

Nowhere in the history of Seychelles have women felt the impact of their power more than in the outcomes of political elections, which have defined the country's destiny. Seychelles was a one-party socialist state from 1977 to 1993, and that was due in large part to the support that the socialist party received from women. At the end of this era in 1993, President René, realizing the need to maintain his party's power in the new era of multiparty democracy, acknowledged the contribution women had made to sustain the party's long reign and their contribution to his social reforms and development programs. "If we are where we are today," he said, "it is because the women have been strong and sincere." This was printed in *The People*, with the headline, "Women are the Pillars of the SPPF."⁵⁸

From the beginning, women had joined the protest marches asking for independence.⁵⁹ The socialist party was also fortunate to have some very militant female activists leading the female wing of the revolution. One of them was Sylvette Frichot, who was the first secretary of the Women's League in 1970. Another was Rita Sinon, who became the first female minister in an all-male cabinet in 1986 and took on no less than the portfolio for internal affairs. The support base for the party was built at district level, and again, its strength relied on a significant number of female activists, some of whom became legendary in maintaining their districts as SPPF bastions even throughout the change to

Women in Seychelles

multiparty democracy. Two such women are Ginette Gamatis of Port-Glaud district and Jovana Charles of Roche Caiman district.⁶⁰ This tradition of encouraging militancy in women within the socialist party is reflected in the reasonably high proportion of women representing the party in parliament over the years. An astonishing example of this is the 5th Assembly following the 2011 elections in which the Opposition abstained from participating, resulting in an all *Parti Lepep* (The People's Party, following a name change of the SPPF) majority. Fifty-six percent of the Assembly was female.⁶¹ The socialist party is currently in decline, following world currents against the last bastions of socialism and a strong campaign by the Opposition against alleged corruption within the government, which is still a *Parti Lepep* government. Notably, this campaign has so far targeted mainly the male leadership of the party. If it is to rise again, the socialist party will once again be borne on the shoulders of its women, as is indicated by the figures representing party activism at district level at the Party Headquarters' Coordination Unit at Maison du Peuple. Of twenty-five districts, twenty-five campaign teams and twenty-four executive committees are female dominated.

Modern Seychelles and Female Power

The postwar feminist movement in the United States and Europe that led to female emancipation during the 1960s also contributed to the fashioning of the modern Seychellois woman. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the top layer of successful women who have "made it" in the world of business or public administration have tended to model themselves on successful women in the Western World who have upheld the principles of the feminist movement such as equal rights and opportunities. Most importantly, Seychellois women took advantage of global policies vis-à-vis gender equality to develop a sense of their own worth. Among educated and successful women, this has also transmitted into self-assertion.

The Impact of Globalization on Concepts of Women's Rights

Though Seychellois women from the 20th century to the present have been influenced by concepts of the feminine self, founded by the feminist movement in the Western World, there was never a true feminist movement in Seychelles. That is, in the strict sense of the feminist revolution, which targeted women's liberation and saw women as a class in their own right. In fact, women in the Indian Ocean region generally have never been a homogenous group as such but rather have fulfilled roles ranging from mothers to daughters; caregivers to entrepreneurs.⁶² Thus, there was never any real feminist activism against male domination, especially in Seychelles where the working class has always been a majority. In this class, most women enjoy a high status within the family network compared to women in other classes.⁶³ Thus, women's rights have always been fought for as a common cause, as part of the class revolution, which began with the socialist movement in the 1960s. This, however, has been transmuted into a less politicized movement

Women in Seychelles

to promote gender equality and women's advancement as part of the current globalized action in that respect.

International Women's Day, for example, has been taken over by a non-governmental organization (NGO), the Seychelles Women's Day Committee, which generally promotes the cause of women in Seychelles and uses March 8 to highlight women's achievements. One such action of this committee is the creation of a Women's Hall of Fame in 2012, which is currently housed in the National Museum. The project was published as a book in 2013.⁶⁴ The first batch of women included in this project hail from different segments of society and different fields of interest, from health, politics, social work, and women who excelled in male-dominated fields such as diving and palm wine tapping, and it reflects a cross-section of the ethnic composition of the population. The Gender Commission in the Liaison Unit of Non-Governmental Organizations of Seychelles (LUNGOS) is another organization that is active in the promotion of women's rights and their advancement and ensures that Seychelles meets the requirements of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which it has ratified. For example, its 2013 Shadow Report lists among its actions over a specified period, the training of 110 women as part of its project to economically empower women to alleviate poverty and curb violence, and the empowerment of women parliamentarians.⁶⁵ All such organizations work in close collaboration with government bodies such as the Social Affairs Department.

As a result of their attendance at the United Nations 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace held in Beijing, Seychelles women created many of the existing women's associations. These included the Seychelles Association of Professional Women (SAWOP), Alliance of Solidarity for the Family (ASFF), Gender and Media Plus (GemPlus), Association for the Promotion of Solid Human Families (APSHF), Women in Action and Solidarity (WASO), and, in 1998, the Seychelles Women's Commission which was renamed the Gender Commission.⁶⁶ All these movements reflect local concerns with regard to ensuring that Seychelles meets international standards of development, as well as giving consideration to Seychellois professional women who want to emulate portrayals of feminine success on the international scene and are doing something about it.

New Male Fears of Marginalization

Marion Benedict's conclusion on the question of what her informant, who to her was representing the up-and-coming Seychellois woman, wanted out of the relationship with her husband, was that the answer lay not in the realm of love but rather in the realm of power.⁶⁷ That was in 1981, and the power in question was contained within the household. In the new millennium, with the growing action of women's associations and the continuing influence of global concerns about women's rights, Seychellois women's power seems to be spreading not only laterally but upward. With a number of female judges and magistrates, an ombudsman, the governor of the Central Bank, a designated minister, and four other ministers in place in the Cabinet, Seychellois women in 2018 have proved right the

Women in Seychelles

Gender Steering Committee's statement in 2004 that women have benefited immensely from the equal rights policies in place and were now competing with men for high decision-making positions.⁶⁸ Certainly, in middle management, female power is well and truly established as is illustrated by the fact that currently, of twenty-seven districts, twenty have female administrators.⁶⁹ In fact, the 2013 CEDAW Shadow Report points out that women are also infiltrating traditional male occupations.⁷⁰ For example, Seychelles has two female pilots and an all-female crew to travel to an international destination which often marks March 8. In 2017, the Seychelles News Agency marked March 8 by featuring fourteen inspiring women online, which ranged "from those who have left impressive legacies to those who are showing their capabilities in fields frequently dominated by males."⁷¹ Among the young women included in this list are a naval lieutenant and those studying refrigeration, electrical engineering, and masonry. Also included in the list is the Indian Ocean's only female priest, who belongs to the Anglican Church.

All this apparent female power has raised concerns among the male population about their own status. The Seychelles 2011 CEDAW Report, for example, underlined the fact that there is a common perception that persists in the 21st century that government policies and services favor women.⁷² A number of studies about boys' underperformance at school have exacerbated fears about Seychellois men losing their place in society. In a 2018 study by Mats Deutschmann and Anders Steinvall about creole male stereotypes in Seychelles, the authors draw attention to a previous study by Geisler and Pardiwalla (2010), outlining a "growing crisis of masculinity." This crisis is apparent in statistics such as a ten-year life expectancy difference in favor of women, alarmingly high levels of substance abuse among younger men, underachievement of boys in schools, and high unemployment rates among young males.⁷³ This is supported by the 2013 CEDAW Shadow Report concluding that girls are outdoing boys in math and reading.⁷⁴ The ascent of women to a wider range of power positions also coincides with increasingly stereotypical views of men as "irresponsible," "unreliable," and, worse, "secondary to women in life generally."⁷⁵ In this, Deutschmann and Steinvall see similar patterns in other Caribbean creole societies, which they attribute to the impact of slavery. The crisis in Seychelles has alarmed both NGOs and government bodies involved with human development and welfare, to the extent that a lot of effort has been put into the promotion of males as responsible figures. Much more effort is being made to raise men's awareness of their role as nurturers of children, and men's associations are being formed in different respects, for example, the Association of Fathers Promoting Responsible Parenthood. However, it is to be noted that women are very much involved in these movements.⁷⁶

However much has been made of women's power in Seychelles, it is a fact that Seychellois society still reflects the general patterns of a male hegemony inherited from a European patriarchal system. As much as women are holding their own in middle-management positions, males continue to dominate the top management jobs. The 2002 census, for example, showed that women were still taking up lower-status and lower-paid jobs. At that time, they represented 60 percent of job seekers, and only 30 percent of employers.⁷⁷ There are so far no female contenders for the positions of either vice president or president in the Cabinet or the post of Minister of Finance. There has not yet

Women in Seychelles

been a female contender for the post of Speaker of the National Assembly either, though the fact that there is a female Chief Justice signals the fact that the possibility is there. What has made the female ascent to power in Seychelles seem overwhelming is that it compares favorably with neighboring countries, which are established male patriarchies, for example, Mauritius.⁷⁸ In fact, at the lower levels of society, women are still disadvantaged because very often they have to manage as single parents on a minimum wage salary. In referring to the UN Millennium Development Goals, the Gender Equality Report reveals that although poverty as a whole has been eliminated in Seychelles, there are still “pockets of poverty,” which have “a feminine face.”⁷⁹ The 2013 CEDAW Shadow Report further corroborates the female disadvantage in the labor market by revealing that the 2008 economic reforms affected mostly women.⁸⁰ Seychelles might be avant-garde with regard to its register of female development, but it still has some way to go to establish true gender equality.

Conclusion

The Seychellois woman in the early 21st century is a product of three different historical factors. First, the implementation of the *Code Noir* imposed a matrifocal system on the laboring slave classes during the early slavery period. This was because the male slave population was intentionally kept down and productive in the plantation economy of that time. Second, a patriarchal system brought in by the colonials was superimposed on the forced matrifocal system, and kept the true reins of power in the hands of a white male minority. This created a new hegemony, which the laboring classes aspired to as the accepted norm. In her introduction to *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities*, Reddock suggests that this type of hegemony has persisted in the postcolonial world. She refers to Errol Miller’s argument that “ruling minority males purposely restrict the numbers of black males who are allowed upward mobility, with the result that black women inadvertently benefit and enjoy greater socioeconomic advancement than black men.”⁸¹ In modern Seychelles, it cannot justly be said that a white minority rules the country as it underwent a socialist revolution, which put power in the hands of the working class. However, the same cannot be said of the economic domain as the vestiges of a plantation economy might still represent an advantage to a white minority in the 21st century (albeit much diluted due to the constant mixing). Added to an expanding business elite of primarily Asian origins, black males might still, in this respect, find themselves at a disadvantage. Third, this is further compounded by the fact that the socialist revolution empowered women psychologically and economically, though this empowerment was based on equality not only of the sexes but also of class and race. Though all three factors might suggest that Seychellois women have the upper hand, the fact remains that the overriding tendency throughout the country’s history has been to emulate the patriarchal system established by the colonials. Coupled with the early subjugation of working-class males (resulting in an aversion to work and a tradition of being absent in the family), this patriarchal tendency has resulted in a Seychellois female underclass which is currently overshadowed by a strata of successful Seychellois women who have benefited from the education and consequent empowerment of the socialist and modern eras. Finally, the underlying conflict be-

tween the sexes in Seychelles results from the clashing of all these historical factors, from the mistrust caused by the exploitation of female sexuality, to women's economic and social emancipation, which has caused them to penetrate traditional male bastions.

Discussion of the Literature

Published literature about women and their status in Seychelles is limited, mainly because there has been very little academic research in most fields of social studies and culture that has been made available to the public. However, some research is available online in the form of theses, dissertations, and reports. For published works that are readily available, the scope is more limited. Because the Seychelles sociocultural landscape is very similar to that of the Caribbean, it is possible to draw parallels between the two creole regions, using the literature that is available on the Caribbean situation. This also includes theses and dissertations available online, apart from published literature.

The best-known published research about women and their status in Seychelles is a couple of anthropological works by Burton Benedict and his wife, Marion Benedict. The research was led by Burton Benedict, whose main concern was the condition of the Seychellois people between the 1960s and the 1980s, which is the transition period from colony to independent republic. Following the first period of study in the 1960s, a first book was published under the title *People of Seychelles*.⁸² The most significant piece of work with regard to women, however, is the 1982 publication *Men, Women and Money in Seychelles*, of which he shared authorship with Marion. The book is divided into two portions, the first of which is a narrative account by Marion, centered on her informant, CM (Charité Michel), and their survey of CM's community on the subjects of money, livelihood, and parental care. CM ends up epitomizing the working-class Seychellois woman who is very concerned with the subject of power and control in her household. Through her actions and thoughts as revealed to the researcher, Marion Benedict, it is possible to gain an insight into the conflicting patriarchal and matrifocal systems that existed in Seychelles at the time. Burton Benedict's part of the book is more systematic and objective, outlining the dynamics of power between men and women from the historical angle, as well as from the different domains of power, such as the means of income and how money is spent and controlled. He disputes the idea that Seychelles is a matrifocal society, arguing that the necessity of putting all earnings back into daily subsistence was the reason why the woman in the family had to control the family income. He also discusses the Seychellois woman's methods of networking for purposes of advancing her family, something that is aptly illustrated in Marion Benedict's part of the book, through her informant's own life.

Another important piece of work that examines the Seychellois woman closely is Bishop French Chang-Him's master's thesis in philosophy, on the moral dilemma of cohabitation in a Christian society (2010). Chang-Him argues that this dilemma is the result of the conflicting values of Christianity and the trauma and sexual decadence caused by slavery. He also attributes the current situation of single-parent families and absent fathers to the

Women in Seychelles

Code Noir. He discusses the mistrust that this situation has engendered between Seychellois men and women, which continues to have an effect on today's society. Chang-Him's thesis is an extension of a previous work he did in 2002 on the impact of slavery on family life in Seychelles.⁸³

Gisela Geisler and Mahrookh Pardiwalla's work is an empirical study that focuses on boys' underperformance in school rather than girls and women's status. However, they do analyze the issue through a gender comparison, bringing out the many levels on which girls outperform boys, mainly because they have better role models in the women around them, and because of gender-prescribed traditions, which restrict boys to a more narrowly defined gender role. They argue that this puts boys at a disadvantage, and they grow up to be irresponsible citizens, in imitation of their fathers, which at an early age manifests in school absenteeism. This of course means that girls are more likely to get ahead in life as compared to their counterparts. Again, this stems from the historical marginalization of working-class men and the restrictions on their fatherhood since slavery.

Though it is very dated, Antoine Abel's dissertation on Seychellois women and cultural heritage (1976) is the only known work that specifically discusses the Seychellois woman and how she is perceived in society that has been documented by the National Archives and digitized for reference. The work is a detailed description of the Seychellois woman, from adolescence through teenage years, adulthood, and old age—from the perspective of culture. This is very important as it enables a better understanding of the factors that influenced the dynamics of male-female relationships from the slavery period to the 20th century. For example, the description of the plantation master, female slave, and male slave triangle clarifies why males did not stick around in working-class households. It also makes it possible to understand, in the 21st century, certain traits in the dynamics of male-female relationships, and the many roles assumed by women at different stages of their lives.

Social Policies in Seychelles (2011) is one of the latest published factual works on the development of Seychellois society through social policies implemented along its various historical phases. Authors Liam Campling, Hansel Confiance, and Marie-Therese Purvis (the last two are Seychellois) examine the impact of social policies on the people of Seychelles during different regimes. Gender comes up in various sections of the book, as it is one of the issues that have preoccupied non-government bodies and government departments in the last ten years. Some of the most important issues discussed from the gender perspective include education, employment, and health. Empirical studies from the relevant ministries and NGOs have informed this work, backing it up with solid data.

From a purely historical perspective, Deryck Scarr's account of Seychelles reads like a fast-paced movie—but the author's humorous style does not detract from the factual solidity of the work. Scarr's history is from the perspective of slavery and its aftermath, and it contextualizes the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean region. This is important for understanding the differences and similarities of social systems in the Indian Ocean region,

Women in Seychelles

from a gender perspective. Scarr's work can be supplemented by William McAteer's histories, which are equally interesting, but more specific to early colonial history.

Primary Sources

The National Archives of Seychelles hold most of the primary documents on women in Seychelles. Most of the older documents can be located through the archives' inventory, *Inventaires des Archives National des Seychelles*, by A. W. T. Webb and H. J. Macgaw. The reference number is F/2.477, and ISBN 2.902.292.03.1. An example of the rare documents included in this collection is *La Femme Seychelloise et l'Heritage Culturelle* by Antoine Abel, documented in 1976 under the reference F/2.211. The Culture Department is in the process of digitizing the collections in this inventory, but it is not yet available online. Physical access is possible at the National Archives in Victoria, Seychelles. The National Library has also published a National Bibliography which can guide research in this area. However, it does not yet appear in digital form but can be accessed at the National Library in Victoria, in the same building as the National Archives. Information about women during the socialist period of Seychelles history and current information on women's actions in the socialist party can be found at the *Parti Lepep* documentation center at *Maison du Peuple*, Victoria. Online data about women and gender issues are available in the form of reports and papers. The following are a few examples: E. Macdonald et al., ***Gender Profile: Seychelles Commonwealth of Learning***; Gisela Geisler and Mahrookh Pardiwalla, ***Socialization Patterns and Boys' Underperformance in Seychellois Schools***; and the ***Shadow Report on CEDAW by the Gender Commission, Seychelles (LUNGOS)***.

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