

**Topic: Describe the various family forms found in the Caribbean and discuss the factors responsible for such diversity.**

Author: Denise Fyffe

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## **Introduction**

The family, in many ways, is the birthplace of society. It is our most basic economic, political, and social unit. It is within the family that individuals first learn the value of work and the worth of their possessions. It is within the family that individuals first experience authority, co-operation, and governance. Families teach individuals how to relate to and treat one another. Families provide an appropriate space for nurturing, growth, and education. They are truly the schools where social and emotional skills are acquired. Clearly, families provide an invaluable service to society. In fact, without families, society as we know it could disappear (Mehrotra, 2005). Each unit within every nation, ethnic group or society differs and so too fashions who we become

What is a family? Mehrotra (2005) states that frequently the answer describes the physical and formal composition of a family: a mother, a father, children, possibly grandparents, or other members of the extended family. The role of each member is often defined by gender. The man is considered responsible for the material well being of his wife, their children and elderly dependants. The woman is considered responsible for the emotional and spiritual welfare of the family unit.

## **Functions of a Family**

Although families differ in form according to the society, they nevertheless are responsible for carrying out similar functions. The primary function of the family is to reproduce society, either biologically, socially, or both (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family>). Family functions are more or less universal, in that families throughout the world are expected to perform these functions for the benefit chiefly of their family members and the community. According to Thelma M. Stewart PhD., of the Ministry of Education, the chief functions of the family are:

1. Procreation or reproduction - for continuation of the species.

2. Socialization this includes - education, religion, learning social relationships, being a responsible citizen.
3. Providing the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, health care and love.
4. Transmitting the culture: that is, passing on the language, beliefs and attitudes, goals and values.
5. Preventing incest, by regulating kinship relationships
6. Conferring Status: Status may be: derived (e.g. family name) or acquired (e.g. earned from society).

## **Family Forms**

Just as there are different functions of a family unit so too are there various forms of the family, expanding across all countries, nations, cultures and ethnic groups. There are seven basic types of families in the world: Nuclear - parents and one or more children; Single Parent - one parent and a child or children; Extended - When a nuclear or single parent family live with any extended family; Blended - A nuclear family in which one or both of the parents have had a previous marriage, and possibly children from that marriage; Adoptive- May be nuclear, single parent, or blended. The child is not blood related to the parent, but has been adopted legally; Foster - Can be nuclear, single parent, or blended. The child may stay with the family for an extended period through special government agencies; Other Types - Any group that does not consist of parent and children. An example is that of a newly married couple (<http://www.hhs.wash.k12.ut.us/departement/health/masters/ch511/type.htm> ).

## **Caribbean Family Forms**

The family, in all its variety of forms, is the pivotal institution in any society. As the Family Code of the Caribbean asserts, "the family ... is the elementary cell of society, and as such, contributes to its development and plays an important role in the upbringing of the new generations" (<http://www.sdn.org.gy/nds/chapter26.html>). In the Caribbean there are variations to the family forms found in other societies.

## **Nuclear**

Nuclear family is a household consisting of two married, heterosexual parents and their legal children (Wikipedia, 2005). Also according to Mehrotra (2005), the nuclear family is the most conventional form of family in the western hemisphere. Bonds of marriage and, consequently, children born in wedlock describe the nuclear family. However, recent years have witnessed an evolution in the form -- although not the function -- of families that will require a reconsideration of both existing values and legislation. Two kinds of families that were considered "unconventional" in the past have become more common: single-parent families headed by women and families established on the basis of de facto unions.

### **Matrifocal family**

Matrifocal family is also referred to as a single parent family. It consists of a mother and her children (Wikipedia, 2005). An average of 35% of all households in the Caribbean are headed by women. The proportions of female-headed households can reach as high as 44% in Barbados and 42% in Antigua and Barbuda. Furthermore, 54% of all separated or divorced women become female heads of households. In these households, averages of 3 to 5 children depend on the mother. Moreover, the proportion of female-headed households in the Caribbean is rising (Mehrotra, 2005). The table below gives the statistics for matrifocal households and their family size.

*Households Headed by Women and Family Size (1990)*

<b>Country</b>	<b>Average Household Size</b>	<b>Share of Households headed by Women</b>
Antigua and Barbuda	4.3	42
Bahamas	3.8*	19*
Barbados	4.0	44*
Belize	5.3*	--
Cuba	4.6	18
Dominican Republic	4.5	25
Dominica	3.6	37
Guyana	5.1*	24*
Haiti	4.5*	30*
Jamaica	4.2*	--
Trinidad and Tobago	4.5	28

\* Data refer to a year between 1980 and 1984.

Source: United Nations (1995). *The World's Women 1995: Trends and Statistics*. New York: United Nations Publication, p. 30.

## Common Law

It is well known that in the Caribbean non-legal unions are common, though it is often suggested that these unions are quite different from legal marriage in terms of the relationships they generate (Smith, 1973). This family form is so called because this occurred in Britain. It was a common practice hence the name common law (Chevannes, 2005).

Families established on the basis of common law marriage -- also called de facto unions -- have also been considered as "unconventional". However, they do constitute a significant proportion of all consensual unions between men and women. While the stable union of the couple is not legally registered or sanctioned, it generally does reflect the same level of commitment and responsibility as a legal marriage (Mehrotra, 2005). The table below displays the percentage of men and women in common law relationships in the 1980's, in both Cuba and the Dominican Republic. Undoubtedly the figure has risen significantly since then.

### *Percentage of Women and Men aged 25-44 in Common Law Marriages*

Country	Year	Women	Men
Cuba	1981	26	27
Dominican Republic	1981	28	27

Source: Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales (1993). *Mujeres Latinoamericanas en Cifras*. Madrid: Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales y FLACSO.

## Extended/Consanguineal

Extended family is a term with several distinct meanings; it is used synonymously with consanguinal family. A **consanguineal** family consists of a mother and her children, and other people — usually the family of the mother. This kind of family is common where mothers do not have the resources to rear their children on their own. Consanguineal families commonly consist of a husband and wife, their children and other members of the husband's family;

## Visiting Union

Men and women engage in love affairs while they are still in their parents' homes (Smith, 1973). If children result they may develop into visiting union were the two individuals live in separate residence, while the child stays with its mother. According to Stewart (2002), at the 4th Caribbean Early Childhood Development Conference in Guyana visiting unions make up about 25% of mating relationships in the Caribbean, (Between 19% and 34% in four different samples of men in Jamaica) and are more prevalent among low-income younger men. Mating couples reside with their families of origin and meet at a pre-arranged location to engage to engage in sexual and social relationships. A significant percentage of women in these relationships see themselves as the head of the household.

About one-third of Jamaican women have their first child during adolescence. Women often raise children alone or in extended families; whatever the arrangement, relatives and neighbours are expected to help with childcare in Jamaican communities. Most Jamaican families are headed by women, a tradition that grew out of colonial times, when slaves were not permitted to marry and raise families together. Mothers bear the primary responsibility for supporting children, as well as raising them. Almost half of Jamaican women work outside the home as professionals, in factories or as domestic helpers. Grandmothers also play important roles in families, providing care for their daughters' and sons' children, especially if the parents work during the day. Most fathers contribute to the support of their child or children, but often play a smaller role in the development or rearing of their child. (<http://www.settlement.org/cp/english/jamaica/family.html> ).

According to professor Barry Chevannes, “families are like human organisms, they live and they die. It is transitional in its form. The types change at different times, whether due to death or migration of family heads”. Also they may cycle from visiting unions to nuclear to marriage to extended families. This cycle may occur in any order.

### **Family diversity Factors**

All these forms of family grew out of varying factors. Factors that have shaped equipped and empowered each type of family unit. The family is pivotal for the good or ill of the society because it shapes the individuals who in turn shape the society. The family is also impacted on

by constraints in the macro economic, social, and cultural environment (<http://www.sdn.org.gy/nds/chapter26.html>). However it is in the historical factors that the family pattern has been greatly affected.

## **Slavery**

Frazier (1966) claimed that the Negro's enslavement tended to destroy so completely his African culture' that only insignificant, soon to be forgotten memories remained. At every stage on the slaves' journey to the 'new world' they were systematically stripped of their culture (Barrow, 1998), and so began the cultural vacuum left by the destruction of African family customs and beliefs. This vacuum was filled by attempts to adopt white planter ideologies as 'the slave tended to take over the attitudes and sentiments of his master toward religion, sex and marriage' (Frazier, 1966(1939): 27).

The broadly-shared belief, backed by most religious teaching, that the ideal family form is the nuclear family bound together in marriage that is legally and/or religiously approved. This was the teaching during slavery when the practice of the slave owners and their allies destroyed any possibility of building such families and began the process through which the single parent, female-headed household became a dominant feature in the Caribbean (<http://www.sdn.org.gy/nds/chapter26.html>).

During slavery many families were separated: fathers, mothers and children were attached to different plantations with the result that some never saw their family members again. The responsibility of bringing up the children rested primarily with the mothers and grandmothers. This situation gave rise to a matriarchal type of family, which is still common in the Caribbean today.

## **Common-Law or Faithful Concubinage**

Formerly slaves had little or no knowledge or opportunity of legal marriages. (Later the missionaries informed them). The slave owners did not encourage the institution of marriage. It was felt that the strength and power of the marriage union would offer a threat to the Plantation System. Concubinage was encouraged, as it was believed that this frail type of union would keep

the Negroes humble and complacent (Stewart, 2005). Despite the rapid social changes taking place, common-law marriages and concubinage are still with us and will perhaps be for a long time.

### **African Heritage**

The majority of slaves come from West Africa where polygamy was practiced, i.e. one man having many wives. They all shared the same compound with their husband who was the father of their children. Some African tribes chose their chief because of his virility and physical prowess. A man's virility was based on the number of his offspring, especially males (Stewart, 2005). In our society today, it is not uncommon to find men who boast about the number of children they have to show off their virility.

### **Sexual Exploitation of Slave Women**

Many slave women wanted their freedom and the freedom of their children. They wanted also to do housework and be free from the toils of field labour as well as to escape the economic hardship of slavery. So they submitted to the sexual advances of the planters and slave masters, and bore them children outside of wedlock (Stewart, 2005). A similar pattern exists today (even though to a lesser extent) where positions and special considerations are exchanged for sexual favours.

### **New Farmers**

Stewart (2005) made mention of the emancipation period in explaining the diversity of the types of family in the Caribbean. He stated that after emancipation many of the ex-slaves deserted the estates to improve their living conditions, and to acquire a sense of independence from their former bosses. With the help of missionaries, large numbers of them purchased small plots of land, up to five acres, while a few squatted on crown lands or on lands belonging to absentee owners. The missionaries encouraged marriage among these freed people who were by that time establishing families.

Many of the holdings were inaccessible to markets so those farmers with donkeys would buy from other farmers. The food would then be transported by the peasants themselves or by higglers. This practice provides financial support for the family, but it is not without its consequences. Here are two:

- Children are kept from school to care for younger siblings or to help with preparation of the produce for market.
- Children are often left to care for themselves while their parents are away

A similar pattern exists today with ‘barrel children’ as the parents to various countries to earn money.

## **Emigration**

The growing number of single-parent female-headed households is today especially vulnerable because widespread migration from and movement around the Caribbean have dispersed extended family support networks, while alternative support systems are either absent or underdeveloped (<http://www.sdn.org.gy/nds/chapter26.html>).

During the latter part of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century (1890-1910) there was a large movement of people from Jamaica to Cuba, Panama, Costa Rica and the United States of America in search of jobs. Fathers travelled away from their families leaving mothers to be solely responsible for the upbringing of their children. During the 1950s there was an exodus of Jamaicans to England. These included both fathers and mothers, and so, many children left to be cared for by their grandmothers and other relatives.

According to the Guyana National Development Strategy 2001-2010, in Guyana some communities are experiencing an increased absence of active fathers, sometimes due to migration; in Amerindian communities of the hinterland, for example, fathers travelling for long periods to work in the growing mining and logging areas create de facto female-headed, single-parent families. Migration, while a factor in the weakening of families across class and race, is differently expressed in poor families; while the issue has not been researched, it appears that among poor families there is a greater tendency for the migration of individual adults rather than



of whole families, contributing to the small but telling number of child-headed households and to a growth in child-shifting. According to the abridged version of the report prepared by the WAB for submission to the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women, 1995:

"...because the migration is largely of individuals rather than families, it has produced a fragmenting of families and communities. A small survey of 27 Indo- and Afro-Guyanese students aged 11-16 attending school in Georgetown, whose parent or parents had migrated, found that 12 out of 27 families were considered to have broken up permanently, and 19 out of 27 students had negative expectations of a future with their Parent(s). Only 7 out of 27 reported receiving adequate support from their migrant parent(s)"... (<http://www.sdn.org.gy/nds/chapter26.html>).

## **Conclusion**

The family is the birthplace of society. Every culture has its own type and function of the family unit and the Caribbean is no exception. It is apparent that in speaking of the Caribbean family we are dealing with a number of varying types. Whether it be nuclear, matrifocal, common law, extended or even the visiting unions. The matrifocal family also largely dominates this region where the female is the head of the family.

Neither in Guyana, Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, nor elsewhere, is the family static in form. Instead, family form is shaped by the environment or history. Moreover, differences in the social organisation and value systems of families are most pronounced in plural societies such as Guyana in which several ethnic groups, originally from different parts of the world, with varying traditions and distinct cultural practices, inhabit one nation state. There is therefore no one typical Guyanese family structure but different family structures shaped largely by differences in ancestral patterns of life and local histories

Slavery left its mark deeply imprinted on the family and it is thus in the strengths and weaknesses of family life (Simey, 1946:79). According to Professor Herskovits, the status of the Caribbean family and most of the other forms of Caribbean life was determined by the play of various forces brought to bear on the Negro in the new world. Slavery he argues did not 'cause'

the maternal family: it tended rather to continue certain elements in the culture endowment brought here by the Negroes (Simey, 1946).

Other elements that influenced the Caribbean family types are emigration, cultural factors, sexual exploitation of slave women, African heritage, and concubinage or common law practises. Many of these occurred during, after, or as a result of slavery. It is our family that make us even more diverse as our motto states “Out of many one people”.

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