

# Sex Work, Street Vending and Implications for Mothers and Daughters in the Global Economy

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## A Feminist Analysis of Political Economy

*Using a feminist analysis of political economy, this paper discusses the mother–daughter relationship as portrayed in the Jamaican film *Dancehall Queen* to explicate the complexities of mothering in the global economy. *Dancehall Queen* can be viewed as a microcosm of how mothering is actually shaped by women’s lived experiences at multiple sites informed by race, class, and gender within hierarchies of global economic structures. We assess the film for its articulation of how neoliberal economic policies often push African Caribbean women towards informal work just to survive and the implications that this has for the mother–daughter relationship. What poor mothers do to make ends meet often challenges normative ideologies about “good mothering.” This paper discusses the protagonist’s work as a street vendor, undercover dancehall participant, and her attitude towards her daughter’s sexuality as a potential source of income, to discern what these may mean for living at the nexus of motherhood and poverty in the global economy.*

### Introduction

Maternal representations of African Caribbean mothers in film can powerfully comment on the complexities of mothering in ‘post’ colonial societies. These types of representations enable us to examine how mothering practices are informed by globalization processes that (re)produce economic hardships. These representations also invite an examination of the multiple meanings attributed to motherhood and mothering according to the cultural, social, and political specificities of women’s lives. The Jamaican film, *Dancehall Queen*, which in part focuses on the tension between the protagonist and her adolescent daughter about the commodification of the young woman’s sexuality, raises troubling

questions about how motherhood is shaped by global economic forces. This paper discusses the mother–daughter relationship as it is portrayed in the film to explicate the complexities and contradictions of mothering in the global economy. Other scholars have expertly addressed the commodification of women’s sexuality in *Dancehall Queen* (Duvivier; Cooper) and more generally, within Caribbean societies (Kempadoo “Freelancers”); thus we limit our discussion to the mother–daughter relationship in the film.

Using a feminist analysis of political economy, we aim to argue that the film is a microcosm of how economic exploitation troubles “normative” views about how mothers are expected to protect their daughters from sexual violence. To this end, we critically assess the film to discern how the impacts of globalization and informal work frame mothering practices when women’s survival is at stake. We begin our discussion with an overview of the film; this is followed by a feminist analysis of political economy and an explanation of why this theoretical perspective provides a more complex understanding of the interaction between the protagonist and her teenage daughter, and in particular, the mother’s commodification of her daughter’s sexuality. The discussion is informed by the mother’s work as a street vendor (or higgler) in the informal economy. Rather than attempting to argue whether or not the protagonist was a “good” or “bad” mother, our objective is to examine the “choices” with which she was presented without losing sight of the harm to which the daughter was subjected. Towards a conclusion, we question the limits of moral judgments about “good” mothering by arguing that maternal love, contrary to popular myth, is not necessarily expressed outside of the realm of violent practices.

### Overview of *Dancehall Queen*

Directed by Don Letts and Rick Elgood and released in 1997, *Dancehall Queen* is a story about the protagonist’s desire to change her bleak economic prospects and to improve the lives of her children. Marcia (Audrey Reid) is a lone mother and street vendor struggling to raise two daughters in an impoverished neighborhood in Kingston, Jamaica. The premise of the plot is the reinvention of Marcia, who works as a street vendor by day and disguises herself by night to participate in dancehall parties. Carolyn Cooper, who has written extensively about dancehall culture, articulates competing perspectives about this phenomenon by noting that, “dancehall’s affirmation of the pleasures of the body, which is often understood as a devaluation of female sexuality, also can be theorized as an act of self-conscious female assertion of control over the representation of her person” (125–26). Indeed, *Dancehall Queen* presents sexuality as a liberating activity in its challenge to traditional discourses about motherhood, femininity, and the objectification of the female body.

Although she sells her goods at dancehall parties, initially, Marcia has no interest in participating in the dancehall scene, that is, until she sees the reigning dancehall queen, Olivine (Patrice Harrison) in public without her make-up and costume. Commenting on Olivine's ordinariness, Marcia realizes that she, too, can enter dancehall's exhibitionist space, assume a sexually liberating persona, and temporarily escape the pressures of daily life. Perhaps because the public display of sexuality within dancehall culture contradicts the image of the "respectable" mother, Marcia attempts to hide from her children her persona and new found pleasure in what Cooper describes as "the fairy-tale fantasy of hypersexuality that the stage property of the dancehall engender" (128). Dubbed the "Mystery Lady" on the dancehall circuit (disguised by wigs and dancehall costumes), Marcia's emerging popularity threatens Olivine's reigning status. In order to settle the tension between the women and to establish who the better dancer is, a competition is organized and the winner stands to collect the prize money in the amount of \$100,000 Jamaican dollars (roughly \$1,000 Canadian). Marcia wins the competition and collects the money, a sum that holds the potential to alleviate, but not transform, her financial hardship.

In order to survive in her "regular life" Marcia is forced to accept financial help from "Uncle Larry" (Carl Davis) who, with money and violence, controls or eliminates those who threaten his turf and business interests in urban Kingston. Larry sexually desires Marcia's fifteen-year old daughter, Tanya (Cherine Anderson). But Tanya despises Larry, whom she views as a father figure, and objects to his sexual interest in her. Marcia refuses to validate her daughter's contempt for Larry or to intervene to end his sexual harassment of her, because as she explains, "When Larry deh bout the place tings run right yuh know." Instead, she encourages Tanya to have sex with Larry as an act of gratitude and encouragement for him to continue his financial support, which includes paying for Tanya's school fees.

With pressure from her mother and at his insistence, Tanya is forced to have sex with Larry, thus Marcia participates in her daughter's sexual exploitation and violates her role as the socially constructed, protective mother. Because her first sexual encounter is against her will, Tanya accuses Marcia of turning her into a "whore." From Marcia's point of view, her actions are practically designed to maintain Larry's tenuous financial contributions to the family and to leverage a better future for her children through the commodification of Tanya's sexuality.

The tense scenes with Marcia and Tanya may invite some audiences to condemn Marcia as a "bad" mother, a pejorative that connotes a "spoiled identity" (Goffman) with the potential for social consequences. However, we propose that a critical reading of the mother-daughter relationship in the film lays bare the complex conditions that, in reality, limit women's choices in their roles as

mothers. Importantly, mothering practices must be understood in the context of how women are located within historically specific capitalist economies and the extent to which the lived experience of motherhood is often shaped by the demands of gendered work, including the belief that child care is “women’s work”; (Mohammed and Perkins). From this perspective, we argue that the film is a microcosm of the economic hardships facing Black Caribbean women in general, and Jamaican mothers in particular.

Mothering practices among African Jamaican women must also be understood within a particular context that reflects embodied market experiences (Brown-Glaude), and, in Marcia’s case, within the purview of working as a street vendor (also known as a higgler), at the nexus of motherhood and poverty. In this paper, we employ a feminist analysis of political economy to address the gendered politics of street vending/higglering and sex work as they illustrate embodied market lives and inform mothering choices in a global economic framework. We further argue that both higglering and sex work have roots in the plantation economy and implications for women’s emancipation.

### **A Feminist Analysis of Political Economy**

A feminist analysis of political economy attends to the complexity of gender within the technologies of global capitalism. This theoretical framework takes up the interconnections among the economy, the state, and women’s lives (Bezanson and Luxton; Bakker). Specifically, it seeks to illuminate how the gendered domain of social reproduction remains unrecognized as work (Bedford and Rai) in political economy discourses that privilege private/public divisions in the performance of labour (Acker). A feminist examination of political economy aims to disrupt the private/public divide within the socially desired roles of men and women as workers; yet, as articulated by Caribbean and Black feminists, this is a phenomenon that has not taken root in the Caribbean as it has elsewhere, among poor and working class men and women (Barrow; Hodge 2).

In reality, the lives of poor working-class “Third World” women are deeply entrenched in the processes and ideologies of global capitalism, which, with respect to Caribbean women, dates back to the plantation economy within the institution of slavery. Black women have always participated in both the productive and reproductive labour that sustains capitalist economies. In recognition of this reality, Caribbean feminists who take as their focus the organization of the region’s economies, call for an interrogation of the racialization of gender and class positionality of Caribbean women in global and local economies (Barriteau) to “demystify capitalism” (Mohanty). This demystification engenders a critical examination of how the “definition of work reconstructs notions of

masculinity, femininity, and sexuality” (Mohanty 144) so that they are intricately tied to the meaning and performance of labour. For our purposes, we extend Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s argument to include the reconstruction of mothering practices and ideologies about motherhood as these are manifested in the larger historical and economic particularities of women’s experiences in a global framework. In other words, global capitalism redefines motherhood and mothering as women are forced to respond to the demands of economic restructuring in ways that shape their relationships with their children, their communities, and their societies.

For example, large numbers of Caribbean women (and men) have had to travel to Canada, the United States, England and elsewhere in search of work at different historical moments. Moreover, transnational labour migration is a practice that continues today as, increasingly, neoliberal economic policies continue to erode opportunities for many working class, poor, and racialized women. Even as host countries restrict travel from “Third World” countries, Caribbean workers find creative ways, often through risky means, to enter these countries in pursuit of paid work. The prevalence of paid work in a transnational context has three identifiable effects. First, it re/organizes local households within the global economy (Safri and Graham); second it creates new subjectivities, desires, and forms of agency that articulate how transnational workers are subordinated by, engaged in, and resistant to global economic processes; and, third, it provides much needed remittances to immediate and extended family members thereby facilitating varying degrees of upward mobility (Burman). Working abroad also means that women must grapple with the shifting meanings of transnational motherhood in relationships with their children whom they continue to support but may not see for many years (Horton; Fresnoza-Flot; Crawford).

The complexities of mothering and motherhood are also evident, albeit in different ways, for women like Marcia who do not travel outside of their countries for work, but who must confront the financial hardships of working in the informal economy while caring for their children. A feminist examination of political economy provides a lens through which to better understand the implications of neoliberal economic policies for social reproduction that includes the daily care of children and the elderly. As in other countries subjected to harsh austerity measures, Jamaican and other women in the Caribbean are expected to undertake more of the activities associated with social reproduction (Harrison) even as they are pushed to eke out a living in the informal economy, often as street vendors and/or sex workers. These types of work challenge problematic discourses about women’s ‘natural’ and ‘unconditional’ desires to love and care for their children. Marcia’s situation reveals that love for her children is motivated, not by the characteristics of intensive mothering,

generally understood as a mother's ability to love her children unconditionally and selflessly (Damaske), but by the desire to escape the structural barriers that trap women and their children in the informal economy.

### Street Vending and Higglering in the Informal Economy

Employment in the informal sector generally refers to legal economic activities that exist outside of government regulation (Fernandez-Kelly). Some scholars argue that mothers choose to enter the informal sector of work because of the flexible working conditions that it offers (Chaudhuri and Mukhopadhyay). Other scholars point out that working mothers in the global economy are more likely to perform informal work because of limited options (Rodin et al.). For Marcia, as is the case for poor women who bear the brunt of austerity measures, informal work is a matter of survival. Forced to end her educational pursuit after the birth of Tanya, her first child, Marcia struggles to make ends meet by selling goods (e.g., clothes, soft drinks) on the streets of Kingston.

Although its meanings have changed over time, labouring as a street vendor or a higgler has deep roots in the plantation economy of slavery. Enslaved market women who sold agricultural goods performed labour that was critical for the nutritional improvement of slaves; as well, the ownership of produce provided them with a measure of autonomy (Freeman citing Beckles 71-72). Historically, higglering in Jamaican society has been the purview of "lower class" African Jamaican women whose work and bodies contradict normative views about race, class, and femininity. On the one hand,

Higglers' bodies are marked as ideological sites—spaces where a variety of discourses about race/color, class, and gender converge. Stories about black/working class-poor womanhood are written on higglers' bodies by the wider society's describing them as vulgar, unfeminine, illegitimate, as contaminating and undeserving. (Brown-Glaude 5)

On the other hand, higglers are valorized as the 'backbone' of Caribbean economies and appear on greeting cards depicting picturesque scenes of Caribbean life (Freeman), much like the 'mammie' images that proliferate American culture. Higglers and street vendors then, are situated within Caribbean-nation states in contradistinction to respectability and class mobility, and arguably, as contravening the ideological and material development aspirations of Caribbean countries. Simultaneously, they hold out the anachronistic promise of a "simpler time" in discourses and images aimed at attracting tourists for an idyllic experience. Yet the body of the higgler challenges and re-shapes social, economic, and spatial boundaries as she moves across the city landscape to make a living

(Brown-Glaude). Her body, much like those of the women who revel in the dancehall scene, troubles Eurocentrically-informed notions of motherhood, sexuality and femininity in the production of respectable womanhood; and this has implications for the shifting meanings of the mother-daughter relationship. Marcia traverses the thin line between being a hardworking street vendor and mother who is respected by other poor people in her community, and a fully autonomous sexual subject on the dancehall scene. As such, she complicates easy tropes about motherhood and sexuality, both of which are foundational to respectable femininity, in ways that complexifies her relationship with, and expectations from, her fifteen-year-old daughter.

### Sex as Labour: Implications for Mothering

The factors that constitute respectability are rooted in discourses about race and class as much as they are historically and contextually specific at different moments within a given nation-state. Furthermore, although problematic images of Black motherhood, sexuality, and femininity are designed for the purposes of subordination (Collins), Black women also negotiate, re-define, and transgress dominant views about them. We argue that these negotiations, re-definitions, and transgressions are evident in how Marcia reconciles the pragmatics of being a “good mother” and her insistence that Tanya must have sex with Larry in exchange for his continued financial support. In so doing, she situates sex as work, devoid of romantic desires and questions about morality, and as a means to facilitate a better economic future for her daughter.

In her study, “Freelancers, Temporary Wives, and Beach Boys: Researching Sex Work in the Caribbean,” Kamala Kempadoo examines the contested discourses about sex work in the Caribbean thereby providing important insights into the conditions under which sex is viewed as labour, more lucrative than other types of work, and with little confusion between commercial sex and sex in the context of romantic love. Without downplaying the risks of sex work, especially in the tourism industry, Kempadoo disrupts feminist and policy perspectives that associate sex work with the perceived inevitability of trafficking and violence against women. Kempadoo does this by presenting ethnographic research that reveals the varied reasons why both men and women perform commercial sex. In her study, one participant, a Guyanese woman, is reported to have stated that, “I will say is a job I doing ... I don’t go fuh feelings, I does go fuh me money” (46). Marcia’s recognition of the material benefits of sexual labour is echoed by other women and men in the Caribbean who view sex work as a job and as a more profitable option than “domestic labour, assembly work in manufacturing plants in Free Trade Zones, or security guard work” (Kempadoo *Sexing the Caribbean* 60).

Similar to the Guyanese participant who values the financial rewards of sex work, Marcia is clear about Larry's role in her family's life and about the sexual-economic relationship that she would like Tanya to have with him. When Tanya challenges Marcia to have sex with Larry instead, Marcia points out that, "is you him want," which suggests that she would perform sex for money with Larry, if he desired her. Marcia does indeed, as Carolyn Cooper argues, "pimp" her daughter, but for reasons that are uncomfortably practical and that trouble dominant cultural narratives that link sexuality to a particular type of gendered morality and expectations of mothers.

As with higglering in the informal economy, the exchange of sexual services for a desired benefit reflects one of a range of survival strategies performed by Caribbean women in the plantation economy. Historical records show that in addition to marketing, some enslaved women in the French Caribbean also profited "from selling their own or their daughter's sexual labour" (Kempadoo 2004: 54). Similarly, while recognizing the violent conditions under which most enslaved women were sexually exploited by their masters, in his study of prostitution in Barbados, Hilary Beckles argues that some female slaves realized the potential benefits that could be gained from their sexual interactions with white men and therefore, used their sexuality as a bargaining tool to gain freedom or better working conditions (Beckles). Although scholars disagree about the extent to which such strategies were successful, higher rates of manumission for women in the Caribbean suggest that sexual relations with white men may have proved "beneficial" for at least some enslaved women. In the case of Jamaica, slave owners frequently engaged in sexual relations with their female slaves that resulted in high levels of manumission for "coloured" slaves (Altink).

We contend that situating Marcia's strategic use of her daughter's sexuality within this broader historical framework, linked to the difficulties of mothering in the contemporary global economy, facilitates a more nuanced understanding of her choices. In fact, while higglering/street vending and sex work may look differently at different historical moments, there are similarities in how women respond to difficult economic and other oppressive conditions; and their responses have implications for parenting their children. Women combine both higglering and sex work as survival strategies. Indeed, multiple and interconnected types of survival strategies are also evident in broader trends whereby women increasingly perform a "triple shift" that combines informal and formal paid work with unpaid labour in the home. For example, in addition to performing data entry work in the formal sector for a wage, some Bajan women also undertake informal activities related to buying products overseas and selling them locally; some of these women also start home-based small businesses so that they can care for children (Freeman). These responses are



indicators of women's increasing responsibilities for social reproduction and strategic mothering practices aimed at improving their children's life chances.

*Dancehall Queen* continues to reflect the hardships faced by Caribbean women throughout the region. Although it was released over a decade and a half ago, its focus on how the protagonist navigated financial hardships by making tough choices is as pertinent now as it was then. Whatever gains that Caribbean women have made in the past decade were significantly rolled back by the recession of 2008. Economies in both the Caribbean and Latin America shrank significantly as trade with the United States declined and much-needed remittances receded as family members overseas lost their jobs. In their seminal report titled, "The Global Financial Crisis and Caribbean Women: A Gender Analysis of Regional Policy Responses," Juliana S. Foster and Rhoda R. Reddock outline the extent to which Caribbean women, at home and abroad, have been impacted by the recession. For example, the authors report that,

In 2009, the Curacao's Women's desk confirms the gendered impact of the crisis as well as inadequate protection for women by early policy responses. The impact of the financial crisis on Curacao women includes an increase in requests for food boxes; more women are reporting domestic violence caused by the financial crisis; inability to pay child care; increased employment on the black market and more. (14)

As a result of the global recession, more Caribbean women have been forced to take low-paying, exploitative jobs in the informal economy while, increasingly, states divest themselves from initiatives that support social reproduction. These activities add further stress to parent-child relationships, and, in real life, stresses and tensions are not as easily resolved as they would appear to be in *Dancehall Queen*.

In the film, Marcia and Tanya are able to overcome the tensions between them. When Marcia loses confidence and changes her mind about participating in the dancehall competition, Tanya encourages her not to be intimidated by Olivene and by her position as a street vendor. In fact, both Marcia and Tanya are portrayed as having strong, individual personalities, as well as the ability to exercise some degree of agency. For example, Marcia finds empowerment on the dancehall circuit, and Tanya pursues a relationship with a young man her own age in defiance of Larry's orders. By the end of the film, the two women are able to reconcile their differences with Tanya expressing pride in her mother for winning the competition. Notwithstanding the seemingly "happy ending" in the film, in reality, relentless economic pressures, as we have shown by our analysis of *Dancehall Queen*, means that women will continue to make tough choices that strain their relationships with their children.

## Conclusion

*Dancehall Queen* clarifies that the re/productive lives of Jamaican women, like the country's economy, are increasingly globalized. A critical reading of the film illustrates that the commodification of Black women's sexuality and women's paid labour spans the plantation and capitalist economies that frame Jamaican history and contemporary realities. Long before the slogan, "the local is global" was popularized, the lives of Jamaican women were globalized and transnationalized, and this has had implications for mother-daughter relationships at different historical moments and into the present.

Yet we would be amiss if we did not acknowledge that Tanya has been greatly harmed by "Uncle Larry": that she was raped, and that her mother played a pivotal role in orchestrating the violence to which she was subjected. Simultaneously, we wish to avoid the trap of mother-blaming that would have us conclude that Marcia is simply a 'bad mother.' This leaves us to query: how do we historicize and contextualize social problems facing women towards more meaningful solutions without losing sight of the traumas to which some mothers subject their children? There is no easy answer to this question but we take some cues from scholars who have attempted to understand the complexities of maternal violence by analyzing Sethe's actions in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*.

In *Beloved*, Sethe, an enslaved Black woman, escapes slavery with her four children. When she is caught, she transgresses dominant notions about "maternal instincts" by killing her eldest daughter, and by attempting to kill her remaining three children to protect them from the atrocities of slavery (Morrison), and to contest her master's ownership of them. In his article, "Beloved's Claim," Christopher Peterson provocatively inquires,

What does it mean to claim one's children as property? When Sethe declares in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, "she my daughter. She mine," what is the difference between her claim and the slave master's? That is, how can we understand the relation between a maternal claim other than in terms of simple opposition and contestation? (548)

We find Peterson's questions compelling because both Black women's productive and reproductive labour was central to the plantation economy. As such, and because property rights in former slave societies framed kinship and parent-child relationships (Spillers; Harris), we can reasonably argue that Sethe's view of her children as property to be disposed of is valid and that her motivations were different from the master's. Indeed, some scholars have argued that Sethe's act of brutality can be read as the ultimate expression of

maternal love and kinship ties, towards a more critical understanding of the different meanings that these held for enslaved women (Žižek; Bhaba cited in Peterson); furthermore, other scholars such as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese point out that “nineteenth century bourgeoisie culture raised [motherhood] to unprecedented heights of sentimentality” (101), such that violence was excluded from respectable, mainstream views about motherhood. Sentimentality was bound up in class performance by white mothers and ideologies about motherhood designed to convey a type of respectability that marked these mothers as “different” from racialized mothers. Enslaved Black mothers, bereft of “normative” material or emotional resources to parent their children, were nonetheless subjected to blame and ridicule for transgressing bourgeoisie expressions of “good mothering”; in the novel, Sethe’s action is interpreted as an example of “African savagery” to which the enslaved are “naturally” predisposed if they are granted freedom (Žižek).

Infanticide then, in *Beloved*, confronts us with the deeply uncomfortable reality that “maternal love,” rather than being innate, was (and still is) contestable, racially gendered and situational in response to the horrors of everyday life in slavery.

While we are alert to the trickiness of making comparisons between Marcia’s and Sethe’s actions because of very different spatial and temporal contexts, we nonetheless argue that in *Dancehall Queen* and *Beloved*, both women are pushed to respond to violent forces beyond their control in ways that disrupt externally imposed constructions of “good mothering.” And both characters, although fictional, represent the historical (Sethe) and contemporary (Marcia) constraints of Black motherhood. Although she is not enslaved, the circumstances under which Marcia is forced to parent her children are informed by the vestiges of slavery, the sexualisation of Black women in the capitalist economy, and the re/production of gendered practices within globalization processes. Marcia’s motivations are framed by a desire for her daughter to escape poverty towards a future with better prospects. In this regard, Tanya’s body is property, a “piece of land” in the marketplace, and a body that “provides shelter, clothing and sustenance for her entire family” (Duvivier 1109) despite her resistance to this exploitation of her person.

A feminist analysis of political economy, directed at examining women’s lives in *Dancehall Queen*, shifts our gaze to the processes that facilitate sexual violation rather than to rest exclusively at site of women’s personal behaviour in their interactions with their children. As such, we are pushed to interrogate the complexities of mothering practices within exploitative economic networks and expressions of violent hegemonic masculinities, towards a more informed understanding of motherhood and mothering in the global economy.

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