

5-18-2008

Immigration and Women's Empowerment: Indo-Caribbeans in New York City

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***Immigration and Women's Empowerment:
Indo-Caribbeans in New York City***

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Immigration and Women's Empowerment: Indo-Caribbeans in New York City

As thesis advisor for _____Farah Persaud_____,

I have read this paper and find it satisfactory.

Aseel Sawalha, PhD (*Thesis Advisor*)

Date

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Precís

Research Question

How do Indo-Caribbean women perceive their socio-economic statuses since migrating to New York City?

Context of the Problem

Since the signing of the U.S. Immigration Act of 1965, there has been a massive influx of West Indian immigrants in New York City. Today, the West Indian subpopulation has grown to be among the largest minority groups in New York City. With such a strong ethnic presence, sociologists such as Nancy Foner, Philip Kasinitz, and Mary C. Waters have documented various aspects of the West Indian immigrant experience, such as degree of assimilation, ethnic and racial identities, and transnational relations. However, most of these studies focus on the Afro-Caribbean migrant experience and overlook the experiences of the many West Indians that are not of African descent. In actuality, the West Indies is a diverse region inhabited by peoples of various races. In fact, Indians make up a significant portion of the West Indian population, both in the Caribbean and in New York City. This paper aims to examine the Indo-Caribbean migration experience, exploring the distinct issues that affect this minority group. The study specifically targets Indo-Caribbean women, and highlights the ways immigration to New York City has affected their socio-economic statuses and social networks.

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Methods and Procedures

In this paper, I analyze data gathered through open-ended interviews and published academic work. I spoke to four first-generation, Indo-Caribbean women living in Richmond Hill, Queens, New York for about 2-3 hours each. Because I met my interlocutors at their respective homes, the interviews took the form of informal conversations rather than question-and-answer—I wanted the women to feel comfortable speaking freely about their migration experiences. I asked the women to begin by describing their childhood experiences in their home countries, and then the conversations continued from there. As the women spoke, they began feeling gradually more relaxed, and were able to share stories and insightful reflections of their life journeys.

Findings

- All four of the interviewees left the West Indies for economic reasons, mainly to provide more educational opportunities and a higher standard of living to their children.
- Home ownership is a priority to the women, and they all reside in their own privately owned homes.
- Upon their arrival to New York City, the four women all experienced initial downward mobility in regards to employment, but since then have worked their way up to more prestigious positions.

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- The women have a new role as significant wage earners, as their contributions to the household income are required in New York City.
- Their role as wage earners has been accompanied by greater spatial mobility; that is, increased freedom to travel to new places and interact with different people.
- Education is more accessible to the women in New York City, and some have obtained college degrees or specialized certifications.
- The women experienced a shift towards greater equality in gender roles within the home and now have an input in their families' financial decisions, although some families still take a traditional stance on household and child-rearing duties.

Further Study

This study only scratches the surface when it comes to Indo-Caribbean immigrants in America. There are relatively few studies on Indo-Caribbean immigrants in general, much less on those in the United States. There are many issues open to examination, including transnational connections, employment networks, racial identity, and inter-racial relations. There is also a need for hard statistical data on this group in regards to employment, poverty, crime, literacy, alcoholism, and drug abuse.

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Brief History of the West Indies

Before examining how the Indo-Caribbean migratory experience differs from that of Afro-Caribbeans, it is important first to understand Caribbean culture itself. In his study of Caribbean migration to Canada, Dwaine Plaza refers to culture in the West Indies as a "Creolized" socialization where African, European, and Indian cultures commingled (Plaza, 2003). In other words, West Indian culture is a multi-layered fusion of several diverse cultures.

The terms "Caribbean" and "West Indies" are interchangeable, since the countries that make up the West Indies are all located in or around the Caribbean Sea. In this paper, the focus is primarily on the British West Indies, or the English-speaking Caribbean. These countries include Anguilla, Antigua, part of Aruba, Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, the Grenadines, Guyana, Jamaica, Montserrat, part of the Netherlands Antilles, Nevis, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Trinidad and Tobago, and many smaller islands (Gopaul-McNicol, 1993).

The first inhabitants of the West Indies were native tribes from South America called the Arawaks and the Caribs. As their populations grew they spread upward into the Caribbean islands. In 1492, Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus landed on an island in the Bahamas and on that voyage "discovered" the islands now known as Cuba and Haiti; on subsequent voyages, he "discovered" more islands in the Caribbean. Believing that he had reached India, Columbus dubbed the natives "Indians." The natives were

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enslaved and forced to work in gold mines in search of treasures for the Spaniards to carry back to Europe. However, the harsh labor conditions and the diseases passed on from the Europeans caused the indigenous peoples to quickly die off. This led to the inception of the African slave trade-- as well as the arrival of the British, soon followed by the Dutch and the French-- in the West Indies (Gopaul-McNicol, 1993).

Africans were first brought to the West Indies as slaves in 1502 (Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc., 1997). The procedure was triangular, starting with the journey from England to Africa, and then to the West Indies. African slave trade became very profitable as the slaves enabled the harvesting of products such as cotton, coffee, and sugar. Slavery continued for the next 400 years, and the West Indian colonies developed into "the hub of the British Empire, of immense importance to the grandeur and prosperity of England" (Gopaul-McNicol, 2003; Williams, 1963).

To the dismay of the colonizers, slavery was abolished in the British West Indies in 1840 due to a bill passed by British Parliament, and they were faced with the crucial dilemma of finding new plantation laborers (Gopaul-McNicol, 2003). Workers were brought in from China and from Madeira and the Azores in Portugal; however, they were unable to salvage the sugar industry that was close to collapsing (Gosine, 1990; Seenarine, 1995). The British East India Company, stationed in India, provided the solution: indentured laborers from India. British colonists in India described the Indian "Hill Coolies" as "more akin to

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the monkey than the man. They have no religion, no education, and, in their present state, no wants, beyond eating, drinking and sleeping; and to procure which, they are willing to labour." Almost immediately, laborers were brought in from India under the pretense that they would be doing gardening work; they were contracted to work for five years with monthly pay rates of three to seven rupees (Scoble, 1840). Women were not excluded— one third of the coolies recruited were expected to be women, and often ships were held up if quotas were not reached (Indian Arrival in the Caribbean, 2003). When inhumane treatment of the Indians was exposed in Calcutta newspapers, Indians were understandably reluctant to board the ships to the New World, and in many cases had to be forced onboard (Bisnath, Indian Indentured Immigration to Trinidad Part 1: Origin of The Coolie Slave Trade, 2007). Nevertheless, Indian laborers continued to arrive in the West Indies until indentured servitude was outlawed in 1917. Although they were allowed to return to India, thousands of Indians chose to stay in the West Indies due to bonds they had formed with other servants in their social circles (Encarta®, 2007; Bisnath, Indentured Indian Immigration to the Caribbean, Part 3 of 3: Life on the Plantation, and Beyond, 2007).

The indentured work that Indians carried out in the New World shared many similarities with the slave work Africans executed. Plantation owners considered the Indians the same as slaves: "As long as the coolie is working for

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you, you have the right to do what you like with him - that is, short of killing." Their daily lives were not much different either:

Plantation life was dehumanizing - long hours of toil with little pay, poor diet, rampant diseases, insults and beatings, intolerable drudgery and loneliness, with almost 60% of the men lacking female companionship. Death from malaria, dysentery, typhoid, tuberculosis and other diseases took their daily toll. The estate workers were woken at 4.30am, they toiled in the torrid sun from dusk till dawn, far beyond their capacity (Bisnath, *Indentured Indian Immigration to the Caribbean*, Part 3 of 3: *Life on the Plantation and Beyond*, 2007).

The social situation that Indians met when they arrived to the Caribbean was essentially a three-tiered hierarchy based on race. At the top of the hierarchy were whites; blacks were on the bottom, and those of mixed race were in the middle. Indians were placed on the bottom tier with blacks because they were seen as uncivilized and unprincipled. The situation was not good for Africans in the West Indies either; slavery was abolished, but the plantation and land owners still maintained control of the government and enforced class oppression (Plaza, 2003; Gopaul-McNicol, 2003).

However, the overall experiences of Africans and Indians in the Caribbean were not entirely the same. As Plaza points out, in the mid 1800's Africans and Indians "lived in nearly separate worlds." Graphically, Africans had begun moving away from rural areas and into urban locations while Indians were engaged in agricultural occupations. The distance between the two groups allowed plantation owners to foster certain stereotypes in the minds of the Africans and Indians. Africans were depicted as physically strong but lazy,

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irresponsible, and poor workers. Indians were seen as hard-working but heathenistic, stingy, and disposed to domestic violence. These stereotypes were encouraged by the plantation owners as a strategy for controlling the labor force and preventing them from uniting against the government. For the most part, both groups accepted the stereotypes about themselves as well as their counterparts, and traces of those stereotypes still exist between the groups today (Plaza, 2003; Stewart, 2000).

Migration to New York City

The search for a better life has taken West Indians all over the world, although the most popular destinations for West Indian immigrants are New York City, Toronto, and London. In 1965, immigration laws were loosened in the United States, and since then high volumes of West Indians have immigrated to New York. Most who come to the United States decide to live in New York City because it is usually the main point of entry. New York City is also appealing because it contains lively West Indian neighborhoods; in these neighborhoods, many immigrants reconnect with family and friends that have migrated before them. Furthermore, New York City is a symbol of North American influence and power. No other city in the country has as large a percentage of West Indians—about 34% of all immigrants in New York come from the West Indies. By 1998, West Indian immigrants made up about eight percent of the city's total population, making them the largest immigrant group in the city. Over two

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million people of West Indian descent live in the state, and most of them reside in Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, and the Bronx (Buff, 2001; Foner, 2001; Brenner, 1993).

It is important to note that the majority of Afro-Caribbeans in New York have settled in the Flatbush, East Flatbush, and Crown Heights sections of Brooklyn, and the majority of Indo-Caribbeans have settled in the Richmond Hill area of Queens, which is where the research of this paper is based (LaBennett, 2003; Gosine, 1990).

In Velta Clarke's article, "West Indians in New York: A Study of Their Social Mobility," Clarke found that like most other ethnic groups, West Indians have been motivated by "survival and more sophisticated forces" to migrate. All four of the women interviewed cited that their main reason for moving to the United States was to provide better opportunities for their families. Scarce resources, overpopulation, high rates of unemployment and underemployment, and limited opportunities for advancement are just a few of the conditions that have impelled West Indians to migrate. Indo-Caribbeans from Guyana and Trinidad were particularly swayed by political repression, discrimination, and slumping economies. Leela stated that she has always thought of America as "the Land of Opportunity," and Janet said that she feels "fortunate" to have been in America when she became seriously ill because, "it's better here medically... back home they would have never been able to help me." They saw opportunities for economic security, better job placement, improved living

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standards and ways to get ahead all in America (Chhaya CDC, 2001; Foner, 2001).

For Caribbean immigrants, migration meant making a fresh start. Many immigrants with possessions in their home countries made a commitment to give up everything, including their wealth, friends, and culture. Unemployed immigrants saw the opportunity as a way to escape from a position of powerlessness. Leela recalls leaving Guyana at the age of twenty, determined to provide a better life for herself and her two small children after a difficult divorce:

I had to support myself and my two children, but it was hard to find jobs... I mean, I did look for jobs at stores, anywhere. I could have gone insane from all the stress and worry... I heard good things about the U.S. from newspapers about schools and colleges in New York. I decided to leave because I wanted to provide a better future for myself and for my kids.

Julie and her husband were also determined to provide better opportunities for their kids— so much so that they decided to come to New York illegally, instead of waiting for their immigration paperwork to be fully processed. Their venture was particularly dicey because they only knew of a few distant relatives in New York who they would be able to reach out to for help.

Overall, the decision to come to New York was a big risk for West Indian immigrants. Success in America depended on the policies of the United States, and the U.S. economy determined the immigrants' possibilities of employment (Clarke, 2002).

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Living Arrangements and Family Structure

Typical Afro-Caribbean family structure prior to migration was very different from that of Indo-Caribbeans. In the mid 1900's, the typical Afro-Caribbean family in the West Indies was headed by a female (usually a mother or grandmother), although there may have been a male partner living in the home as well. The female head and her male partner may or may not have been legally married. Millette notes that for Afro-Caribbeans, "the main function of the family is reproduction," as opposed to modern American marriages where couples are expected to "fulfill new functions of friendship and emotional support" (Millette, 1990). In cases where the head of the household was male, he may have been the father of only some of the children. Afro-Caribbean households were characterized as being matrifocal with high illegitimacy rates and frequent casual mating; this was accounted for by social scientists as being due to the social and economic circumstances of slavery, which had hindered them from developing nuclear families (Millette, 1990; Plaza, 2003).

Unlike Afro-Caribbeans, marriage rates tended to be higher for Indo-Caribbeans due to "more conservative beliefs about sexual activity and greater conformity to traditional patterns of marital norms and the sexual division of labor" (Roopnarine, 2002). Indo-Caribbean families had reduced from a traditional patrilocal extended family (the ideal structure in India) to a smaller, nuclear family; this was because it was difficult to maintain extended family ties through their relocation to the Caribbean. The head of the typical Indo-

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Caribbean household was male, and women and children were expected to be subservient (Plaza, 2003; Roopnarine, 2002).

Meager data on post-immigration Caribbean family structure show that marriage rates among Indo-Caribbeans remain high. My research supports this claim; all of the women I interviewed currently live with their nuclear families, although they all reported living with friends or relatives upon their immediate arrival to the country. (They moved into their own residences once they had established themselves and were able to afford it.) The women conveyed disapproving views of premarital co-inhabitation, premarital intercourse, and extramarital affairs. Janet said that these behaviors are simply "not acceptable," and that she would never approve of her children adapting such practices. For Janet, it is a matter of morals: "I hope I have taught my kids enough that they would know better. There is a right time and place for everything." Leela said that she could see why so many Americans would choose to live together before marriage ("they might want to share expenses because of high cost of living, or they want to realize how compatible they are before marriage"), but she feels that marriages last longer when done "the traditional way." She adds that, particularly for girls, such lifestyles can degrade reputations in the Indo-Caribbean community: "People lose respect for you when you do things out of wedlock... It just does not send the right message. Some families would even treat their daughters as outcasts for these things." These comments indicate that social stigmas are still attached to these

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practices in the West Indian-American community as they are for Indians in the Caribbean.

Home Ownership in New York City

Home ownership is an important element of Indo-Caribbean culture, and all four women in this study expressed it as a priority for their families. However, studies on West Indian immigrants in Canada and London show that Afro-Caribbeans have a much lower preference for home ownership and a higher tendency to rent property when compared to Indo-Caribbeans. In Canada, 68 percent of Indo-Caribbeans were likely to be living in a home they owned, as compared to 39 percent of Afro-Caribbeans. Similar results were found in Britain. The difference in Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean feelings toward home ownership may be attributed to Afro-Caribbeans' future desire to return to the West Indies; many Afro-Caribbeans see America as a temporary home, while most Indo-Caribbeans view their migration to America as a permanent move (Plaza, 2003).

When asked for her take on the "American Dream," Leela listed owning a home as one of her foremost aspirations. For Leela, home ownership even took precedence over owning a car:

I think the American Dream is to own a home and a car and be able to support yourself. I think I have the American Dream. I don't have a car yet, but soon, hopefully, I will help my daughter to buy one. I am a working class woman and I thank God for blessing me with a home.

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Julie expressed owning a home as a main priority for her family as well:

We had to pay the mortgage, my college tuition, and take care of two kids. I don't know how we did it. But somehow we managed to pay our bills. But we always made sure to pay our mortgage first. Even if it meant that we had to spend less on food and clothes and whatever, we always made sure to get the house payments out of the way.

Home ownership gives Indo-Caribbeans a sense of independence, and allows for stability and growth in their new country. Owning property gives them a solid foundation to start becoming upwardly mobile, and is often the first step they take in assimilating into American society. Furthermore, many Indo-Caribbean immigrants had homes of their own prior to migration and think of renting property as a negative change that will cause others to view them as downwardly mobile. In cases where Indo-Caribbeans cannot buy the types of houses they want, they buy the ones they can afford and scrupulously work to repair and upgrade them:

After a long day's work, which often involves manual labor, the typical (Caribbean) East Indian will return home to spend the waning hours of the evening making certain needed repairs and fixing up his home to the liking of his family. In fact, in the remodeling process, the East Indian exercises great care and patience. When the prolonged task of making the necessary repairs is finally over, there tends to be a total transformation to the building (Gosine, 1990).

In their endeavors to remodel their homes, many Indo-Caribbeans often have to refinance their mortgages (as Leela did) or take out home equity loans (as in Annette's case) in order to be able to afford the renovations. The reward for their efforts is two-fold: they gain a sense of self-sufficiency, and they gain commendation from their friends and family for "being successful and upwardly

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mobile in America" (Gosine, 1990). In addition, the women I interviewed felt that owning a home was a necessary step in the pursuit of a better life for their children. Annette stated that she wanted her children to have "a nice house to grow up in. It's important to have a welcoming home and a loving family life for the kids."

The Feminization of Migration

It is not surprising that many West Indian immigrant women are nurses and domestic workers. In 1965, the Immigration and Nationality Act was passed, which modified immigration policies so that they were no longer based on nationality and race. The new requirements allowed for the entry of relatives and dependents of United States residents; selectivity was also based on occupation and skills. Furthermore, each country was allotted its own immigrant quota. Although some West Indians were able to migrate to America prior to 1965, the new regulations opened doors for countless West Indians who previously did not have the opportunity to travel to America (Thomas-Hope, 2002). Because of the new requirements based on occupation and skills, West Indians now make up a relatively high portion of the educated and skilled migrant population (Livingston-Baker, 2006).

At the time the Immigration and Nationality Act was enforced, there was a call for professionals in the area of nursing and domestic work— careers that were usually dominated by women. A large number of West Indian women

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decided to take the opportunity to come to America. Consequently, there was a predominance of West Indian immigrant women in America that still exists today. In the 1990's, there were 92 Caribbean immigrant men for every 100 women in New York City (Scott, 2003; Foner, 1999). The West Indian population in America can be described as being mostly composed of women, being literate in English, having the highest levels of high school graduates and persons with college degrees, and having high levels of labor force participation (80%) (Livingston-Baker, 2006).

West Indian women have increasingly become the "lead migrant" of their families. This empowering change has led to a restructuring of the West Indian household. Many women had to travel alone, leaving their families behind. Mothers often had to make the difficult decision to leave their spouse and/or children at home as they attempted to take advantage of economic opportunities. A trend in the West Indies that became extremely common was "child-shifting," where the migrant's children are left in the care of a relative or close friend. The intention was for the mothers to establish themselves in America so that they could pave a way for the rest of the family to migrate later on (Foner, 1999).

Child-shifting became a reality for Leela, who reported having to leave her two small children in Guyana with her sister in 1973 as she tried to come to America:

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There was so much hardship. I was divorced with two kids... There were no jobs available, just seasonal work like cutting cane or farming rice. I had heard good things about the U.S. from newspapers. But I was refused a Visa to the U.S. because I had no money so I ended up going to Toronto and leaving (my kids) with my sister... I just wanted a better future for myself and my kids.

Another sister sponsored Leela and her children to go to New York in 1978, which is when she reunited with her kids. The other three women interviewed were more fortunate; they each were able to migrate with their spouse and children.

Changing Gender Roles

Along with changing family structure came the progression of women's gender roles. Contrary to popular belief, many immigrant women do have pre-migration work experience (Zentgraf, 2002). All four of the women interviewed for this study worked outside the home in the Caribbean in addition to their household work and child-rearing duties. Zentgraf says that although many women have worked outside the home in their home countries, their work was not as vital to their families' survival as it is in America. She suggests that the growing need for women's wages may cause a shift in traditional gender roles:

It is still possible that the increased importance of women's wages for immigrant households results in a greater acceptance and appreciation of their work. This in turn may trigger a modification in the domestic workload toward greater equality (Zentgraf, 2002).

Increased gender equality within the home is particularly significant for Indo-Caribbean families, where women are expected to subservient and men are expected to be dominant (Roopnarine, 2002). While three of the women

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interviewed felt that they had greater influence and control over family decisions—particularly financial ones—after immigration, only two of the women (Annette and Julie) interviewed reported that their husbands had begun to take over a more equitable share of childcare and household responsibilities. The other two women, Leela and Janet, reported that their husbands only helped out occasionally, or only with specific tasks. Leela stated that both she and her husband work full-time, but he does not do any housework. She is expected to take care of their children as well as clean and cook for the family. Women in these types of situations have to negotiate the double roles of both being a breadwinner for the family as well as being a homemaker. In addition to working outside the home, they have to cook, clean, and take care of the children. However, Leela did state that she is solely responsible for financial decisions for her family; in fact, her husband rarely gets involved in the family's financial matters. When asked about her feelings about the gender-related dynamics of married Indo-Caribbean couples in America, she said that they are becoming more "modern": "The husband and wife have a more open relationship, as opposed to back home where he's the boss and whatever he says goes."

Janet had a special situation; she had worked prior to migration and she also immediately after she arrived in New York with her family. However, after a few months she fell ill and was unable to go to work. When she recovered, her husband insisted that she stay at home and take care of the children and the house, as his pay as a land surveyor was sufficient to take care of the family's

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expenses. Janet also said that her husband took care of all financial matters, with little input from her: "It's like this: he worked outside, I worked at home. We paid our bills together, but he was a bit wiser when it came to financial matters. So I would listen." Leela and Janet both reported that even though their husbands did not help with the housework, what the men did take charge of were issues such as obtaining medical insurance, immigration documentation, yard work, and small home repairs.

The reason that has been suggested for immigrants holding on to such traditional gender roles is because "the acculturation process is shaped by a multitude of forces within and external to immigrant families"; such forces include personal psychological reasoning, religious beliefs, and political and economic conditions. Moreover, most Indo-Caribbean families move into neighborhoods with a high proportion of other Indo-Caribbean immigrants. In such an atmosphere, the traditional roles of men and women are reinforced and are rarely ever challenged (Roopnarine, 2002). This may be the case for Leela and Janet, who feel as though their gender roles have not changed much since migrating to New York; it seems as though their families are striving to assimilate into American society but are not yet ready to let go of past traditions.

By contrast, the other two women interviewed do consider their domestic responsibilities to be equitably shared with their husbands. Annette reported that domestic tasks are fully shared in her home. Her paid labor was not required for

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household survival prior to migration; however, in New York her husband's pay is insufficient to pay for the family's expenses. Annette's income has gained a new importance since migrating, and has resulted in a transformation of gender relations between her and her husband. She and her husband now run their own real estate business, and she reported that they share responsibilities both at work and at home: "We do everything together— work, pay bills, clean, cook, buy groceries, spend time with the kids. The only things I do without him are church, choir, and the gym."

The exception to the norm, Julie, reported that she and her husband have always shared domestic and child-rearing tasks, even before migrating to New York. She said that she and her husband split the cooking and cleaning responsibilities, and that he would take care of the kids while she attended night classes. She explained that their atypical relationship was due to their non-traditional take on marriage: "our marriage was an equal partnership from the onset. I guess we realized early on that if we worked together we would accomplish more."

Surviving the Early Stages of Migration

Immigrants often describe their initial experiences in America as being difficult, usually because of having to learn a new language, having to take in a new culture, and not having support networks to rely upon (Zentgraf, 2002). West Indians have an advantage over most other immigrants in these areas. The

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primary language of the West Indies is English, factoring out language as a barrier. Although many West Indians speak their region's local Creole language (often referred to as "broken English"), in schools they are taught to use "formal" English in schools and in written communication— although most do speak with a perceptible Caribbean accent. The women I interviewed all cited their mastery of the English language as a trait that has helped them gain employment in America. Annette said she had no trouble being hired as a receptionist at an insurance company, and later on at an export company: "They loved the way I spoke. They said I spoke the most beautiful English. We speak better English than Americans." Julie noted that her oral communication skills have significantly benefited her career; she currently works at a rehabilitation center for the disabled where she works as a program coordinator and regularly hosts seminars, conferences, and training sessions.

Learning about American culture is no longer a barrier to West Indian immigrants, either. Foner describes the growing American influence on Caribbean culture:

British influence has declined, while American political, economic, and cultural influence has grown. Modern technology—especially television, phones, and jet travel—and growing tourism allow people in the most remote West Indian villages to have an up-close view of American life before they even get here (Foner, 2001).

This exposure to American culture gives West Indian immigrants an idea of what cultural differences to expect long before they even get to America.

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As mentioned earlier, most West Indians settle in ethnic neighborhoods upon arrival to the United States. Indo-Caribbeans tend to gravitate towards the Richmond Hill area of Queens, New York City, where there is a large network of other Indo-Caribbeans. Often referred to as "Little Guyana," Richmond Hill is a residential neighborhood highly populated by Indo-Caribbeans from Guyana and Trinidad, although there are also smaller groups of East Indians, Latin-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and African-Americans. The main shopping strip, Liberty Avenue, is lined with stores specifically geared toward the West Indian community. There are several Trinidadian *roti* shops, as well as numerous restaurants serving the unique Guyanese-Chinese cuisine of Guyana. Various grocery stores sell Indo-Caribbean food products such as curry powder and *halal* meat, and several jewelry stores advertise yellow-gold jewelry made of pure Guyanese gold. Many West Indian entrepreneurs have opened medical offices, real estate offices, beauty salons, travel agencies, and law offices specializing in immigration and real estate law (McLeod, 2006). The Indian influence on Indo-Caribbean culture is particularly evident in the many clothing stores selling traditional Indian clothes such as *saris* and *kurtas*, and in the entertainment stores offering a wide range of Bollywood movies and Hindi music. Along the avenue, there are also a number of religious institutions—Christian churches, Hindu *mandirs*, and Islamic mosques—highlighting the religious diversity of Indo-Caribbeans. On warmer days, young Indo-Caribbean drivers can be heard playing music that is characteristic of Indo-Caribbean

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culture (such as reggae, *soca*, *chutney*, *calypso*, or Hindi) as they drive down the avenue. Liberty Avenue is the center of activity in Richmond Hill, and is the place where many Indo-Caribbeans reconnect with friends and neighbors from back home. The cultural richness of the area has caused Janet to feel that she “has seen more Guyanese culture here (in Richmond Hill) than in Guyana itself.”



Figure 1: Liberty Avenue has become the core of the Indo-Caribbean community in Richmond Hill, Queens.
(Photo credited to <http://guyanaprovidencestadium.blogspot.com>)

Gosine notes that ethnic communities such as these serve as “launching pads” for socio-economic and political mobility. Those who migrate to America first tend to establish beachheads for further immigration by providing financial or moral assistance; by gaining a foothold in New York, it becomes easier for

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their family and friends to follow (Foner, 1999). Research conducted by Gosine indicates that Indo-Caribbeans from Trinidad come to America with about \$200 (U.S. currency) in their possession, and those from Guyana come with about \$30. Financial constraints such as these mean that upon arrival to the United States, immigrants have to live with friends or family who are already living in America; this is possibly the most important reason why Indo-Caribbeans choose to settle in Richmond Hill (Gosine, 1990). While Richmond Hill is the choice for most Indo-Caribbean immigrants, Leela recalls initially moving in with relatives in the Bronx, Annette with relatives in Park Slope, Brooklyn, and Janet with relatives in Hollis, Queens. Interestingly, these are all diverse areas highly populated by immigrants of various nationalities. All three of these women moved to Richmond Hill at some point afterwards. Gosine notes that most Indo-Caribbeans choose Richmond Hill over other ethnic neighborhoods because "it is in their view much better than some of the other lower class neighborhoods in the city" (Gosine, 1990).

Another reason why Indo-Caribbeans may choose to settle in the area is the availability of jobs— Richmond Hill is only a train-ride away from Manhattan. The Indo-Caribbean social network is beneficial here because it is the primary means through which new immigrants find employment. This holds true for Leela, who was able to find employment at a high-end department store in Manhattan through the referrals of her sisters, who also work there. She said that she is hesitant to move away from Richmond Hill because of the convenience of

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the public transportation nearby: "If we move anywhere else, how will I get to work? Here we have the A train, the Q10, the Q41, and the Q7 (buses). I don't mind moving, but if we did, we would probably still live in Richmond Hill because everything is right here."

Economic Mobility

Even with the aid of Indo-Caribbean social networks, newly arrived immigrants often have little say in the nature of the jobs offered to them. Many have to accept the first jobs offered to them due to their lack of necessary credentials, skills or experience (Gosine, 1990). Lack of credentials is what caused Annette to experience some initial difficulty in finding a job in New York. Prior to migration, she was trained and employed as a nurse for five years on a military camp in Guyana. However, when she applied for nursing jobs in New York, she was told that she needed a New York nursing license: "I called a few agencies. They told me I couldn't start right away because I didn't have a New York license. Even though you have experience you have to do it all over to get a state certificate here." Annette ended up working as a receptionist while taking nursing certification courses. Janet experienced a similar decline in occupational rank when she moved to New York. After teaching at a secretarial school for 12 years pre-immigration, she had to accept a job as a cashier when she migrated to New York due to lack of necessary computer skills and experience.

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Finding employment is particularly difficult for immigrants who have come to America illegally. Julie, who came to New York with her family without immigration papers, found that the jobs available to her were very limited:

We didn't have our (immigration) papers so people took advantage... I worked as a babysitter and as a home health aide. I was paid \$4.25 an hour, way less than minimum wage, with no benefits and no traveling money. The thing is that when I would start working, we would agree that I would do x, y, and z. But later on they would expect me to clean their house, do their laundry, things like that. I worked really hard.

Although these women faced downward occupational mobility upon their arrival to the United States, none of them expressed regret about their decision to migrate. Their main concern was their children; they viewed their new statuses as necessary "sacrifices" in the process of providing better lives for their families. However, some of the women did express grief about having less time to spend with their children due to demanding job schedules. When asked about her experience working in America, Julie said:

I am an immigrant and a woman. I put in a lot of sacrifices to get where I am. Today we have our own home, but it wasn't easy... I believe that every generation should take a few steps forward. I see so many children come here and do things that they would never do back home in Trinidad. It's always been important to Ram (her husband) and I that we spend a lot of time with our children. It's important to work but it's also important to find balance. You have to have some sort of family life.

Annette expressed similar feelings about finding balance between work and family life:

I loved nursing but I had to quit because I was working night shifts. I needed to spend more time with the kids. Of course I wanted the "American Dream"—I wanted to go back to school to get my Master's and my Doctorate. But I want the best for my kids, too. Their achievement

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is my success. I sacrificed a lot, but life is much better... People come here and kill themselves to pay bills. Children react to those things. Parents need to take jobs where they have time to spend with their children.

Although these women's initial post-immigration employment were low-wage, manual jobs, it is important to note that they did not remain in these positions. Since migration, these women have worked their way up to more highly esteemed professions. Leela worked as a security guard at a major New York City department store, and over the next 25 years worked her way up to being a buyer's clerk. After taking the required courses, Annette became a licensed real estate broker; since then she and her husband have established and are currently running a successful real estate business. Julie earned her GED, and afterwards a degree in psychology; as mentioned earlier, she is now a program director at a rehabilitation center.

Pre-migration economic standing is an important part of understanding the frame of reference Indo-Caribbean women use to evaluate their current, post-immigration statuses (Zentgraf, 2002). Although the women I interviewed had to work at lower occupational levels in New York than in their home countries, they did not dwell on the negative aspects of their circumstances. Instead, they focused on their ultimate goals of achieving a better quality of life for their families. This seemed to motivate them to work harder to move up the economic ladder. Julie said that her motivation to succeed was "intrinsic... I kept telling myself 'I'm not gonna settle.' I wanted more than what I saw around me."

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Spatial Mobility and Cultural Freedom

The daily lives of immigrant women tend to be vastly different from the daily lives of immigrant men; unfortunately, studies on migration often overlook this aspect of the immigrant experience (Zentgraf, 2002). Life becomes drastically different for Indo-Caribbean women in America because they begin spending much more time outside of the home than they did prior to migration. Before migration, women were usually found either at home or at work. One reason that women did not venture too far from their homes before migration was due to a cultural belief that a woman's place is in the home:

Ideal femininity was predicated on... above all else, women's primary involvement in maintaining the domestic realm... (Women) are more bound to the home and therefore achieve their status through success in the realms of motherhood, domesticity, and the colonial/religious derived notion of the "respectable" Caribbean female (Millette, 1990).

Janet's family shared this belief; she stated that when growing up in Guyana, she "just stayed home. There wasn't much to do because we weren't allowed to date or go to parties." Even after marriage, the only place she traveled to was work.

Another reason that women did not venture far from their homes in the Caribbean was that there was simply no reason to. Leela said that the only times she would go anywhere besides work was when there was a wedding, funeral, or sick relative to visit. Julie said that in Trinidad, women stayed at home

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because "there wasn't anything to do. There were not really any opportunities to go out and do anything."

Conditions are quite different for Indo-Caribbean immigrant women in the United States. As wives and mothers in New York City, women have no choice but to learn to navigate their new territory. They have to spend a substantially larger amount of time outside of the home traveling not only to work, but also to places such as grocery stores, post offices, and doctors' offices. This task is especially daunting for women who immigrate ahead of their families because they have to adjust to the new environment on their own. This was the case for Leela; after leaving Guyana on her own, she found that learning her way around in a new country was both "exciting" and "scary":

I had to learn to do things I never had to do before... I found out that I had to go to a bank to deposit my pay in a checking account, but I had never been to a bank before!... I had to have someone explain to me how credit cards worked... I had to learn how to have conversations on the telephone... I learned how to use public transportation to get to work. At one point I even drove my own car... It was very scary coming here on my own, but I was excited to learn how to do things myself.

In addition to the increase in spatial mobility, life in New York also offers more cultural freedom for Indo-Caribbean women; there are countless opportunities open to them in New York that were not available to them in the Caribbean. Janet said she was happy to be "finally able to go to Long John Silver's," a fast-food restaurant she had frequently seen on television commercials. Annette reported that she now enjoys spending free time window-shopping at the local mall, an activity that was not possible before migrating.

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Leela said that she and her family now take yearly vacations, a concept that she had never even considered while in Guyana. Julie noted that trips to the hair salon and to the movie theater were very new to her when she first arrived to America because she never had enough money to go to those places in Trinidad: "Over here everybody goes to the hair salon all the time. It's no big deal. But back home, my husband would cut my hair for me. Even going to the cinema was a luxury. Now we can do so many things." She adds that the increase in cultural freedom has resulted in more educational opportunities for Indo-Caribbean women because in the Caribbean, "Indian men sending their wives to college is unheard of."

All four of the women reported an increase in personal freedom and self-sufficiency as they became more actively involved in the public realm of their new environments. Julie said that coming to New York has caused her to develop as a person:

I've become very thick-skinned and more aware of the fact that everything in life is not fair... You have to be flexible and able to change so you can assimilate faster... I saw my independence here as a window of opportunity to better myself. The difference in my life in America is so huge. I learn something new every day.

Leela also saw her increased autonomy as a positive advancement: "I have become a stronger woman, more independent, since immigrating. Now I know how to make my own decisions."

Although the idea of embracing a completely new lifestyle and culture was initially intimidating to the women in my study, they each conveyed a sense

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of accomplishment from the experience. To a certain extent, the women have begun breaking down traditional social roles through their exploration of new places, increased interaction with different types of people, and willingness to try new things.

Conclusion

Through these interviews, I was able to shed some light on the largely understudied New York City subculture of Indo-Caribbean women, paying special attention to the issues that differentiate the Indo-Caribbean experience from that of their Afro-Caribbean counterparts. Furthermore, I examined the women's experiences to reveal how Indo-Caribbean women evaluate their post-immigration gender-related social and economic statuses.

Overall, the women in my study communicated a positive evaluation of their post-immigration economic and social statuses. They adapted to American culture, but managed to hold on to selective aspects of their culture by deciding to live in a predominantly Indo-Caribbean community. The women reported that their primary reason for migrating was to provide more opportunities to their children, but they did feel that their lives had also been positively affected in the process. They have increased gender equality within the home, and now participate in decisions regarding social and financial issues. The women also have more cultural freedom to make their own decisions and access to educational opportunities that they did not have in the West

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Indies. The negative aspects of their migration experiences included dual roles within the home (as both breadwinner and homemaker) and downward economic mobility. However, the women did not dwell on these issues, and seemed to accept them as unavoidable hurdles they had to overcome in the process of providing better lives for their families.

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Appendix A

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Pseudonym	Year of Migration	Years of Education	Current Marital Status	Current Age	Current Employment
Annette	1981	12+	Married with children	53	Real estate broker
Janet	1995	12	Married with children	47	Homemaker
Julie	1991	12+	Married with children	42	Program coordinator
Leela	1973	8	Married with children	55	Clerk

Table 2: Labor-Force Participation for Female Immigrants Aged 16 to 65 in New York City, 1990

Country of Birth	Female Participation in Labor Force (%)	Country of Birth	Female Participation in Labor Force (%)
Philippines	87.0	Ecuador	61.6
Jamaica	79.5	India	59.9
Trinidad	77.5	Korea	59.8
Haiti	76.3	Dominican Republic	51.9
Guyana	70.7	Former USSR	51.9
Colombia	66.3	Italy	50.1
China	65.6		
Poland	63.9	Total of all foreign-born*	60.2

*Includes island-born Puerto Ricans.

Adapted from Foner (2000), pp. 126

Table 3: Niche Industries for Foreign-Born West Indian Women in New York City by Year

(Numbers in parentheses indicate percentage of African American women in niche)

INDUSTRY	1970	1980	1990
Private hospital	20.8 (7.30)	21.7 (7.62)	19.4 (9.32)
Local hospital	3.46 (2.29)	4.86 (3.74)	3.84 (2.76)

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Private household	17.7 (9.39)	9.82 (4.58)	5.79 (2.22)
Banking	6.33	7.00	6.74
% of group in niche employment	48.3 (27.6)	43.4 (28.2)	35.8 (25.5)

Adapted from Livingston-Baker (2006), pp. 42

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