
Women's Participation in Politics: A View from the Caribbean

Hon. Ingrid A. Moses-Scatliffe

Historically, the traditional role of women was thought to be one of domestic ingenuity; managing the household with the greatest proficiency without any prospect of upward mobility. This article looks at the recent progress women have made in politics, particularly in Caribbean Parliaments.



Rosalyn Sussman Yalow, an American Medical Physicist, co-winner of the 1977 Noble Prize in Physiology or Medicine stated that “we still live in a world in which a significant fraction of people, including women, believe that a woman belongs and wants to belong exclusively in the home.”

According to world population statistics, women make up 50% of the world's population. The passage of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, the introduction of modern democratic constitutions, enshrined with fundamental Human Rights and the need to advance women's issues, have laid the foundation for the emergence of women's participation in politics. But this struggle for equality in empowering and encouraging women's representation in politics is not void of challenges facing women politicians in the British Virgin Islands and the wider Caribbean.

In 1965, the first woman was nominated to sit in the Legislative Council of the British Virgin Islands, and it would be some 30 years later in 1995 that the first woman was elected as a member of the Legislative Council. In fact, two women were elected in 1995. Since then, there has been a continuous presence every four years thereafter of two women on average gracing the

halls of the now House of Assembly as representatives of particular districts. To date, no woman has served as Premier in the British Virgin Islands. However from 1999 to 2001, Eileen Parsons served as Deputy Chief Minister, the first woman to accomplish such a feat and from 2007 to 2011, Dancia Penn, served as the first Deputy Premier. We are hopeful today more than ever, that the time is ripe for women's leadership at the helm of our Territory.

Regionally, there has been increased women's representation in politics, but at a slower rate than representation by our male counterparts. The Islands of Dominica, Guyana, St. Lucia, Bermuda, Jamaica and the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago have been able to elect female head of states over the course of women's involvement in politics in the Caribbean. But the slow growth of women politicians domestically and regionally can be attributed to some of the following challenges:

Political Participation: A large percentage of political parties are controlled by men exclusively and women are primarily used as tools for mobilizing votes from the female populace leaving the decision-making of political candidates to men. Often, when women rise to the helm of political parties it is a clear and popular view of who is better suited and qualified to hold the controlling position if the political party must emerge victorious.

Ideological Factors: A Patriarchy system of a male-dominated structure, shaped by the ideological stereotypes of a women's place being in the home, still continue to mar the level of women's political participation regionally. Often, women must be thick-skinned to venture into the political arena because

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before the race has begun, she is reminded personally as well as by media influence as we say in local parlance: “but where is she going?”; a subtle reminder that perhaps she may be embarking on a role not suited for her. Despite these ideological views, women continue to enter the political arena without trepidation making strides to close the gender disparity in politics.

Socio-cultural Factors: Predetermined social roles assigned to women complicate and limit the time women can dedicate to participate in politics when trying to balance our dual roles as homemaker and our public life as a political representative. Often, our role is compounded by the constant negative images and views of inferiority to that of our male counterparts which make many women reluctant to enter the political arena.

Economic Factors: With a significant, commercialized twist to party politics, more and more money is needed to participate in politics and often women with the drive, determination and dedication to enter the political arena lack access to the financial resources needed to start or join political parties, or do not belong to certain social circles to garner the much needed financial contributions. Regionally, many women advance in politics based on their families’ economic standing in society. With more women being educated and having access to personal funds and the ability to obtain the necessary finances, this challenge is surmountable as a barrier to women’s advancement in politics regionally.

Trail Blazers

Despite these challenges, in the 21st century, women are now emerging in larger numbers and holding prominent positions in government, eradicating many of the traditional stereotypes that kept us from advancing politically.

Commonwealth Caribbean evidence suggests that females being educated is surpassing that of males at all levels. This is vividly evident at the tertiary educational level. Thus, we see younger and more qualified female politicians emerging, and this factor has significantly influenced the composition of female involvement in politics. Once our male counterparts can overcome their personal biases and as we gain their respect, although we may have to demonstrate three times over, a more level playing field of political involvement between the genders will be seen regionally.

Globally, we owe gratitude to trail-blazers in politics such as Corazon Aquino (First Female President of the Philippines and first Female President in Asia) and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (Second Female President of the Philippines); Indira Ghandi of India; Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom; Kim Campbell of Canada, Martress Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan; Condolezza Rice and Hilary Clinton of the United States of America, among others, who have paved the way for women’s advancement in politics and to them we are indebted.

In the Caribbean, we also find a number of trail blazers.

Dame Eugenia Charles	Dominica	First Female to be elected Prime Minister in the Caribbean
Janet Jagen	Guyana	First Female Prime Minister and President
Pamela Gordon	Bermuda	First Female Premier
Dame Jennifer M. Smith	Bermuda	Second Female Premier
Paula Cox	Bermuda	Third Female and current Premier and Leader of the Progressive Labour Party
Portia Simpson-Miller	Jamaica	First Female and current Prime Minister and President of the Peoples National Party
Kamla Persad-Bissessar	Trinidad and Tobago	First Female and current Prime Leader of the United National Congress and leads the Peoples Partnership, a coalition of five political parties
Dame Louise Lake-Tack	Antigua and Barbuda	First Female Governor
Dr. Jacqui Quinn-Leandro	Antigua and Barbuda	President of the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM), 2006-2008, a specialized organ of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the oldest organization committed to addressing the rights of women, gender equality and equity. Now the Minister of Education, Youth, Sports and Gender Affairs)
Mia Mottley, QC	Barbados	Former Leader of the Barbados Labour Party, the First Female Leader of the Opposition and now a Member of Parliament
Dame Pearlette Louisy	St. Lucia	First Governor General

Women in politics has to do with the social standing of women, generally. Politics is about power and power is viewed as a man's preserve.

Jennifer M. Smith
Premier of Bermuda
Voice of Change

Finally I should mention Ethlyn Smith and Eileen Parsons who were the first elected female parliamentarians in the British Virgin Islands and Inez Archibald, first female Speaker of the House of

Assembly, among others, who have championed the cause for female representation in politics and on whose shoulders we now stand. We honour and respect their sacrifices for taking the stand to advance women in politics globally and regionally. To them, we are indebted and we say 'thank you.'

As we continue our stand politically, despite the many challenges, let us forge ahead as we represent women issues and lead in our respective positions for the advancement of our regional states. We must not be afraid to stand out, compete and to lead ethically because the next generation of women are watching and depending on us. Let us lead by example.