

## **“SEASONAL LABOR, GLOBAL VISIONS: JAMAICAN WOMEN AND THE U.S. HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY”**

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Early one morning in May of 2000, I received a phone call from Marva, a woman with whom I had been particularly close during my doctoral fieldwork in a rural hillside community just outside Kingston, Jamaica. She was calling from a pay phone somewhere in South Carolina while the Greyhound bus that was transporting her to Maine made a pit stop. Never having been to the United States before, she could barely contain the excitement in her first words:

“Deborah, me reach! Me get through!” She had arrived in Miami the night before to embark on a six-month sojourn as a hotel worker under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour’s Overseas Employment Programme. While government-assisted contract labor schemes have long existed as integral parts of Caribbean development initiatives, the Jamaican Hotel Workers Programme is representative of a more general shift within the global political economy whereby service industries have proliferated and female labor has become increasingly mobile.

In recent years, scholars and activists alike have critically reflected upon the impact of privatization policies and the resurgence of liberalism more generally, both within and between nations. Much of the focus has been upon the ways worldwide de-industrialization and the concomitant rise of the service and informal economic sectors, the phenomenal proliferation of information technologies, and – throughout the Third World – the implementation of structural adjustment policies have widened the gaps between rich and poor, developed and

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underdeveloped, north and south.<sup>1</sup> While shifts in the balance of power between state administrations and transnational capital during the past two decades have closed many of the traditional means by which citizenries have met their needs, it is also the case that new avenues of survival and expression have emerged. That is, while it is well known that current privatization drives and structural adjustment programs have had their greatest negative impact on women's lives since they repatriate the provision of social services to the home and therefore make the work of social reproduction more difficult,<sup>2</sup> recent reconfigurations of capitalism have also allowed some women to enter global markets in new, and sometimes lucrative, ways. As they have done so, they have sometimes challenged and sometimes reinforced gendered divisions of labor and ideologies surrounding class and status – at both the individual/family level and broader structural levels.<sup>3</sup>

This paper offers a preliminary exploration into some of these issues, using Jamaican women's participation in the Hotel Workers Programme as an ethnographic point of entry. It is based on research carried out during the summer of 2000, and interviews conducted in January 2001. As I continue with this project, I am delving more deeply into two dimensions of this story. On one hand, I focus on understanding Jamaican women's objectives for participating in the Programme and whether these objectives are being met; the ways their participation has both altered and maintained their roles within their families and their communities in Jamaica; and how their participation has helped to shape their goals for the future (as well as where they want this future to unfold). On the other hand, I examine the ways Jamaican women's pursuit of this migratory niche has transformed labor markets and race relations within the U.S. communities where they work, and the kinds of responses this has engendered from local civic and

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commercial bodies. Today, drawing from the experiences of women I interviewed, I will focus on the former set of concerns.

### **The Hotel Workers Programme**

The Jamaican Hotel Workers Programme (now called the U.S. Hospitality Programme) was initiated by the Ministry of Labour in 1989, but it did not “take off” until about 1997, when new emphasis was placed on it at the same time that the Farm Workers Programme was being scaled back.<sup>4</sup> Where forty-six U.S. employers had tapped into the Programme in 1998, by the year 2000, that number had increased to 140. These employers are geographically dispersed, representing twenty-two states from Arizona to Alabama, California to the Carolinas, the Midwest, New England, and the mid-Atlantic regions. They are equally diverse in the scale of their operations – from small New England bed and breakfasts to luxury hotels in the Rocky Mountains. The number of Jamaicans working in these hotels increased tenfold from two hundred and thirty in 1994 to almost 2,500 in 1999, with women comprising seventy percent of that total.<sup>5</sup> During 1999, in fact, the Hotel Workers Programme was the only one of the Overseas Employment Programmes to have recorded an increase in employment (Ministry of Labor and Social Security 1999:40). By the year 2000, Jamaican women’s participation had almost doubled again. Since then, though there have been small increases in the total number of workers participating in the Programme – approximately 4,500 traveled in 2002 – the percentage of women has declined to constitute approximately 60% of all hospitality workers.

Remittances from the Ministry’s Overseas Employment Programmes contribute significantly to the Jamaican economy. During 1999, for example, the approximately 4,500 farm workers in the United States contributed US\$ 4.2 million, while the approximately 2,500 hotel workers contributed nearly the same amount. In other words, women hotel workers, who

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comprised about 34% of all Jamaican workers employed in the United States in 1999, accounted for almost 50% of the total remittances from all overseas workers. Moreover, while both the U.S. Farm and Hotel Workers Programmes recorded increases in remittances compared to 1998, farm workers' contributions increased by 6.6% while those of hotel workers increased by 76.1% (Ministry of Labour 1999:41). By 2002, approximately 4,500 U.S. hospitality workers were sending back US\$7.5 million, while 3,500 farm workers (all men) sent only US\$3.8 million. The percentage of women's contributions to the total remitted by farm and hospitality workers had dropped to about 36% though they constituted 51% of total workers in the United States (Ministry of Labor and Social Security 2002:30, 35).<sup>6</sup>

According to the former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Labour, Anthony Irons, the impetus for developing the Hotel Workers Programme came from the U.S.-based employers. Hotel managers who are interested in employing Jamaican women must first gain clearance from the U.S. Departments of Labor and Immigration by arguing that they cannot find American workers for the jobs. They then contact the Ministry, which places advertisements in the *Gleaner*, one of Jamaica's daily newspapers. Potential workers are screened for previous experience in the hotel industry, as well as for police records. Representatives either of the U.S. employers or the Labor Department then interview the job candidates, accepting about half of all who apply. Those women chosen are then given a medical test free of charge, and their passports are processed for H-2B visas by the Ministry. They are then advised of their departure date and destination, often only days before they are scheduled to leave Jamaica. On the departure day, the women report to the Ministry, are again given a urine test to ensure that they are not pregnant, and are driven to the airport and cleared through immigration. Before they get on the plane, their passports are returned, at which point they find out how long their contracts

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last (most last from six to nine months). When they arrive in Miami, the women are then shuttled onto buses to be transported to their destinations. In some cases, their employers hold their passports until their date of return to Jamaica.

Wages and housing arrangements vary from employer to employer, and the Ministry's liaison officers in the United States are charged with monitoring housing and working conditions (acceptable standards are defined by the U.S. Department of Labor in conjunction with the liaison officers). The Ministry provides Workmen's Compensation insurance, and the workers also contribute to a health plan (arranged through the U.S. Department of Labor) out of their wages. In addition, twenty percent of the women's wages are automatically repatriated to Jamaica. According to the women I interviewed, four percent of this amount goes directly to the Ministry and sixteen percent into their individual savings accounts. Finally, tax forms are filed in the United States for the workers, which they sign the subsequent year as they return on another contract. About ninety percent of the women participating in the Programme do become repeat workers at the request of the employer.<sup>7</sup> The women I interviewed were all requested back, and knew they'd be returning to work by the time of their departure.

**“We do it fi wi children”**

Like most West Indians, all of the women I interviewed had been involved in a variety of income-generating activities prior to their participation in the Programme, including experience working in the hospitality industry in Jamaica. In recent years, however, all of them had been unable to find consistent work. They attributed this to a general downturn in Jamaica's economy, and to their impression that younger people – they were all in their mid-thirties – were more employable. “At our age,” one woman said, “you don't get jobs quickly here you know,

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that's why we had to run up there." Not surprisingly, the women's main reason for participating in the Programme was to economically benefit their families, and especially their children.<sup>8</sup>

One of the women I interviewed worked in the kitchen of a 700-room luxury hotel in Colorado. She supplemented her hourly rate of US\$6.50 with overtime at \$10/hour whenever she could get the extra work. Despite the US\$90 taken out of her check for rent every fortnight, in nine months she was able to accumulate approximately US\$4000. This savings was in excess of the money she spent on household, personal, and food items that she sent in barrels to her mother in Jamaica. She, unlike other women I talked to, didn't send goods to her daughter because she was already living in Baltimore with her father. She also expects to receive about US\$800-1000 in tax returns. With the money she saved, she plans to double the size of her house in Jamaica in order that her daughter has a more comfortable place to which to return.

Marva, who worked as a housekeeper in Maine, earned an hourly rate of US\$7.00. She too tried to get as much overtime at \$10/hour as she could, but because the hotel where she was placed did not have a restaurant, the opportunities for doing so were fewer. Furthermore, like all the hotel workers, she was forbidden from picking up extra work with another employer. Nevertheless, in six months she was able to send home about US\$2000 in cash and another estimated US\$1000 in goods. Part of this money went to cover her children's school fees as well as their books and clothes for the year. The remainder was earmarked for contributing to the purchase of land on which she and her children's father can build a house for themselves so they can move out of the small two rooms they all share in his family's house on their family land. This is something they had been trying to do for almost a decade, but her children's father's mechanic trade had not generated sufficient means to facilitate this objective.

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The issue of fathers' and/or partners' inability to realize economic goals was further explicated by another woman whose children's father drove a taxi. She contended that while men, like women, aspire to provide for their families, they are less likely to try a variety of routes toward this end simultaneously. Women, on the other hand, will attempt to get work for which they were trained in addition to engaging in supplementary activities. "Men will just go part of the way," she said, "but women will gwaan and gwaan until dem achieve certain tings. Men nuh really have that patience fi do it, but me put mi hand ina everyting." This woman also argued that while men will talk about their goals and plans mainly with their peers, women's social networks encompass both men and women and cross class lines, and so they are more likely to find out about opportunities that might facilitate their goals.<sup>9</sup>

**"Woman a put dem foot forward now"**

Despite the fact that these women's participation in the Hotel Workers Programme has augmented their economic roles within their families, those with male partners have not necessarily come to see themselves as the primary breadwinners in their households. For example, though Marva's increased income is what will ultimately enable her family to move forward with their plan of buying land and building a house, she positioned her earnings as "contribution."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, she maintained that for many women, the increased economic autonomy afforded by their work in the United States made them stronger, both in the sense that they were able to see "wha dem want outta life," and in relation to their partners. Here, she offered the somewhat standard argument that if women were financially dependent on their partners, they had less room to assert their own opinions and to pursue their own goals.

Marva also felt that men's expectations had changed in that they were more inclined to want their partners to contribute substantially to the household's income:

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Now a modern times, and most men who really waan fi get ahead ina life nuh really waan nobody who nah do nuttin. If the two a you a work, you can go farer, so I think dem more respect you when you go up there and work more than when time you siddung and nah do nuttin. Woman a put dem foot forward now. A nuh like the olden days, we nuh really under that suppression again.

Another woman made the related assertion that by working in the United States, they garnered more respect from their partners than when they were working in Jamaica. She linked the increased value placed upon their labor as migrants to the greater purchasing power of the U.S. dollar.

Despite the financial benefits derived from their participation in the Programme, those women who lived with their partners sometimes also worried that their increased economic autonomy – in conjunction with their extended absences from home – might threaten the integrity of their households. While conventional patterns of child fostering ensured that children would be cared for while their mothers were abroad, the emotional effects of parental migration are as yet largely undocumented. One woman noted that her youngest daughter had a difficult time with her being away. “She did hardly eat,” she said, “but hopefully in time to come, she will see that whatever you did, you did it for her.” Another woman mentioned that because men often felt that women couldn’t go without a man for such an extended period, they would worry that their partners might leave them. In Marva’s case, on the other hand, marriage to her children’s father – her partner of seventeen years – became both a possible and desired option where this had not been the case prior to her participation in the Programme.

**Conclusion: “In Jamaica, it’s just the financial part that’s the problem, you know”**

Despite the women’s complaints regarding various aspects of their experiences as hotel workers – complaints that for the most part were framed in terms of the idiosyncrasies of their individual employers rather than in relation to the more general systemic inequalities of the

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global division of labor – they assessed their first year as contracted migrant laborers positively. Not only did participating in the Programme afford them the kind of work experience to confidently state, as one woman did, “Me tink me coulda hangle a job like that anywhere now,” it also broadened their vision of life’s possibilities. While one woman was able to move her children to a better high school in Jamaica, another began to hope that hers might ultimately attend universities in the United States. Furthermore, they also began to see new potential for their own self-actualization. Marva, for example, started to explore the possibility of opening a Jamaican restaurant in Maine during the months she would be working at the hotel.

It remains to be seen what impact these women’s participation in the Programme will have on their families, and on their communities, in the long run. One of the trends that seems emergent is that while two of the women interviewed had been very active in community development projects in Jamaica prior to their participation, they no longer extended their time or resources beyond their individual families when they returned. Additionally, while some women seemed to pursue U.S. hospitality work as one among several strategies for permanent migration, others asserted that they were not interested in staying in the United States. Instead, they saw their participation as a means to achieve their ends in Jamaica. As one woman put it, “In Jamaica, it’s just the financial part that’s the problem. The work situation and everyting bruk down out here man. You know how much people siddung pon road who have how much subjects and nuttin fi do?” On the whole, the women I interviewed felt that since they were unable to get work that remunerated them adequately in Jamaica, their only option was to take advantage of their possibilities as migrant laborers in the United States. Furthermore, since their contracts lasted for six to nine months, they were either unable to, or were disinterested in, finding work locally for the months they were home. The resulting view was that the United

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States was the place to make a living while Jamaica was the place to make life. “That’s the only way it’s worthwhile you know,” Marva said. “You work it up there and you come out here and you spend it. The dollar strong.”

The ideologies the women I interviewed had developed were consistent with a more general (and long-standing) trend of viewing migration as a strategy toward economic development, and of understanding the ability to migrate as one among other social resources, like education and land ownership. They also demonstrate the ways patterns of migration, like other social resources, are gendered. Within the community where I conducted my doctoral research, for example, both men and women sought to “better themselves” and their families through migration, but they tended to do so in different ways. First, because women from the community who stayed through their early thirties were more likely to be primary caretakers of children than their male counterparts, they tended to look for opportunities to migrate for short and structured periods of time rather than indefinitely. In most cases, these women’s children were already at least old enough to attend secondary school, and so were more enmeshed in local educational and family networks that facilitated short periods of absence. Men, on the other hand, generally had a more limited educational background, but a greater array of possibilities as migrants due to the kinds of labor-intensive industries in the United States that tend to hire undocumented workers at relatively high wages.

These local trends draw attention to the persistent development issues confronting small states in an era of intensified neo-liberal capitalist globalization. They also draw our attention to the ways contemporary global political and economic processes – and peoples’ experiences of these processes – generate both continuities and innovations. Ultimately, this kind of research also must address the critical role of states in structuring the movement of their citizens during a

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period that has been characterized as increasingly territorially “unbounded.” Here, we are forced to confront questions not only about the power of the state in an era of globalization, but also about the relative power of different states within newly (re-)configured global hierarchies – of labor, of gender, of race. What are the kinds of regulations and restrictions placed upon mobility? What are the kinds of policies that privilege certain kinds of mobility over others? Within this context, how do we achieve a fuller understanding of people’s motives and actions? And how can we best support people’s efforts to reach individual goals, provide for families, and build communities? What might this all mean for changing assertions of, and mobilization around, racial, class, gender, generational, and national identities? These are questions that not only animate this particular research project, but also undergird the strategies of working-class Jamaican women.

By analyzing the issues evoked by the Hotel Workers Programme relationally – that is, by attempting to understand a new form of labor migration from various articulating viewpoints (the women who participate, their employers, their family members and communities in Jamaica, workers and other entrepreneurs in their adopted communities in the United States) – we engage an approach that is at the heart of the anthropological method. In doing so, we are not only able to get a more complex picture of the structural dimensions that shape (and are shaped by) these women’s experiences, but are also privy to the nuances within interactions that might engender the success or failure of particular policy responses or advocacy campaigns.

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**NOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> Though many scholars have provided insights into the various transformations in the global political economy since the 1970s, my own understanding is based primarily on the work of the following scholars: Appadurai 1990, 1996; Jean and John L. Comaroff 2001; Friedman 1993, 1994; Ferguson 1999; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Hall 1997[1991]; Harvey 1989; Petras 1990; Sassen 1994, 1998; and Trouillot 2001. The literature on the new gendered international division of labor is vast (see, for example, Bolles 1996; Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Mies 1982, 1986; Ong 1987; Safa 1981, 1995; Ward 1990). These scholars have shed light on the processes by which the exploitation of young Third World women workers within off-shore multinational capitalist production both articulates with local gender ideologies (but see Freeman 1998 for a different context), and generated the opportunity for women to organize as woman and as workers (see Enloe 1990 and Mohanty 1997 for analyses of women's activist strategies). A literature has also developed on women's migrant labor as domestics (see especially Aymer 1997; Colen 1989; Colen and Sanjek 1990; Parreñas 2001), often focusing on the ways ethnicized, racialized, and nationalized labor has enabled the upward career mobility of white American (and European) women, thereby solidifying hierarchies between women. Scholars have also demonstrated the ways in which migration, especially to the United States, has reproduced, transformed, and generated new gender ideologies and practices among immigrant women (see, for example, Garcia Castro 1985; Geroges 1992; Lamphere 1987; Pessar 1996; Soto 1992[1987]; Wiltshire 1992). Several scholars have also focused on the cultural dimensions accompanying recent global economic shifts, but analysis of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper (but see, for the Jamaican context, Meeks 1996; Robotham 1998; Scott 1999; Thomas 2000; Ulysse 1999). The context for this project draws upon, but is somewhat different from, work done on the incorporation of female labor into an international work force dominated by multi-national corporations. In the West Indies, there is a long history of women migrating for work, one that begins in the 1920s but has escalated after the 1960s. Furthermore, the primary motor for post-1960s economic development in Jamaica has been neither agriculture nor manufacturing, but tourism and the service industries. This project, therefore, adds another dimension to our understanding of the various ways women have participated in economic activity worldwide, as well as how this participation articulates with local gender ideologies and practices.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Sen and Grown 1987; Harrison 1991, 1997; and Deere, Antrobus, and Bolles et. al. 1990.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Freeman 2000.

<sup>4</sup> According to an article in the *Daily Observer*, the de-emphasis on the farm work program, under which Jamaican male laborers have been recruited from predominantly rural areas to reap orchard crops and other agricultural produce in the United States and Canada, has been due to the growing use of machines in the reaping process, as well as the growing problem of illegal entry into these countries by persons "running off" (January 17, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> This is in contrast to the Farm or Factory Work Programmes, in which males accounted for 85.3% of those employed overseas.

<sup>6</sup> I have not, as yet, been able to ascertain the reasons for these changes, though as the research for this project continues, it is one of the areas I will continue to investigate.

<sup>7</sup> Rumors circulated among the women regarding the possibility that several return visits would lead to a better chance of receiving a ten-year multiple-entry visa, but representatives from the Ministry of Labour argued that this was not the case.

<sup>8</sup> This echoes Patricia Mohammed's (1999) recent findings regarding Caribbean women's decision-making processes in Barbados, St. Lucia, and Dominica, though her team also noted that women are currently considering their own self-actualization as factors in their decisions more often than did previous generations.

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<sup>9</sup> Diana Wells' research on the women's movement in Trinidad also supports this point with respect to women's success (relative to men) at mobilizing across class and ethnic lines (2000).

<sup>10</sup> This is similar to what Patricia Pessar found with Dominican Women in the United States (1996). In that context, though there was a change in migrants' practices with respect to women generating substantially more income for their families, this change did not necessarily lead to a fundamental change in gender ideologies regarding who the primary breadwinner should be. Of course, the West Indian context differs in many respects, due to the different historical positioning of women's economic activities. Marva's insistence that her earnings were "contributions," however, may have had as much to do with her latent distrust of her partner's level of dedication to her and their children as it did to gender ideologies regarding work and money. She maintained that once she saw him initiating the process of buying land, she would "chip in."