

MIDDLE-CLASS ENTREPRENEURS IN BARBADOS ARE FOCUS OF STUDY

In the Caribbean, the traditional path to a middle-class lifestyle was to get a good education and pursue a job in civil service or the professions. The top scholars went to Oxbridge, got their degrees, and returned to become statesmen and professionals. Becoming an entrepreneur was an option primarily for the white elite and a few “free coloureds” and was generally believed to be reserved for those not smart enough to reap the rewards of a good education.

However, many individuals have been inspired by Bill Gates and other successful business leaders, such that things are changing in the global economy. There is now “a tremendously passionate energy surrounding new entrepreneurs,” according to Carla Freeman, an anthropologist and a new MARIAL faculty fellow.

Freeman is studying middle-class entrepreneurs in Barbados, where she lived and did fieldwork for several years. In that time, she interviewed 115 men and women who have gone into business for themselves. Her research aims to “advance a conceptualization of class that takes the middle seriously.” She also hopes to compare and contrast family life in Barbados with family life in America.



“I think there are resonances in the way in which middle classes are taking shape in many countries, developing and otherwise,” said Freeman, whose MARIAL research is titled “Respectability and the Making of an Entrepreneurial Middle Class.” She noted that people in the Caribbean “are tapped into all the same popular culture and media that we are, and they are not unaffected by the portrayal of family life in popular sitcoms and movies.”

Freeman’s research is part of a larger collaborative project she is doing with two other

anthropologists: Kate Brown, who is working in Martinique; and Moira Perez, who is working in Puerto Rico. Together, they are studying gender and entrepreneurship in the Caribbean. “It’s one of very few comparative studies that looks across the Caribbean region, across the linguistic and historical divides of the Francophone, Hispanic, and Anglophone territories,” Freeman said.

Each country has a unique history and labor system. Martinique is part of France; Puerto Rico is tied to the United States; and Barbados is an independent, parliamentary democracy formerly colonized by the British. “So these are three very different systems and three very different histories that have given rise to different patterns of labor along gender lines,” said Freeman, whose recent publications include a book, *High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy: Women, Work, and Pink Collar Identities in the Caribbean*, and several articles on gender, globalization, labor, and identity in the Caribbean.

“I will examine the work and family lives of middle-class entrepreneurs in Barbados and explore the changing divisions of labor, ideologies of gender, and articulations of class as manifested in conceptualizations of work, professionalism, consumption, and religious practice,” said Freeman. In Barbados, women always have been workers and mothers, and “the two have never been seen to be at odds with each other,” the way they might be in Asia or Latin America, Freeman said.

Forty-six percent of households in Barbados are headed by women. “That’s dramatic,” Freeman said. Among the entrepreneurs she interviewed, the majority were married. “I’m discovering that people are attempting to enact those marriages in a new way . . . [through] what they call in business language a ‘partnership,’ ” she said. “I’m trying to unearth how those marital partnerships are actually experienced and how long-standing ideologies about middle-class respectability relate to these lived realities.”

What she has learned so far about working families in Barbados is that having a nanny, or hired help, at home is critical to success. “If it works at all, many of the women will tell me, it works because they have this nanny housekeeper at home and she’s cooking the meals, cleaning the house, and caring for the really small children,” Freeman said. “It’s almost like the woman has this new and hidden partner.”

Flexibility is another key concept for female entrepreneurs. Almost all the women Freeman interviewed said “flexibility to rear their

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children” was the reason they chose to leave stable, high-paying jobs and start their own business. To get a sense of contrast, Freeman also interviewed women who have professional careers within the private sector and the civil service. Businesswomen might be working more hours—eighty rather than forty per week. However, they prefer this, because they see themselves as setting the rhythm: they choose which hours to work and which ones to spend with their children.

Freeman is an associate professor of women’s studies and anthropology, and is currently a senior fellow at Emory’s Center for Humanistic Inquiry. She is an associated faculty member of Latin American and Caribbean Studies at Emory. Freeman hopes that her work in the Caribbean will help Americans better understand their own work, culture, and family life.

She expects that her research will show that “some of the patterns of the work/family struggle we are witnessing are shared across culturally distinctive places in the world and also that the meanings of work and what it is to be “middle class” must be understood within particular historical and cultural contexts.”