

OPINION & INSIGHTS

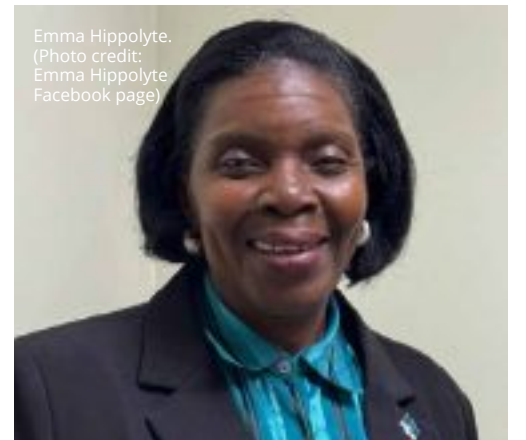
The unfinished fight for women's political inclusion in Saint Lucia

AS I SEE IT



By Rahym R. Augustin-Joseph

(Part 1)

Lisa Jawahir.
(Photo credit: Lisa Jawahir Facebook page)Shanda Haracksingh.
(Photo credit: Ernest Hilaire IG page)Emma Hippolyte.
(Photo credit: Emma Hippolyte Facebook page)

A few months ago, the University of the West Indies Cave Hill Campus, as is customary when alumnae make sterling contributions to their countries and achieve great feats, congratulated the "Trinidad and Tobago Three" for ascending to the highest political offices after elections earlier this year.

As a matter of fact, the wider Caribbean Region and the world not only looked to Trinidad and Tobago, rethinking their outdated notions of the Caribbean countries as backwater slumps of empire or just sea, sun and sand experiences, but saw the emergence of these three women to the highest political offices as a beacon for gender equality, women's empowerment and inclusion of women in politics:

Christine Kangaloo, President; Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Political Leader of the UNC and Prime Minister; and Penelope Beckles, the first female political leader of the PNM and Leader of the Opposition.

But this occurrence, while heralded by many, particularly with the recent exuding of global leadership of Mia Mottley and Kamala Harris, caused some from Saint Lucia and the wider Eastern Caribbean to interrogate why is there a notable absence of women in politics in Saint Lucia, in comparison to their male counterparts, even as the final bell has been rung for our general election.

That may be unfair, as it inadvertently silences and sidesteps the contributions of politicians such as Heraldine Rock, Dr Gale Rigobert, Menissa Rambally, Sarah Flood-Beaubrun, and many others within civil society, political parties and within the ecosystem of politics.

It is most likely for this reason that *Running in Heels: Women and Politics in Saint Lucia 1961 to 2016* by Yasmin Odlum and Barbara Jacob-Small, and *Women in Caribbean Politics* by The UWI's Professor Cynthia Barrow-Giles were written to illuminate the experiences and personalities of women in politics.

And, even with the recent inclusion of Dr Shanda Harrakison, Lisa Jawahir, Ms Laura

Jn Pierre, Lady Lee and Marcella Johnson as political aspirants in the upcoming election, it does not negate the existing statistical evidence of the wider and deeper absence of women in politics in Saint Lucia, such that women argue accurately that it is an all-boys club, evidence of the patriarchy at work, and in recent times has become increasingly misogynistic, such that politicians denigrate and disrespect women based on their physical features among other things, which are not remotely connected to their policy positions. Truly, it is a man's (political) world.

Statistical basis of argument

As such, did you know that Saint Lucia, with 28.3% of politicians being women, is barely above the Commonwealth average of women in legislatures, at 25.9%, but below the regional average of 30% according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union?

As it stands, Saint Lucia, according to Parliamentary Data, only has 11.1% of women as members of the House of Assembly, with only two women elected to the 17-member House, and six women nominated to the Senate, including to the post of President.

Of the 45 candidates in the last general elections in 2021, only 11 women were candidates, 25% of the field. At this stage, it appears that only six of the candidates are women, a marked decrease from previous elections.

These numbers must, however, be put in the context of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) recommendation, agreed to by Caribbean countries, to ensure that 33% of women are engaged in meaningful decision-making.

As such, critics are correct in bemoaning an absence of women in politics in Saint Lucia, recognising that we fall below the established regional and international

benchmarks of 33%, in the Latimer Guidelines and the Kingston Way Forward.

But, from a public policy and research perspective, it would be interesting to see what the disaggregated data would show of women who showed interest in the political party primaries, in order to assess whether collectively it may have reached above the 33% at the point of the primary. Moreover, it would be interesting to also see what the percentages of women are engaged in mass-based political parties as ordinary members and executives, to assess whether it falls below the 33% at that level. It would also allow us to assess the percentages of those who "stepped up to the political podium", to borrow a phrase from a Caribbean academic who taught me, Dr Sandra Ochieng Springer.

Beyond the figures

But what political pundits and practitioners will tell you is that, while the figures are abysmal at the level of electoral politics, behind every successful politician, i.e., male, there is a successful woman, and thus women are actively engaged in the political process.

They are correct, because according to the historical data, women are greater in numbers as foot soldiers, canvassers, organisers, activists and members of political parties.

However, fewer women end up climbing the political ladder to become candidates, executive members, or even deciding on policy positions, because it is what Prime Minister Mottley describes as a closed shop of decision-making.

But why?

Some critics may say though that there is nothing precluding women from putting themselves on the ballot box for electoral politics, recognising the introduction of adult suffrage. And, as such, there are no barriers to entry, and the absence of women is self-

inflicted.

Interestingly enough, women historically were partially enfranchised and requirements for them were imposed, including age, income, property tax and literacy levels that were more severe than for men. And, this was only resolved through the unrelenting efforts of women in the 1940s, writing to the editors of newspapers, petitions to colonial governors and formations of women's organisations and street marches.

But the lack of preclusion is not fully accurate because culturally, many within our patriarchal society contend that "women should be seen and not heard", "are better placed at home engaging in domestic tasks", or "should be working for someone" and that they are unable to deal with the "nastiness and roughness" of politics. Certainly, gender roles — what a society and culture believes are the attitudes, feelings, and behaviours of a biological sex — have been socially and culturally defined as noted by sociologist Silvia Walby.

Similar anti-intellectual arguments have been made to justify the lack of inclusion of young people.

Not only have we normalised politics as "nasty" instead of working to rethink the narrative, but we have also legitimised that it is not for good boys and, certainly, girls.

As such, culturally, we have established barriers for the entry of women in politics.

Rahym R. Augustin-Joseph is the 2024 Rhodes Scholar for the Commonwealth Caribbean, and is a two time Valedictorian. Currently, he is pursuing a Masters in Public Policy at the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford. He holds two First Class Honors degrees from the UWI Cave Hill Campus in Political Science and Law, and Bachelor of Laws. An award-winning debater, public speaker, youth leader and advocate, Rahym is passionate about law, politics, and governance and aims to shape the future of Saint Lucia and the Caribbean.