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Jennifer Munnings  
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“Smile For Me, Sweetie!”: An Analysis of Contemporary Gender Based Violence and  
Discrimination in The Bahamas

by  
Jennifer Munnings

Honors Thesis

Submitted to:

Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
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Advisors: Dr. Eric Anthony Grollman, Dr. Jeff Hass, and Dr. Bedelia Richards

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## **ABSTRACT**

Women in the Bahamas face various forms of pervasive sexist discrimination and high rates of gender-based violence. However, recent governmental initiatives aimed at addressing gender inequality have not proven effective. The narrow focus on individual reforms like anti-crime measures to curb structural violence highlights a lack of understanding of gender inequality as embedded within social institutions. To interrogate the institutionalized nature of gender inequality in the Bahamas, the present study draws on in-depth interviews with seven Bahamian women's rights activists to explore the social, cultural, and political explanations for the persistence of gender-based violence and discrimination. Three major themes emerged from the interviews: 1) determinants of gender-based violence and discrimination; 2) barriers to addressing them; 3) and, proposed solutions to eliminate gender inequality. This study highlights the structural nature of inequality, focusing on meso- and macro-level explanations for the contemporary state of gender relations.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the Bahamas, there is a disconnect between public perception and the actual state of gender relations. There is a sense by the public that significant advancements have been made to improve Bahamian women's position in society. The absence of a definitive caste system and the relatively higher graduation rates of girls and women from high school and college paint a picture of equality. However, despite the high graduation rates, progress made towards gender equality is often short-lived or overemphasized. Government intervention in issues surrounding gender-based violence and discrimination ignores the ways in which sexism is embedded in social institutions and operates as a macro-level structure. The government's individualistic approach that focuses on individual behaviors and attitudes to gender inequality mirrors the broader conceptualization of sexism in the Bahamas.

Gender-based violence (GBV), and gender discrimination (GD) are prevalent throughout Bahamian social, cultural, and political institutions. Constitutional discrimination, low female political participation, and high rates of rape are indicators of persistent gender inequality throughout the country. The Bahamian government and public have yet to critically address the role of women within the country and analyze the impact of socio-political structures in promoting a culture that normalize violence and discrimination against women. Patriarchy is embedded in the foundations of the Bahamas wherein legacies of colonialism and gendered aspects of nation-building established women as second-class citizens. Social institutions similarly work to promote traditional gender roles that establish women as inferior to men.

Gender scholars have proposed a theoretical framework wherein gender is conceptualized as a social structure (Risman 1998). As such, efforts to eliminate gender inequality must attend

to the ways in which sexism operates at the structural level of society, is embedded in major social institutions, and shapes gender identities and ideologies and interactions between women and men. As such, the present study moves beyond an individualistic understanding of gender relations that focuses on reforming individual attitudes towards women. Instead, this study examines discrimination and violence against women in the Bahamas and highlights meso- and macro-level determinants of gender inequality and barriers to effectively achieving equality. Furthermore, this study focuses on the activist perspective to examine gender inequality and their proposed solutions to eliminate sexism in the country. The research capitalizes on the wealth of knowledge that the activists have on gender relations in the Bahamas to critically assess, in particular, the impact that the nation's colonial legacy, and the institutions of religion and politics have on gender relations.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Women in the Bahamas have made notable achievements throughout the country from winning Olympic medals, to holding key leadership positions at prestigious banks and law firms. Women are graduating from high school and college at higher rates than men (CEDAW 2017) and have more public visibility than ever before in Bahamian history. However, women are highly represented in middle management positions and earn less than men do for the same work (CEDAW 2017). The increase in women's visibility in low-wage jobs has led to the perception that women are overtaking men economically (Benjamin and LeGrand 2012). The perception, however, differs from reality wherein a study found that men were represented in the labor force at higher rates than women at 80.5% and 71.9%, respectively (CEDAW 2017). Different aspects

of gender inequality including gender roles and expectations, sexual objectification and infantilization, and unequal access to power have worked to legitimize and perpetuate violence against women (Russo and Pirlott 2006).

Gender-based violence is an indicator of persistent and pervasive gender inequality in society (Russo and Pirlott 2006). One form of such violence that is prevalent in the Bahamas is intimate partner violence (IPV). IPV has been normalized in Bahamian society through institutions of socialization as many children grow up in homes with recurrent domestic violence. In 2009, a survey of nearly 600 college students in Nassau found that around 21% of students reported experiencing and/or witnessing domestic violence at home (Plumridge and Fielding 2009). In addition, nearly 100 women were killed as a result of intimate partner violence between 2010 and 2016, accounting for 10% of all murders during that time (UNHRC 2018). Annual police reports documented over 9,000 assaults including intimate partner violence against women between 2008 to 2012 (GBV Task Force 2015).

In addition to intimate partner violence in Bahamian households, there are high rates of rape and sexual assault. While the worldwide average for rape in 2007 was 15 per 100,000 persons, the Bahamas had an average of 133 – which, at the time, was the highest in the World (UNHRC 2018). The rampant rates of sexual abuse have made it so that the first sexual experience of many sexually active girls was “forced” or “somewhat forced” (UNHRC 2018). The Royal Bahamas Police Force found that over 6,200 cases of sexual offenses were reported over a 10-year period (2003-2013) (UNHRC 2018). However, consistent with the trend around the world, incidents of sexual violence are systematically underreported. Emergency room data

found that cases of rape treated at the Princess Margaret Hospital alone were nearly 1.6 times higher than those recorded by the Bahamian police department (UNHRC 2018).

The normalization of violence against women extends into the political sphere, as well. Risman (1998) argues that gender is a structure that affects all strata of society including micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. Gender inequality manifests at all three levels of society, which intersect to perpetuate and reproduce inequality. Traditional gender roles in the home and at work instill gendered differences in people's perceived entitlements and place different values and meanings on the resources women and men provide in relationships (Acker 1992; Risman 1998; Russo and Pirlott 2006). These traditional gender roles are reinforced by various social institutions that encourage women to be submissive to their partners, thus normalizing sexist conceptions of women as inferior to men (Nicolls 2014). As such, meso- and macro-level analyses of institutions are necessary to understand the different ways in which gender discrimination and violence against women are reinforced through social institutions.

For example, gender inequality in the government and marriage are mutually reinforcing to legitimize GBV in society broadly. In particular, the failure of the Bahamian government to outlaw marital rape exemplifies how the institution of marriage legitimizes men's sexual and physical violence against their wives (Russo and Pirlott 2006). The issue of marital rape has long been a point of contention in Bahamian society, as religious leaders and women's rights groups continue to argue over its legitimacy. The marital rape spousal exception, which exempts spouses from the constitutional definition of rape, can be traced back as early as 1736 and is tied to the colonial view of women as chattel or property (Benjamin and LeGrand 2012). In 2009, the Bahamian government tabled a bill to criminalize marital rape and again in 2017 following a



statement from the Special Rapporteur citing the spousal exception as the most pressing issue to women. The government, however, has refrained from moving forward with the bill because of public objection and the powerful influence of the lobbyist group, the Christian Council (Benjamin and LeGrand 2012).

The rhetoric surrounding the marital rape exception is reflective of the ways in which intersecting institutions like politics and religion reinforce sexism. Myths about rape permeate the national conversation on addressing sexual violence. Some have expressed fear that wives would use rape as a “weapon” against their husbands, undergirded by the more general fear that women are spiteful and liars. The 2017 bill also failed to gain support from women who, in line with conservative religious views, felt that it is a wife's duty to submit to her husband (Benjamin and LeGrand 2012). The lack of female support for the bill highlights the significant impact of institutions of socialization like the church in maintaining patriarchy. Marital rape is also frequently framed by the media, politicians, and religious officials as a privacy issue. Bahamians felt that what happens between spouses is a private matter that the government should not have the authority to interfere in undertaking an individualistic understanding of violence against women (Benjamin and LeGrand 2012). In this way, marriage works to silence victims and normalize violence against women (Russo and Pirlott 2006). Inequality in different contexts have a compounding effect when they intersect to reinforce the structural nature of GBV and sexual violence (SV) (Reskin 2012).

### **Nation-building, Race, and Misogyny**

Attitudes towards women today are largely the result of the making of the Bahamian nation-state, which was entrenched in a battle for racial equality that sacrificed the constitutional

status of women to achieve independence. The move towards independence saw the overthrow of a white colonial power that had been ruling since the mid 1600s by a Black-majority government. The making of the Bahamian nation could begin only after racial empowerment was achieved and that, as a result, Bahamian independence was more about racial justice than nation-building (Bethel 2003). In the Bahamas, men are seen as “hard” or aggressive and women are seen as naturally “soft,” which is typically characterized by submissiveness and proximity to whiteness. This is a reflection of a colonial mentality that praises whiteness as the standard to strive towards (Bethel 2003). However, this mentality is inherently problematic especially given that the Bahamas is a majority-Black nation.

As such, the construction of Bahamian citizenship and Bahamian nation-building are entrenched in racial politics and the control over women’s bodies and reproductive choices. To preserve a clear racial binary, women of the newly independent Bahamas were made second-class citizens in the constitution despite their instrumental efforts that led to independence in 1973 because of fear that they would have mixed children with white men (Bethel 2003). The unequal conferral of citizenship is representative of colonial-era sexist attitudes towards women that persist today. In the Bahamian constitution, the wives of Bahamian men are automatically entitled to Bahamian citizenship; however, the husbands of Bahamian women have to apply for citizenship like any other immigrant. Similarly, the children of Bahamian men, whether born in the Bahamas or elsewhere, are Bahamians at birth whereas the children of Bahamian women have a more complex journey towards citizenship (Bethel 2003). The limited ability of women to confer citizenship is the result of a political move by the new Black government to ensure that the population and the government remained majority Black

(Bethel 2003). The new government placed emphasis on women who were seen as a way in which a white majority could regain control over the government even though men presented the same challenge as they could have biracial children with white wives. The double standard discriminates against women and places limitations on women's reproductive rights.

The failure of the 2016 referendum to eliminate constitutional gender discrimination highlights the ways in which macro-level structures and micro-level behaviors and beliefs mutually reinforce gender discrimination. The referendum proposed four bills that would neutralize discrepancies in the transference of citizenship and add sex as a ground of discrimination under the constitution. The bills proposed in the referendum were overshadowed by a contentious political climate and fear that the inclusion of the word "sex" would open the door to same-sex marriage, which Bahamians overwhelmingly opposed (Wallace 2017). Thus, the rampant homophobia in the Bahamas played a large role in the country's vote against the gender equality referendum. Many Bahamian women, in particular, felt that there was no need for the changes because of fundamentalist beliefs that women are meant to be submissive to men not equal, and that the referendum was actually anti-men. The widely held belief by men that women are more successful in society deterred most men from supporting the referendum.

## **THE PRESENT STUDY**

Gender discrimination and gender-based violence are pervasive in all aspects of Bahamian society, however scholarship about Bahamian gender relations is limited in its exploration of the relevance of the nation's history for contemporary gender relations. The historical scholarship that analyzes the women's suffrage movement and the colonial legacy does not provide an

in-depth analysis of their impact on the current state of gender relations. Although some scholars like Wallace (2017) have prioritized macro-level factors of inequality over individual-level factors, there is not extensive research that analyzes the compounding effect of social institutions in maintaining a patriarchal system. In addition, there is a gap in literature that critiques the political apparatus as both a source of inequality and a barrier to achieving equality.

In light of what research has been done so far, this study explores the impact of the social, cultural, and political makeup of the Bahamas on gender relations from the perspective of women's rights activists. Interviewing activists provides a new perspective on the current state of gender relations. Scholars have acknowledged the importance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as they have influenced politics and private institutions and play an important role in good governance and economic development (Teegan and Doh, 2004; Johnson and Prakash 2007). Bahamian NGOs and activists similarly play a significant role in persuading the government and the public to more seriously analyze the status of women in society. In addition, as Bahamians, they understand the historical, cultural and societal practices that allow discrimination to persist and thrive.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

To examine contemporary gender relations in the Bahamas, I interviewed seven activists from NGOs and international organizations that advocate for gender equality. These activists have worked to champion women's rights in the Bahamas and challenge the government and the public to reimagine women's role in society. As gender rights activists, they have significant experience in combatting gender-based violence and discrimination. As such, their work to

dismantle oppressive institutions, educate the public, and support victims provides a unique perspective on the issues. These activists are acutely aware of the challenges that fighting for gender equality in the Bahamian context poses. I recruited interviewees using snowball sampling techniques. Given the limited scope of this study, there were restrictions on the amount of people who could be interviewed. However, all seven of the interviewees whom I invited to participate in this study agreed to be interviewed.

This study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews, based upon questions devised in consultation with prior literature on gender-based violence and discrimination in the Bahamas. Each interview lasted between one to two hours. Five of the seven interviews occurred virtually over WhatsApp video chat because of physical distance between the interviewees and me; the remaining two interviews were conducted in person in Nassau, Bahamas. All of the interviewees signed consent forms to be recorded during the interview. They also consented to the use of their real names in the present study to provide context on the level of experience and expertise they have in the field. The names and background for the seven activists who I interviewed for this study are listed in Table 1 (see next page).

**TABLE 1. Profiles of Bahamian Activist Interviewees (N=7)**

| <b>Interviewee</b>        | <b>Affiliation</b>                          | <b>Background</b>   |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Ternielle Burrows         | Rise Bahamas!                               | Ternielle Burrows is the founder of Rise Bahamas! An organization dedicated to raising awareness about women's rights in The Bahamas. Rise Bahamas is a grassroots organization that advocates for increased government accountability in regard to gender relations. It is an expansion of the Bahamas Sexual Violence & Child Abuse Prevention group that was founded in 2009.  |
| LaToya Johnson            | ZONTA                                       | LaToya Johnson is the current president of the ZONTA Club of Nassau. ZONTA is an international activism club dedicated to empowering women and girls through education and raising awareness to gender inequality. Johnson also works as a management consultant.   |
| Alicia Wallace            | Equality Bahamas                            | Alicia Wallace launched Equality Bahamas in 2014 which is an organization that works to promote women's rights as human rights and advocates for equality through public education, community engagement, and empowerment of women, girls, and LGBT+ people in The Bahamas.   |
| Allicia Rolle             | The Department of Gender and Family Affairs | Allicia Rolle is a gender equality and human rights advocate. Rolle works for The Department of Gender and Family Affairs as a Gender Specialist conducting data collection and reporting and assists government representatives in preparation for international conventions like CEDAW.   |
| Erin Greene               | Independent queer rights activist           | Erin Greene is a women's rights and queer rights activist who has been partnered with various advocacy groups throughout the years. Most recently Greene was involved in educating the public about queer rights in regards to the gender equality referendum.  |
| Dr. Sandra Dean Patterson | Crisis Centre                               | Dr. Sandra Dean Patterson is a psychotherapist and founded the Bahamas Crisis Center in 1982 to provide services for people who are the victims of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. The Center has received many accolades for its efforts to address gender-based violence. Patterson continues to be at the forefront of women's rights advocacy in the Bahamas through the development of educational campaigns and organizing talks to promote gender equality. |
| Marion Bethel             | CEDAW                                       | Marion Bethel is an attorney, poet, essayist, filmmaker, human and gender rights activist, and writer. In 2012 she directed the documentary "Womanish Ways" on the Bahamian suffrage movement. Bethel currently holds a position on the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).   |

I analyzed my interview data using grounded theory, employing inductive reasoning to allow the data to guide emerging codes (Charmaz and Belgrave 2007). As a result, I went through various stages of coding in order to develop the final codes. The first stage occurred immediately following the completion of each interview, when I wrote an analytical memo. The memos gave an overview of the person interviewed, lingering questions I had, and new perspectives introduced by the activist. Next, I transcribed the seven interviews using the online transcription service, Rev. I read each interview once prior to highlighting emerging themes in the second read-through. The original codes were: causes for GBV and discrimination; religious impact; gender socialization; political landscape and institutional failures; solutions; and, the public perception of GBV and discrimination. After reading through the interview transcripts a third time, I collapsed the codes into three major themes: 1) determinants of gender inequality; 2) barriers to achieving inequality; and, 3) solutions for eliminating gender inequality. The first theme, determinants of gender inequality, is comprised of the following codes: causes of GBV and discrimination, religious impact, and gender socialization. The second theme -- barriers to equality -- includes the initial codes of political landscape and institutional failures, religious impact, and the role of the colonial legacy. The coding categories, however, often interlock, wherein determinants of inequality could, at times, also act as barriers to achieving equality. As a result, some codes showed up more than once in the analyses.

## **RESULTS**

Upon analyzing the seven interviews conducted with Bahamian women's rights activists, I identified three major qualitative themes: 1) determinants of gender-based violence (GBV),

sexual violence (SV), and gender discrimination (GD); 2) barriers to addressing these forms of gender inequality; and, 3) proposed solutions to eliminate gender inequality. In what follows, I extrapolate each of the three major themes and expound on their importance for gender relations in the Bahamas.

### **Determinants of Gender Inequality**

Consistent with a structural conceptualization of gender (Risman 1998), all seven interviewees highlighted meso- and macro-level determinants of gender inequality in the Bahamas (e.g., religion, gender socialization). They avoided individualistic micro-level factors to explain gender relations, such as victim-blaming, citing psychological causes for men's sexist or violent behavior, or placing the burden on women to protect themselves from violence and discrimination. The activists also introduced macro-level barriers to achieving gender equality and ending GBV and SV (e.g., political landscape, institutional failures, colonial legacy). Furthermore, each interviewee highlighted the importance of understanding gender inequality and GBV as part of a larger social system. For example, Marion Bethel – a member of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and producer of the feminist documentary, *Womanish Ways* – said, “[g]ender-based violence is part of an economic system, it’s part of a political system.” Prior research has demonstrated links between GBV and women’s access to education, their involvement in politics, and economic freedom (Yodanis 2004). Scholars agree that GBV and SV are linked to the status of women in the country and cannot only be explained as a result of individual males' beliefs about women (Yodanis 2004). As Bethel continued, “[t]his issue of structural and systemic violence against women is found in every country and it takes different forms. It could



be high rates of rape, which is what is prevalent here.” These activists’ focus on institutions instead of individuals importantly allows for an analysis of institutions that perpetuate and reproduce sexism. In what follows, I expand on the specific structural determinants the interviewees introduced.

The seven interviewees identified three social forces that work together to maintain a patriarchal system and high rates of GBV and SV in the Bahamas. First, the interviewees spoke about the influence of religion, specifically the role that this social institution plays in shaping the Bahamian understanding of gender and perpetuating gender inequality. Religion influences gender socialization and gender roles including the perception of familial roles, extra-familial roles, and gender stereotypes (Mikołajczak and Pietrzak 2014). Most Bahamians identify strongly with Christianity, with the church representing one of the few shared experiences in the nation. According to the CIA World Factbook, 70% of Bahamians identify as Protestant, 12% as Roman Catholic, and 13% other Christian (including 1.1% Jehovah's Witness). Erin Greene – an independent women’s and queer rights activist, once affiliated with the Rainbow Alliance – said, “Bahamians don't have any cultural rites of passage and so the greatest collective experience is the church and then family and then Junkanoo.” The centrality of religion is reflected in the large role that Christianity plays in gender socialization and defining the nation's understanding of gender roles. Bethel asserted:

The Christian cultural notions are one of the root causes of discrimination against women and the continuing and persistent and prevalent discrimination against women. I don't think [Bahamians] see women as worthy of any other way of life than what Christianity prescribes.

Ternielle Burrows - the founder of Rise Up Bahamas! - indicated that fundamentalist Christianity teaches women to be submissive.

It is noteworthy, however, that the seven activists disagreed over the extent of the impact of religion on GBV, SV, and GD. Specifically, some of the interviewees cited religion as the *primary* source of sexist discrimination, while others felt that the role of religion in perpetuating gender inequality was more indirect. For example, Greene – said:

I think that for many churches, they're not focusing on messages that promote misogyny or the subjugation of women. But, I think that they are also not challenging these norms in their church environments, and they are not encouraging their parishioners to challenge these norms in their family lives.

Yet, Bethel – disagreed, arguing: “Embedded in Christianity is a notion of patriarchy and women’s subordination to men. I think this is a very strong part of our culture.” The disagreement is based on differences in the perceived power of the church in shaping the national conception of gender. However, the interviewees agreed that strong fundamentalist Christian beliefs played a role, whether primary or more indirect, in producing and maintaining the Bahamian patriarchy. Scholars agree that the conservative culture of the Bahamas often bolstered by religion reinforces sexist gender roles and stereotypes (Nicolls 2014).

The second determinant of gender inequality cited by the interviewees was the legacy of colonization on Bahamian gender relations. According to the interviewees, the colonial legacy of the Bahamas functions in similar ways as the role of religion in normalizing colonial-era notions about gender. Speaking of the lingering effects of colonization, Bethel noted that “[t]he law has a normative effect and impact, so growing up as a colonial subject and moving into independence

with colonial laws that are not changed still permeates the social understanding of norms.” As a result, sexist stereotypes and patriarchal institutions rooted in the colonial understanding of women still inform Bahamian society today. Notions of submissive women, or even women as men’s property, are directly linked to colonization. Patterson articulated this in the following quote:

If you look at [the perception of women] historically, the attitude was that women need to know their place [in society]. As long as the instrument with which you beat your woman is ‘no thicker than your thumb,’ it’s okay to do it. That was in British law, that’s where the ‘rule of thumb’ comes from.

Despite over 45 years of independence, the colonial legacy of the nation informs Bahamian laws and social norms that continue to impact the status of women today (Elvy 2016; Reid 2000). The interviewees identified, for example, the citizenship laws and the marital rape exception as sexist legislation left behind by colonialism. Sandra Dean Patterson – a psychotherapist and the founder of the Crisis Center – said, “[o]ur constitution makes it very clear that if you are a woman and you marry a foreigner, you can’t come back here [to the Bahamas]. That was a part of the colonial mentality.” Wherein the Bahamian constitution includes unequal conferral of citizenship to the spouses and children of Bahamian men and women. Regarding the marital rape exception, Alicia Rolle – a gender specialist at The Department of Gender and Family Affairs – added, “Bahamians are still under the impression that you cannot rape your wife because she belongs to you.” The interviewees argued that the colonial-era mentality that women were not full, valued citizens persists today.

The final determinant of GBV, and GD identified in the interviews is the idea that Bahamians are taught to romanticize unhealthy and abusive relationships because they have been normalized in society. For example, Patterson remarked, “[t]he messages that we’ve given boys about what the definition of a man is and what the definition of what a woman is, and the exposure to domestic violence, is creating the problems in our country that we’re seeing today.” In a study of Bahamian high schoolers, Nicolls (2014) found that 16% of boys and 6.6% of girls thought that a woman who dresses too sexy deserves to get hit by her male partner. The interviewees argued that such normalization of relationship violence instills in the public a sense of impunity towards men who perpetuate violence against women. For example, Rolle reflected on these seemingly normal dynamics of traditional gender roles and violence against women who deviate from those roles:

A lot of women and children don’t know that they’re being abused. A lot of high school kids are in abusive relationships and their boyfriends slap them, verbally abuse them and they just think that’s what’s supposed to happen in a relationship.

In addition, Bethel said, “[t]here is a tolerance clearly of violence against women. That in some ways we are deserving of it, this is our lot.” Some of the interviewees linked this tolerance and acceptance of GBV back to agents of socialization that objectify women like religious institutions, schools, and the family structure.

The activists also identified patterns of objectification and infantilization of women as sources of inequality that can also lead to GBV, SV, and GD. They argued that Bahamian society does not view women as autonomous beings with agency over their own bodies. Patterson offered the following assessment:

This idea that men are supposed to be in charge and women are supposed to follow instructions creates this environment where if women do not follow instructions or if they make mistakes they are to be punished.

Alicia Wallace -- the founder of Equality Bahamas -- added :

There's also this infantilization of women – this idea that women are akin to children under patriarchy, where the father gives them away to a husband and that husband becomes the new owner, the new parent almost. So, you have this idea of disciplining another adult added into the equation.

Scholars agree that the infantilization of women in the Bahamas is used under patriarchy as a tool to reinforce the subordination of women and is correlated with acts of GBV and SV (Namy 2017).

The socialization of Bahamians through institutions like religion, politics, and culture according to the interviewees acts as a significant determinant of gender inequality and frames contemporary gender relations. These institutions work together to reproduce patriarchy and the subordination of women and normalize GBV, SV, and GD within Bahamian society.

### **Barriers to addressing Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination**

The second major theme that emerged from the interviews with gender rights activists is barriers to effectively addressing GBV, SV, and discrimination in the Bahamas. The interviewees identified various socio-political barriers that prevent the Bahamas from achieving gender equality including the colonial legacy, political landscape, and the role of religion. Whereas the activists argued that the determinants and barriers to addressing GBV, and GD are

all interconnected, therefore some of the social forces mentioned in the preceding section are also mentioned below.

The interviewees argued that the legacy of colonization acts as a barrier to achieving gender equality because the beliefs and values about women from the colonial era remain engrained in Bahamian society today. Indeed, the nation is only just beginning to grapple with the extent of colonialism and the way it affects Bahamian women today. For example, Bethel said, “[t]he colonial legacy is one that says that what we have is superior to anything we could possibly re-enact.” Part of the colonial mentality is an understanding of the political system implemented by the British as superior to anything native Bahamians could create (Merry 1991). Greene argued that these remnants of the nation’s colonial history are difficult to change: “It goes well beyond just colonialism, it’s the laws around sexuality, the laws about men and women, the way that we relate to each other and the paradigms of relationship and living together.” She argued that the way that Bahamian’s understand relationships, sexuality, and gender are deeply rooted in the slave and colonial experience; consequently, it proves difficult to redefine contemporary norms regarding gender and sexuality.

The activists cited legislative reform as one way to address the colonial legacy of patriarchy. However, they expressed concern that attempts to change laws have proven to be challenging because of the state of the Bahamian political arena. In particular, the interviewees identified general lack of political will to combat GBV, and GD as a second barrier to achieving gender equality. For example, Bethel offered the following assessment:

There’s a direct link between gender inequality and violence against women and the government doesn’t understand that. It doesn’t have a political will to address it.

There's no political currency for them to address it. The government gets the vote of women regardless.

The interviewees suggested that gender inequality in the Bahamas is not considered a pressing issue neither by the Bahamian people nor the government. Despite numerous studies by the UN, governmental agencies, and local NGOs that highlight the need for structural change, the Bahamian government has done little to enact them. Specifically, three of the seven interviewees identified different times between 2014 and 2015 when their respective organizations made attempts to reach out to the government to provide data or assistance, only to be met with silence. For example, Wallace said the following:

In 2014, when we first started doing this work, following the non-joke that Leslie Miller [former member of parliament] made about domestic violence, Equality Bahamas presented to the government a proposal that included a very wide public education campaign about domestic violence to talk about the statistics and resources that are available for women, talking about the signs, how to get help, that kind of thing. I think we sent it to the Prime Minister, we sent it to what was then The Gender Bureau, they didn't respond.

Although the entire population would benefit from reform as indicated by the interviewees, the lack of political currency around gender equality prevents progress toward challenging the status quo.

Whereas Bahamian politicians, who are overwhelmingly men, refuse to recognize gender inequality as a pressing political issue, the interviewees stressed the importance of increasing the number of women at the decision-making level in the government. For

example, Latoya Johnson - the current president of ZONTA an activism club dedicated to education on gender equality - said, "Women are not in places and spaces to be able to speak for women. And that is one of the biggest challenges that we have right now. Is not having someone to advocate at the top level." Indeed, at the time of interview, Johnson reported that "[t]here's only one female in the Cabinet; that means things are only being seen from one woman's perspective in a Cabinet of 34." These activists argued that there is a pressing need for more women in positions of power because there would be people to advocate for legislation that recognizes men and women as equal, and shift public perception about women. Prior scholarship confirms that increased female participation in government has far-reaching benefits even beyond gender issues including a reduction in corruption (Dollar 2001).

However, the activists cited deterrents to women taking office and the subsequent lacking representation of women in public office in the Bahamas as another barrier to promoting gender equality. The structure of the parliamentary system and the political violence that women candidates face limit the presence of women in office. Johnson said, "[i]t's not even the country because the country can only choose from who goes on the ballots, but the party chooses who goes on the ballot." Political parties choose who they think can get elected, which, given the current state of gender relations, is generally not women. Rolle argued that "[a]nother reason why we have a lack of women even interested in running for politics is because of the way that women are treated when they run. They are torn apart by the media, torn apart by the general public." Women face harsher scrutiny by the party and the public, limiting their ability to hold decision-making positions in



government. Women entering the political sphere are more likely to experience this type of violence than men (Bardall, 2013; Kammerud, 2011). In fact, Bardall (2013) conceptualized these character assaults as a form of political violence – any harm or threat of harm towards any person or property involved in a political race during the election period. Owing to their fear of widespread backlash, it is unsurprising that only 21.2% of parliamentarians worldwide are women (Bardall 2013).

While my interviewees cited religion as a powerful determinant of GBV, SV, and GD, they also characterized it as a hindrance to effectively advocating for gender equality in the Bahamas. Specifically, the activists remarked that notions of male superiority and female subjugation are embedded in Christianity, which, in turn, informs the response of the public and the government to gender inequality. For example, Bethel said, “[a] part of [Bahamian] culture is a very strong affiliation that we are a Christian nation. That, for me, really frames a part of [the country’s] response to issues of gender-based violence.” The interviewees highlighted the issue of the marital rape exemption as a prime example of how religion poses a challenge in dealing with GBV.

Reflecting on the debates regarding the marital rape bill, Wallace said, “[w]omen's rights organizations and advocates were calling for [the bill] to be more progressive. The Christian Council was calling for it to be lighter and framing it as something that was a threat to the family.” The Bahamas Christian Council (BCC) is a major lobbyist group that advocates for traditionalist values (Benjamin and LeGrand 2012). The church and the BCC work to reify in legislation the sexism they taught to the public. Wallace said the following:

Typically, the government is open to making changes in law and policy to address gender issues and to the benefit of women and girls, but it is often impeded by religious bodies that have a significant amount of power and which they, political parties, government administrations, depend on to move their constituents in a particular direction. So, they're not inclined to go against them because the church is the largest constituency in the country.

Religious institutions, as a result, have a lot of power in the Bahamas and act as both determinants and barriers to gender inequality, GBV, and SV.

The macro-level institutions identified by the interviewees highlight the intersecting nature of barriers to effectively achieving gender equality in the Bahamas that work to reinforce sexism(Reskin 2012).

### **Proposed Solutions**

The final theme that emerged from my interviews with Bahamian gender rights activists is proposed solutions to effectively combat GBV, and GD. The interviewees introduced various methods to promote gender equity, including legislative reform, economic investment, and educational campaigns. According to the interviewees, because gender inequality, GBV, and SV have structural explanations they, in turn, require macro-level solutions. For example, Bethel said, "There needs to be a holistic approach to gender-based violence against many structural qualms. It can't be seen in isolation of other social structures."

First, the interviewees highlighted education as a potential site for transformation. Arguing that the government alone cannot solve gender inequality and GBV, they noted that successfully promoting gender equity required participation from all parts of society. In

particular, they called for increased collaboration with NGOs to combat gender inequality. Bethel said, “[t]he State has a responsibility for public education around gender equality. The other responsibility lies with civil society.” In addition, each interviewee argued that both civil society and the government need to reach a broader scope of women in educational programs about gender inequality and gender based violence. For example, Greene remarked,

Feminism is seen in the Caribbean as classist – it’s something that the educated have the privilege of enjoying. But, it should be for the woman who works two, three jobs, and has five kids. She should understand that she is entitled to her rights just as much as the college graduate or CEO.

The interviewees called for an intersectional approach to gender rights that supports all women. The activists offered that the government and women's rights organizations needed to engage in widespread education about gender, consent, and healthy relationships – a sentiment echoed by researchers who argue for an increase in education around gender relations (Nicolls 2014). Wallace called for widespread compulsory education: “We need to have anti-sexual harassment training in government, all government departments, in schools, we need to have it in corporate Bahamas. We need to have gender sensitivity training in all those same places.”

The interviewees also proposed the creation of more spaces for Bahamians to critically engage gender inequality besides the University of the Bahamas, the country’s main institution of higher learning. Greene said

I think we need to invest seriously and substantively at the national level and at a social level in creating infrastructure mechanisms to engage issues to provide

spaces for people to learn and to get help, to access services, information, and assistance.

Further, Greene argued that rather than attempting to challenge a person's religion as biased, it is best to help people understand their relationship to the church to allow for more substantive engagement and examination of the role of religion in gender relations. These types of proposed solutions were offered to address the lack of understanding by the public and government on gender relations by providing spaces where Bahamians would feel safe to ask questions and analyze their environments.

The activists expressed a sense that there is a lot of work that needs to be done in the political sphere to address gender discrimination, and GBV including applying a gendered perspective to policy. For example, Bethel said, “[a]t a very basic level, you would have to have a national policy that recognizes gender as a part of every aspect of national political culture.” Some of the interviewees advocated changing the current gendered perspective from one that privileges men and disadvantages women to a perspective that grants equal benefits. Currently, as gender is approached by the government through a micro-level approach; a gendered perspective would address gender inequality at institutional and structural levels, as well. Wallace said, “We need to talk about gender mainstreaming and how we can do the same work that we’re doing now, but with a gender perspective.” Gender mainstreaming is an institutional approach to addressing inequality that embeds gender sensitive practices and norms in the structures and policies of all political institutions (Daly 2005).

To further address inequality within the government, some of the interviewees introduced the idea of temporary special measures in government, specifically quotas. These activists argued

that gender quotas were necessary because it requires intentionality on the part of the government, which, as highlighted above, is lacking. Indeed, scholars argue that quotas tend to be implemented when NGOs see no other way to get women in government and are effective measures to disrupt the status quo (Davidson-Schmich, 2016). Calling for quotas, Rolle said:

Implement legislation that says if you have this many men at the table, you should have this many women at the table. You give men this much land, you need to give women this much land. Instead of leaving it up to happenstance because what happens is, we say well, it was open to everyone, but only men qualify or sign up which usually is not true.

Yet, some of the activists disagreed, suggesting that quotas would not effectively address gender inequality at all. For example, reflecting on gender quotas, Patterson said:

I'm not sure that that's the way to go because I think that it can't just be any women, just to say we have women just for the sake of being women. It has to be women who are aware, conscientize and wanting to ensure gender equality and the acceptance of men and women as equals.

Those who disagreed with the implementation of gender quotas were fearful of public backlash and candidates being framed as incapable by the media and public (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008). In addition, they were concerned about possible political violence as a response to the increased presence of women in government. However, prior research suggests that this practice would increase the presence of women in government (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008).

Another potential avenue for reform identified by the interviewees was systematic data collection regarding gender. The activists argued that there is currently little data about gender

differences in the Bahamas, which makes their work to promote gender equality challenging. For example, Wallace said:

People often ask – and this is sort of a way to deflect from the issue or to discourage the conversation – people request data. And they know that we don't have statistics on a lot of things and that is used to invalidate what we're saying is happening and what we're saying is needed.

Some of the activists highlighted poor technological infrastructure as the reason behind the lack of data. Wallace continued, “I think we need data, we need statistics, we need individual stories to be able to connect to individuals and understand where they are and how they may have struggled or the opportunities they may have missed because of gender.” As highlighted above, public opinion impacts political will; therefore, data collection according to the interviewees is important because it provides evidence of problems they know exist.

Several of the activists identified promoting women's economic independence as a way to curb GBV and SV. For example, Bethel offered the following hypothesis:

I think one of the ways I think we might begin to address this at the national level is economic empowerment of women. I think that the more women are economically empowered and have their own sense of wage-earning and autonomy from the so-called male head of the household, I think that is one way to address the issue of gender-based violence.

Indeed, prior research suggests that women's economic independence empowers them and allows them to meaningfully contribute to expenses or start small businesses (Al-Mamun 2014). The economic independence of women has been proven to reduce violence against women

(Borraz and Munyo 2020). The development of programs like conditional cash transfer programs that are aimed at women and designed to end the cycle of poverty address structural economic inequality with positive effects on both women and children. Once women gain economic autonomy, household dynamics improve as women contribute to economic burdens, children have increased access to healthcare, and the quality of life for women and children improve in general. These programs can be developed through government agencies or independently to address gender-based violence and inequality.

The solutions provided by the interviewees address gender relations as a structural problem and move away from individual level solutions. Individuals act within the context of gender relations (Ridgeway 2009) therefore measures like anti-crime bills that punish individual behaviors fail to address the root causes of gender inequality. The interviewees highlighted meso- and macro-level solutions that tackle the institutionalized nature of gender inequality. They focused on solutions that reform structures that promote and perpetuate inequality in order to improve gender relations in the Bahamas.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with seven women's rights activists to explore the historical, social, and political foundations of gender-based violence and discrimination in the Bahamas. Echoing a structural conceptualization of gender (Risman 1998), these activists offered meso- and macro-level explanations for the persistence of gender inequality, highlighting the structural nature of inequality as embedded within institutions (Acker 1990). Out of the interviews, three major themes emerged including 1) determinants of gender-based violence and

discrimination; 2) barriers to addressing these manifestations of gender inequality; and, 3) proposed solutions to end gender-based violence and discrimination. Focusing on the activists' perspective introduced the expertise of those who work to dismantle the Bahamian patriarchy and are acutely familiar with the nuances of gender relations in this context.

In the first major theme - determinants of GBV and GD - interviewees introduced meso- and macro-level social, political, and historical institutions that shape the current state of gender relations in the Bahamas. For example, the interviewees highlighted how the colonial legacy and nation-building entrenched within the foundations of the Bahamas racial and gendered politics, as well as fundamentalist religious beliefs, normalize old ideas of women that creates a culture that is accepting of discrimination and violence against women (also see Nicolls 2014; Russo and Pirlott 2006). Coupled with the infantilization of Bahamian women, these social and historical forces create a dynamic that justifies disciplining adults and excuses violence and discrimination against women (Bethel 2003). These historical legacies and social institutions continue to impact women's position in society today.

Similarly, the second theme - barriers to addressing manifestations of gender inequality - highlighted social institutions that prevent progress toward achieving gender equality. The activists highlighted the lack of political will to address gender inequities and the underrepresentation of women in government as key barriers that prevent reform, such as removing sexism from the constitution. Furthermore, this theme highlights the ways in which sexism in other institutional domains, like religion, undermines the transformative potential of the legal process.



Finally, the interviewees proposed solutions to achieve gender equality. The activists focused on meso- and macro-level institutions that address the structural nature of inequality. In particular, they suggested implementing gender quotas in government to address the underrepresentation of women in office, improving women's economic position, and promoting educational programming to foster positive attitudes toward women. In identifying the aforementioned social institutions and historical legacies that perpetuate discrimination and violence against women, the activists' perspectives provide possible solutions to address inequality that can be practically implemented.

Perhaps more importantly, the interviewees identified aspects of Bahamian society that act as *interrelated* determinants of gender-based violence and discrimination. In particular, they spoke of the ways in which gender inequalities perpetuated by religion, colonialism, gender socialization, and the Bahamian political system compound and mutually reinforce one another. For example, the interviewees highlighted the connection between religious and political institutions in the failed 2016 referendum as an example of how sexism is reinforced through these intersecting institutions. The interviewees argued that religion limits the nation's ability to address gender relations because of the power that the church and Christian lobbyist groups have over governmental progresses as the church is the biggest constituency in the country. As a result, the power of the church limits the government's willingness to introduce progressive legislation.

Similarly, the interviewees cited the constitutional marital rape exemption as another way in which social institutions like politics and religion intersect to reinforce sexist legislation. The activists indicated that the institution of marriage is used to justify abuse and promote traditional

gender roles of women as submissive to their husbands. The normalization of abusive relationships is based on traditional conceptions of women - developed out of fundamentalist religious beliefs and the colonial legacy - which foster a culture that accepts violence against women as a legitimate part of relationships. These social institutions converge to justify and legitimize violence against women and create a culture that is forgiving of men who commit violence against women.

To address GBV and discrimination reinforced through intersecting institutions, the activists proposed solutions that address inequality on multiple levels across multiple institutions. The interviewees suggested widespread educational campaigns about gender discrimination and GBV. Educational campaigns are necessary interventions because individuals' attitudes about women simultaneously reflect and reinforce sexism at the institutional and structural levels of society (Risman 1998). As a result, the interviewees proposed solutions that targeted micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of society for a holistic approach to addressing gender inequality. For example, individuals vote on reforms and therefore need to be educated about the state of gender relations and gender-based violence to make informed decisions. Therefore, intervention in one institution will ultimately fail if it is not also addressed in other institutions (Reskin 2012).

Despite their view that religion perpetuates gender inequality and undermines efforts to promote gender equity, it is noteworthy that the interviewees did not propose interventions to the institution of religion head-on. And, unlike calls upon politicians, educators, and NGOs to fight sexism, the activists did not suggest that churches and/or religious leaders should play a role in efforts to promote gender equity. The interviewees recognize that the institution of religion serves as a barrier to effectively ending sexist discrimination and violence and that it is difficult

to challenge people's religious beliefs. Instead, they suggested that addressing individuals' relationship to the church could facilitate constructive dialogue related to gender relations -- that is, they did not call into question the validity of Christianity or how churches operate. In particular, they call for church-based conversations in which congregants are able to critically discuss the construction of gender roles and the traditional role of a wife as submissive to her husband. Constructive dialogue about the role of religion in perpetuating sexist ideology may be useful in similar ways to education about gender relations wherein progress requires both structural and individual reform. Yet, it is worth noting that the aforementioned solutions do not address the *structural* implications of religion and the power dynamics religion has in Bahamian society. Why these activists did not offer interventions that would directly challenge Christianity and religion more generally should be further examined in future research.

These findings make several scholarly contributions. First, by interviewing activists, these findings draw upon the wealth of knowledge that they have on the nuances of gender relations and the practical experience in working on the front lines to dismantle the patriarchy in the Bahamas. The interviewees are acutely aware of the significant work it takes to address gender inequality which has worked to shape their perspective on the institutions that maintain and reproduce patriarchy in the Bahamas. As such, their perspective on gender-based discrimination and violence is incredibly valuable; indeed, scholars have acknowledged the importance of activists and NGOs in shaping political institutions (Teegan and Doh, 2004; Johnson and Prakash 2007). As a result, activists' perspectives on the challenges to achieving gender inequality are useful in understanding the structural changes required to improve gender relations.

Second, this study contributes to sociological understandings of gender-based violence and discrimination through a meso- and macro-level analysis of social, political, and historical institutions from the perspective of activists who advocate for gender equity. Individualistic micro-level explanations miss the structural nature of inequality, including institutions that reproduce and perpetuate sexism. The focus on macro-level socio-political institutions, in addition to the centrality of the activist perspective to identify determinants, barriers, and solutions to gender inequality, contributes to the limited existing scholarship on contemporary gender relations in the Bahamas. This study can be relevant to understanding gender relations in other Caribbean nations with similar histories, as many former British colonies throughout the Caribbean have similar discriminatory legislation remaining on their books from that era.

Finally, the present study advances the sociology of gender in its focus on gender relations in the Bahamas - an understudied area of inquiry. This study fills gaps in the literature on Bahamian gender relations by focusing on structural implications of gender inequality instead of individual behaviors in order to understand the root causes of gender-based violence and discrimination. Although I adopt Risman's (1998) theory of gender as a social structure, her framework fails to account for the cultural and historical dynamics of the Bahamas and other countries with similar colonial legacies. In also employing an intersectional approach, these findings highlight the ways in which the gender structure intersects with nation-building, race, colonization, and citizenship to frame contemporary gender relations.

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