

**"Gender Relations, Patriarchal Control and Domestic Violence:
A Village Study of Montserrat"**

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Abstract

This paper is based on fieldwork carried out during 1986-87 on the island of Montserrat. The paper intends to place domestic violence within a theoretical framework which shows that it is not an individual problem but rather a social one. Domestic violence is a form of social behaviour enacted in order to maintain control. The paper examines the concept of gender relations, and investigates the nature of such relations in a Montserratian village. It analyses whether they are structured in a patriarchal, matriarchal or egalitarian way. The paper presents evidence which shows that Montserratian sexual union patterns and heterosexual behaviour are organised in a patriarchal way. Once patriarchal gender relations have been identified it is necessary to investigate the means by which such relations are maintained and reproduced. In Montserrat social censure of behaviour relating to sexual union patterns and that of heterosexuality is found to be one such mechanism. However, the most powerful mechanism invoked to maintain patriarchal control is that of domestic violence.

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Violence: A Village Study of Montserrat
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Introduction

The concept of gender relations has becoming increasingly important in theoretical work which attempts to investigate the subordination of women. Such work has moved away from a concentration on descriptive work about gender roles to analytical work which focuses on the nature of power between men and women and how such power relations are maintained and reproduced.

One way of approaching the investigation of gender relations has been to consider the nature of such relations and evaluate whether they can be said to take a patriarchal, male-dominated form, a matriarchal, female-dominated form or whether they are egalitarian in nature (Foord and Gregson:1986). Such an approach allows for the fact that gender relations can take different forms in different places and at different times. Hence, within one society it may be possible for egalitarian relations to be the norm in the workplace but for patriarchy to rule in the household. What is in fact more likely is that rather than very different natures of gender relations one specific form will predominate but there will be variance in degree.

Once an investigation sees the nature of power between men and women to be a major focus then it is essential to move on from there to consider how such power is maintained and reproduced; to identify the mechanisms at work (Whitehead:

1984, Young, Wolkovitz and McCullagh:1984). Domestic violence and social censure have been identified as two mechanisms that play an important role in the patriarchal control of women and girls (Dobash & Dobash:1980, Hamner:1978).

Through evidence collected on the island of Montserrat I plan to identify briefly the pattern of gender relations present, to examine the key areas where patriarchy is at its strongest and to evaluate the role domestic violence plays in the maintenance and reproduction of Montserratian patriarchal gender relations.

The thesis investigated the nature of gender relations within four major social institutions on Montserrat; the household; the workplace; sexual union patterns; and heterosexual behaviour. The fieldwork took place in three main areas. I conducted semi-structured interviews with women from all over the island in their places of work. I used participant observation methods in a wide range of social settings, cultural and festival events. I lived with, observed and interviewed people in a village. It is the latter fieldwork material I am drawing upon for this paper.

The research showed that the workplace and household per se could not be described as sites of patriarchal gender relations. However, sexual union patterns and heterosexual behaviour were structured in a strongly patriarchal way. It is these areas of social organisation that the paper will focus upon.

The Village

Montserrat is a small island of 32 miles in area and has a

stable population of 12,000. It remains a British dependency but has an elected government which handles all home affairs. Montserrat is a volcanic island and although small, dramatic mountain and hill ranges divide the island both spatially and in the mental maps of the islanders. The village I lived in was on the east side of the island and was a relatively self-contained unit. Unlike its neighbouring villages it had several churches, shops, a nursery, a primary school, rum shops and a clinic. It was therefore a lively village and one that could support a population for most essentials and so thrived quite separately from the only town and capital.

I rented a three-roomed 'wall' house in the heart of the village and lived there for ten of the 11 months I was on the island. My first month was spent in an expatriate area while I made a decision about the village to select for study.

The population of the village was almost 700 and there was a wide range of household structures ranging from single person households to ones with extended families of multi-generational ages. I carried out several intensive interviews with men and women in the village. Many people said that they would rather not give me an interview but were happy to talk to me about the areas I was researching and knew that I may use some of the material in my thesis. The names of everyone have been changed to maintain their anonymity.

Gender Relations

In 1986 Joycelin Massiah stated that the Women in the Caribbean Project was partly conceived from a realisation that there was not an adequate theoretical framework for the study

of women's subordination in the Caribbean:

"Social science research in the region has proceeded on the basis of movement from one theoretical model to another, all offering explanations/interpretations at the macro-level, but none of them being particularly suited to explaining gender relations within the region." (Massiah, 1986:3)

The concept of gender relations grew out of a dissatisfaction with the concept of gender roles. The latter gave the impression that what men and women do in life was the problem, rather than the power relations between men and women (Whitehead, 1979:10). These power relations between men and women are socially constituted and not derived from biology (Rubin, 1975:158). The concept of gender relations rejects the idea that the roles of men and women are complementary, and emphasises the conflictual nature of the relationship between them (Whitehead, 1984:93). Gender is always present. Women cannot escape being perceived as a particular gender in any social situation they become involved in (Foord and Gregson, 1986:199, Whitehead, 1979: 11). Gender as a characteristic leads to the social domination of women by men. Men as a category have power over women as a category through social, economic and political institutions. Gender relations vary over time and space. They may take many particular forms, patriarchal gender relations are one form, others could be matriarchal or egalitarian.

Definitions

As has been said above the two areas of social organisation that were found to be most strongly patriarchal were those of sexual union patterns and heterosexual

behaviour. At this stage it would be useful to consider briefly what is understood by the terms patriarchy, sexual union patterns and heterosexual behaviour.

For the purpose of this paper let us define patriarchy as a form of gender relations in which men dominate women. The mechanisms used to create and maintain this domination may vary but the result is the same. Men as a category control the nature of women's lives. The term sexual union patterns is understood to be the range of types of relationships whereby men and women become sexually involved with each other. The nature of these unions was a focus of the study and elements of the union patterns will be outlined below. Heterosexual behaviour is a term used to cover all aspects relating to sexuality, masculinity and femininity, biological reproduction and the care of children. Once again the general features of this behaviour on Montserrat will be described below.

Patriarchy in Sexual Union Patterns

As R. T. Smith notes, the vast majority of Caribbean women spend some time in some form of union (1982:70). Caribbean sexual union patterns take a variety of forms and there are almost as many explanations about why such patterns evolved. The key types are those of legal marriage, cohabitation which in many islands is not legally recognised, 'visiting' or 'friending'. There is considerable variation in the stability and flexibility of these forms. There are differences in the social status each type is accorded.

The nature of sexual unions patterns on Montserrat reflected those that have been described for other areas of

the Caribbean. The most formal and only legally recognised form is marriage but this only involves about 30% of all adult women and the number of people getting married appears to be falling. While marriage does offer security in a legal sense, for many women it symbolises a loss of their independence and involves them in a patriarchal form of gender relations. Many women said that they were in favour of marriage at a personal level but given the opportunity to discuss marriage and husbands at a general level they were critical. Marriages do not appear to be very successful and while it remains difficult to get a divorce the numbers are steadily increasing.

Cohabitation was the least popular form of union and has a very negative image. For many women it means the loss of their independence without any of the advantages that marriage brings. It was seen as the most patriarchal of union forms because men have control over women in the household and in most areas of their lives, but the women have no legal security and also face social censure from the community.

The visiting union was one whereby women could retain their independence and yet have the comfort of a partner. The gender relations in such unions are far from equal but they could not be said to be as patriarchal as the other two union types. For this, and other reasons, visiting unions were the most popular form of sexual union patterns for all social classes and age groups.

It must be remembered that women and men do not benefit equally from these unions. There is often a high degree of conflict and enforced compromises invariably entail some loss

of power, independence or control in some shape or form for the women.

Patriarchy in Heterosexual Behaviour

Initially certain aspects of heterosexual behaviour were neglected by Caribbean studies but during the late 1970s and 1980s this altered. Let us now briefly consider the main features of Montserratian heterosexual behaviour, which was found to be very similar to the general pattern found in the Caribbean as a whole (Barrow: 1986, Blake:1961, Brody:1981, Dann:1987, Freilich and Coser: 1972, Kamugisha:1986, MacCormack and Draper:1987, Moses:1977, Rodman:1971, Smith R.T:1988, Wilson:1971).

In Montserrat sexuality is defined in heterosexual terms with men's sexuality defining that of women. Masculinity is defined through heterosexuality and the production of children; femininity is defined through the production and rearing of children. The sexual double standard is organised to be strongly in favour of men; men are allowed to have several partners simultaneously whereas women must remain loyal to one partner. Women were found to have a negative perception of men and men were found not to really trust and form close relationships with women who were prospective sexual partners. The gender relations of sexuality are thence patriarchal.

Montserratian attitudes towards biological reproduction and the care of children follow similar patterns to those found in the Caribbean. Women are increasingly using contraception but are reluctant to do so; very few men would

consider using contraception and it was seen almost exclusively as a woman's responsibility. Women are expected to care for children; many men refused to accept any kind of responsibility for the children they fathered. Those men that did take a share of the financial, emotional and practical responsibility were considered a desirable exception. The gender relations surrounding biological reproduction and the care of children are therefore strongly patriarchal in Montserrat.

Having thus identified the social areas where Montserratian gender relations were found to be at their most patriarchal the paper will now investigate the mechanisms through which such patriarchal control is maintained and reproduced.

Patriarchal Control

Two main mechanisms which maintain and reproduce patriarchal gender relations have been identified throughout the Caribbean, those of social censure and domestic violence. Social censure and violence are difficult areas to investigate for various reasons. Social censure will vary between cultures and so may be missed by someone from another culture. Because of the cultural specificity of social censure something that may appear to be fairly innocuous to someone from one culture may be very hurtful to someone from another, this is especially true of abusive language. Often violence relating to gender is private and rarely an area of discussion.

Let us consider the range of social censure and domestic

violence which has been identified throughout the Caribbean. Cohen (1955) states that the most frequently employed and effective externalised mechanism of social control within the community is gossip. It appears that Caribbean people have a great fear of being talked about. In densely populated villages and with houses open to the streets it is difficult to conduct one's affairs in private. In most villages there is always someone observing what is going on, ready to pass on the information. This fear of being watched and discussed, and possibly publicly ridiculed, makes Caribbean people attempt to keep their behaviour within certain socially defined parameters. Gossip is particularly successful in controlling women's behaviour as there is considerably more condemnation of their 'wrong' behaviour than there is of men's. 'Shameless' (Powell, 1976:110) and 'worthless' (Dann, 1987:85) are some of the milder terms used against women who do not appear to be following the sexual double standard where women remain loyal to one man. Men, on the other hand are not criticised for their promiscuous behaviour, but they will be ridiculed if their partner appears to be 'cuckolding' them.

Social censure and gossip may be used against men who fail to acknowledge and support their children, however it is rarely successful. If the father has the slightest doubt that the child is not his he will disown it and no amount of gossip will change his mind (Rodman, 1971:79). If the mother takes him to court it is she who will then be socially censured and become the focus of negative gossip.

A woman will also be ridiculed if she makes a fuss about her partner's infidelity, it is by acting as though nothing

were happening that she earns respect.

While gossip acts as an effective control mostly against women, men are given public places in which to boast about the very exploits that women are criticised for. The rum shop is the most important place (Brana-Shute:1976, Dirks:1972, Smith:1988, Wilson:1971). Women are effectively excluded from these male places until they are older, married and past childbearing age and even then their presence is not tolerated for long.

Statistics recording violent events relating to heterosexual behaviour are sketchy and do not reflect the actual instances of sexual aggression. Change (n.d.) argue that domestic violence crosses all classes and that verbal violence seems to be a past-time for men. Kamugisha states that crimes of violence against women, rape, incest, assault sexual harassment are prevalent in the region. She notes that in the 1970s the number of rapes actually reported increased in Trinidad and Tobago (1986:74). After the attack itself Caribbean women generally face further difficulties if the case comes to court. In some Caribbean courts a woman who does not respect the sexual double standard is assumed to deserve what she gets; often it is the sexual reputation of the women which is on trial (1986:75)

It appears that rape is a fairly common occurrence for young girls entering their sexual lives. Brody (1981) found that for 17% of young girls their first sexual experience had been a rape. MacCormack and Draper (1987) found that in Jamaica, about the same proportion of women said they first had sex for love as said they were raped. It would appear

therefore that the problem is a major one.

Domestic violence is perhaps more frequently discussed but again statistics are scarce. The police and other professional view it as a problem of individual families rather than as a social one. Jackson found that abuse of women was a common source of discord in residential unions (1982:47). Powell found that domestic authority was relatively common as a means of men asserting their authority over women (1976:110). A commonly stated reason for men beating their partners was because of her infidelity, proved or suspected (Freilich and Coser, 1972:8). Dann found that Barbadian men felt that women who had more than one partner were running the risk of getting beaten up (1987:86). Many of the life histories provided by Sistren (1986) tell of male violence from fathers, partners and employers.

The heterosexual behaviour of adults throughout the Caribbean is subject to social censure and some degree of control, although most negative censure and any control is usually directed at women. Men use violence to maintain the advantage conferred upon them by the social construction of heterosexual behaviour.

Social Censure in Montserrat

Social censure and control takes various forms in Montserrat. It ranges from the quiet word between older members of the village and younger men and women about their relationship, through gossip which passes negative criticism about certain members of the village, to abusive language attacks in private or in the public spheres of the street, the

rum shop or other social meeting places.

Ruth told me about the circumstances which encouraged Alfred to marry her. Alfred had not really thought about marrying her until the sexton of the church had had a quiet word with him about their relationship. Mayetta told me that in the past older people would talk to younger couples about their relationship and try and encourage them to marry rather than live together. Some of the women in the village said that they were happy with the nature of their relationship but had decided to marry either because of their mother's feelings about cohabitation or because they would not stay overnight with their boyfriend because of upsetting their parents. Not offending older relatives is something that most young Montserratians strive towards but others just do as they wish and become 'wayward'. It is always women's behaviour which is more constricted and controlled than men's, and women will bear the brunt of social criticism and condemnation if they disobey these controls. Men, on the other hand, are indulged more and while they may earn some criticism for extreme behaviour, the controls are not so tight. For example, none of the women said that they had decided to marry because their husband's family had been upset. The women who visited boyfriends had to return before dawn because their own parents would be upset, not their boyfriend's.

The public arena is the place for social criticism. The street is often the sight of confrontations between men and women and the language used is frequently explicit and designed to bring as much humiliation as possible upon the protagonists. There are more insulting terms to use against

women in Montserratian dialect and unless a woman is particularly sharp tongued she will lose face the most; that is she will be deemed not to have defended herself very well. 'Cursing' is sometimes called a Caribbean national sport and clever use of language is seen as a great skill. A 'cursing' couple arguing in the street will be a source of entertainment and a group will often gather round the pair. Some of the incidents in the police report book were ones where men had publicly insulted women in the street. The men are usually warned but they rarely stop it.

In Montserratian society men are expected to boast about their sexual exploits whereas women want to keep them secret. Men are given the public space of the rum shop in which to discuss their sexual activity. Women have no such public space apart from the church where strict moral standards of behaviour are to be maintained. Vivette discussed the different reactions between men and women just after they have begun a sexual relationship:

"When you love one guy, then you going to have sex with him. But men don't care like women, they just want to brag about you the next day. They call out to the girls in town. Sometimes they might be calling to that girl and she won't speak to them or call to them, because she wants it a secret, and they get upset and so they shout, 'oh, I fuck you last night but now you won't talk with me!', they feel hurt and so they curse her."

It is very difficult for a woman to be seen talking to a man and for people not to think that there is some kind of relationship between them. Young, unrelated men and women do not communicate with each other generally unless they are initiating a sexual relationship. If a boyfriend or husband saw a woman talking to another man, or was told about it by

other villagers, he would certainly ask her about the incident or he may even beat her. Ruth gave the following example;

"Somebody might just see you talking to the boy and then someone meet your boyfriend and they say "You know what happen? I meet Tracey and she talking to the boy". When you come home probably he don't even ask you, but he just get full up and swell up and as you say any little thing, that start the noise and from then you get blows, and you don't even know the cause of it!"

If older women see their daughters or younger relatives talking with 'unsuitable' men they will quickly interfere and break up the conversation and lecture the man and probably hit the girl, depending on how closely they are related. Girls are much more restricted in their social activities than boys and are not allowed to attend as many events, especially at night, and are always called in from playing before their brothers are.

Gossip is seen as a major problem in Montserrat because nothing is secret from anyone, and everyone is seen to interfere in everyone else's business. Alice saw gossip in a very negative light:

"People are always ready to tell you something. People who gossip so, their tongue should be clipped. It messes up people's lives. Plenty people go around telling you something that is not true because they don't like that person. You see people just gossip too much and people are funny. I have a very good man friend, not a boyfriend or nothing, but a good friend. People always saying we are in something, but we are not, they are so childish. You have to be very careful about who you talk to on Montserrat. "

There are, therefore, strict patterns of behaviour which women are expected and forced to adhere to. They should be loyal to one man; they should either have a visiting relationship or be married, but not cohabit. If they discover their partner is not loyal to them they are respected more if they keep quiet

about the whole affair rather than make a fuss. If they have to argue with anyone then it should be the other woman but never the man himself. A woman is not supposed to ask a man about his activities or where he has been; if she persists with such questions, ^{she} may be beaten. A woman who does not comply with such behaviour may be gossiped about, cursed in the street and generally socially criticised by both men and women.

On the other hand, men are expected to boast about their sexual prowess and those that do not may be ridiculed as homosexuals. A father is expected to acknowledge his child and to support it and will be criticised if he fails to do so. However if he still refuses there is no other form of social control meted out to him. If a mother does take him to court to get some kind of support then public opinion often sides with the father because people tend to think that women should not take a child's name into court.

Domestic Violence in Montserrat

As is true in all societies it was very difficult to gather any data about violence between men and women who were sexually involved with each other (Dobash & Dobash:1980, Hanmer:1978, Kamugisha:1986). Montserrat prides itself on its good record of little violence in the public sphere and it is a very safe place to live, work and walk as a single woman. However, for women involved with a man, the story can be very different, although such incidents are rarely reported.

I was able to do a small study of a sample over three months of police reports held in the police station of the

study village. In the chosen months of March, May and July, 1987, there were 15 incidents which involved men and women; five were reports of the use of threatening language; two of indecent language; two cases of annoyance; four cases of assault and two cases of battery. In only one instance was the case to go to court; in the other 14, warnings were given to the offending men. In almost all cases the men and women were in a residential union together, in a visiting union or neighbours. The fact that so many cases were dealt with by just issuing a warning does not mean that the police do not see these cases as serious, although for some individual officers that was the case. Rather it is because many of the women want the men warned and told to stop interfering with them; they often do not wish to take the matter any further either because they cannot afford the financial cost or face the social embarrassment.

It was very difficult to get women to discuss the issue of violence, even when I knew that they had violent partners. While some women would not discuss it in an interview they would talk to me about it. For some women my house became a place of safety where the women could wait with their children and from where they could call the police or another person to intervene in the situation, usually a minister.

I asked women if they felt that violence in the home happened a lot in Montserrat. Ruth felt that relationships between men and women used to be better:

"When we were younger men and women relationship used to be sweeter, people used to love better. Sometimes you used to hear about beating and those things but not much. But now they see you talking to some man without any meaning in it, tonight when they come they just beat you up and all that kind of foolishness. In my time you could go this

place and that place and it wasn't a problem. Now there is the jealousy that is bad."

Mayetta said:

"I don't know if it happen so much in this village but in Montserrat they do it, men beat women, usually because they see her with another man, because she don't behave as she should."

Violetta argued that:

"Is not very common but those that do it they really do it often. Some men don't know how to control their temper while others do...I don't think it is fair for men to hit women, he's some kind of coward. I don't think a man who would hit a woman sees himself as a real man. But some men claim that hitting the woman means that he loves her, I can't believe that."

Alice told of the fate of her neighbour at the hands of a violent partner:

"When I used to live at home by my mother there was a couple next door and, oh my goodness, it was awful, he was beating up this girl every night. They are not married or anything, she didn't have to hang on in there because she has a family who is telling her to come back home, come home and she still hang on. Sometimes he was drunk. I think it was chronic in him, he wouldn't stop."

While few women would discuss violence those that did were very angry about it and felt that men should be able to control their temper. They were very contemptuous of men who beat their women. Vivette said that if she ever saw a man hitting a woman in public she would always try to intervene and stop him. All too often, though, the violence happens in the home and while neighbours can hear the arguments few will actually intervene and go into the house, although they may call the police. Few cases are ever reported and even fewer reach the law courts.

The most difficult experience I had while conducting interviews in the village was when I asked Jacob about violence towards women and he went on to tell me that he had done it himself and felt perfectly justified:

"Yes men hit women. It happens because of something that is wrong, the woman might just take a chance with a

different guy or it come from different behaviour, like when the man feel embarrassed in certain ways so he just do slap her or something. It's kinda like a training, if you have a child and you lash that child to give it a training then that might just work for the woman. Because you know women just be like a child sometimes, so you just lash her to make her co-operate more. Some of them love it, right, some of them love it, because they say that if the man doesn't beat them it means he doesn't love them. I had to do it myself. She had played a trick on me. The trick was that I told she not to go out and she decide to go out when I turn my back. When I come home I find that she gone, she had gone to see another man, so it was because of that I hit her. It was an argument first but after she bawl and went out. Then I plan for when she come back to beat she. I hit her hard with my fists. It's not like fighting with a man, when you hit a man you want to win, but with a woman you still have love within you but you want to give she blow or something. Afterwards I did feel two ways, I feel proud and I feel sorry afterwards, because you see I still have to watch she. But we get over it and keep the relationship going. It don't make no sense to hurt her because what she can't do if she injured you have to do it all."

This lengthy and open description of what he did shows that some men believe that disciplining a woman who they feel has done wrong is quite acceptable and that women usually deserve the treatment they get. Viewing women as children that need to be taught a lesson indicates the inferior status men designate to women.

Conclusion

Social censure and control is therefore directed much more at women than men and it is used as a means of controlling women's behaviour. There is acceptable heterosexual behaviour and anyone stepping beyond the boundaries can expect the most severe social reaction. It is fear of social censure that; makes women reluctant to go to the family planning clinic for advice; makes them desire to keep their sexual relations private; makes them try to keep an abortion as secret as

possible; makes them remain loyal to a man who may have many other girlfriends; makes them confront the other women rather than the adulterous male; and makes them struggle to raise a child alone rather than go to court. The gender relations involved in social censure and control are patriarchal and once again men benefit at the expense of women.

In men's eyes there is an acceptable form of behaviour for women and those that stray away from that or disobey orders can expect to be punished. For women who refuse to accept such a subordinate position violence may be used against them as a form of control. Montserratian women have a very difficult battle to try and change such attitudes. Opting for a visiting union rather than a residential union may be a way of women trying to minimise their risk of being beaten as most violence did appear to occur between men and women who were living together. Domestic violence is the epitome of patriarchal gender relations and more women on Montserrat experience such patriarchy than we could ever know about.

What I have attempted to show in this paper is that certain social areas of Montserratian social organisation, namely sexual union patterns and heterosexual behaviour are the site of patriarchal gender relations. I have then gone on to examine the ways in which such patriarchal control of the gender relations is maintained. Social censure through advice, gossip, and verbal abuse and ridicule in the public sphere is one such mechanism. Domestic violence against women by men who are invariably their partners is the other major mechanism and is the most aggressive and in many respects the most

effective. I have therefore placed domestic violence within a theoretical analysis of the subordination of women within the island of Montserrat. The violent event is the most strongly patriarchal control Montserratian women experience and is the weapon used by many men to maintain and reproduce that control.

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