

ABSTRACTThe Historical and Contemporary Role of Female Sugar Cane
Cultivation Workers of Trinidad

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The study examined the historical and contemporary role of female sugar cane cultivation workers in Trinidad. The findings of twenty case studies, together with historical information were used to analyse and document the social, economic and ideological factors governing the lives and apprehensions of the women, and the social unit of producers to which they belonged. Emphasis was placed on qualitative data rather than quantitative.

The findings of the study showed that the sugar industry experienced three systems of production: slavery, indentureship and private/state ownership. Women were brought to the region as slaves and indentured labourers to work on the sugar plantations. Their productive functions were given priority over their reproductive roles as wives and mothers. With each new system, the role of female labourers was defined and redefined to suit the economic needs of the plantation owners. However, while the characteristics of their labour changed, their relationship to the means of production remained the same. Neither the women, nor the social productive unit to which they belonged, owned or controlled the industry (land, products, capital, etc.)

The first two systems were dominated by foreign powers who sought metropolitan interests and profits. As part of the labour force engaged in the production process the female workers were brutally exploited and oppressed. The colonialists also used gender to further institutionalise certain discriminatory policies.

The women never accepted the poor, unjust conditions of work and together with their male counterparts they actively sought through violent and peaceful means to make things better.

Under the present state capitalist system of production, female sugar labourers now form part of the proletariat or working class, as wage earners. Conditions have improved in terms of wages and social benefits. However, the economic laws of capitalism do not allow them to control or own the means of production or to accumulate sufficient capital to change their socio-economic status in society. Many of them remain poor, uneducated cultivation workers, in the same job they were employed in 36 years ago. Neither the sugar industry nor the state of Trinidad and Tobago has assisted in their social development.

The study concluded that the future of the women and their social unit looks bleak as the diversification of the sugar industry will result in a reduction of the labour force. Many of the women will be without jobs, seriously hampering their economic independence and ideological and cultural advancement.