

CENTERING WOMEN IN JAMAICA'S POOR RELIEF ADMINISTRATION: THE 1930s

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ABSTRACT

At the centre of the Jamaican Poor Relief Administration were Inspectors of Poor [sic], appointed to monitor and administer relief to applicants throughout the island. Acting on behalf of the Board of Supervision and the Parish Councils, these civil servants protected the financial interests of the government while also representing the needs of applicants for relief. Many Inspectors of Poor, through their daily interactions, developed criteria of poverty through which they were able to identify those whom they thought took advantage of the loopholes in the system. In May 1932, Acting Inspector of Poor, Mr. D. Phillips alerted the Town Clerk of the Kingston and St. Andrew Corporation of his encounter with two women who attempted to defraud the Poor Relief Office. Using poor relief records of the Kingston and St. Andrew Corporation, I explore conflicts between poor relief officers and paupers, more specifically women, to assess the ways in which women engaged and navigated the bureaucracy of the poor relief system. I contend that women on poor relief operated in communities through which they shared their aid and navigated the complex bureaucracy of the Jamaican poor relief system. In addition, I argue that poor relief records are a rich archival source from which we can engage emerging areas of research such as poverty, family, and childhood.

Keywords: Poor Relief, Poor Law, gender, women, 1930s, children, poverty, Parochial Boards, Imperial Institutions, Jamaica

RESUMEN

Los inspectores del Sistema de Asistencia a la Pobreza de Jamaica se encargaban de supervisar y administrar ayuda para los solicitantes. Estos funcionarios representaban a las juntas de las parroquias y protegían los intereses financieros del gobierno, mientras que representaban los intereses de dichos solicitantes. A través de sus interacciones cotidianas, estos inspectores desarrollaban un criterio de pobreza que utilizaban para identificar a aquellas personas que se aprovechaban de las deficiencias del sistema. En mayo de 1932, el inspector D. Phillips, avisó a un funcionario de la corporación de Kingston y St. Andrew que dos mujeres habían intentado estafar a la Oficina de Asistencia a la Pobreza. Utilizando los archivos de la corporación, exploro los conflictos entre estos inspectores y los pobres y especialmente las

mujeres pobres para determinar las maneras en las que estas mujeres negociaron la burocracia del sistema de ayuda a los pobres en Jamaica. También planteo que los archivos del sistema de ayuda para los pobres funcionan como recurso importante para investigar la pobreza, la familia y la niñez.

Palabras clave: asistencia a los pobres, leyes de pobres, género, mujer, 1930s, niños, pobreza, juntas parroquiales, instituciones imperiales, Jamaica

RÉSUMÉ

Les inspecteurs du Système d'Assistance à la Pauvreté de la Jamaïque étaient chargés de superviser et d'administrer l'aide allouée aux bénéficiaires sociaux. Ces fonctionnaires représentaient les conseils paroissiaux et protégeaient les intérêts financiers du gouvernement, même s'ils représentaient par ailleurs les intérêts des dits bénéficiaires sociaux. A travers leurs interactions quotidiennes, ces inspecteurs mirent en place un critère de pauvreté qu'ils utilisèrent pour identifier les personnes profitant des failles du système. En mai 1932, l'inspecteur D. Phillips avisa un fonctionnaire de l'antenne de Kingston et de St. Andrew que deux femmes avaient tenté d'escroquer le Bureau d'Assistance à la Pauvreté. A partir des archives de cette antenne du Bureau, j'explore les conflits entre ces inspecteurs et les plus démunis, et plus particulièrement les femmes, afin de déterminer la manière dont celles-ci négocièrent la bureaucratie du système d'aide aux indigents mis en place dans la Jamaïque. Je démontre par ailleurs que ces archives constituent une ressource importante pour des recherches portant sur la pauvreté, la famille et l'enfance.

Mots-clés : assistance aux pauvres, lois de pauvreté, sexe, femme, 1930s, enfants, pauvreté, conseils paroissiaux, institutions coloniales, Jamaïque

Ellen Edwards arrived at the Poor Relief Office on Friday May 27, 1932 and presented to the Acting Inspector of Poor, Mr. D.S. Phillips, pauper ticket no. 467. When Mr. Phillips checked the ticket number against the Pauper Register, he found that the ticket belonged to Sarah Lester and not Ellen Edwards. Three days later, on the 30th, a woman claiming to be Sarah Lester arrived at the Acting Inspector's office demanding relief payment of 4 shillings for two weeks. On checking the Pauper Register, Mr. Phillips found that Sarah Lester had been sent to the Corporation Poor House two years earlier, in May 1930. Mr. Phillips then called the Master of the Corporation Poor House in Kingston who informed him that Sarah Lester had died three days after being admitted to the poor house. Shortly afterwards, Mr. Phillips

penned and dispatched a letter to the Town Clerk of the Kingston and St. Andrew Corporation (K.S.A.C.) detailing his encounters with Ellen Edwards and the woman claiming to be Sarah Lester (Public Local Records, Kingston 2/6/397, 1929-1934, 30 May 1932).

The experiences of the women—Sarah Lester and Ellen Edwards—provide insight into the complex bureaucracy of the Jamaican poor relief system and, more specifically, the experiences of women approved to receive relief. Lester's story highlights how paupers negotiated the poor relief bureaucracy and reflects micro tensions between poor relief officials and paupers in Jamaica. An underutilized archive, I posit that poor relief records provide snapshots into the lives and experiences of Afro-Jamaicans who depended on poor relief. My evidence is drawn largely from the poor relief records of the Kingston and St. Andrew Corporation (hereafter the K.S.A.C.)—the body administering the island's capital Kingston and the neighboring parish of St. Andrew. While there was no explicit policy regarding women on poor relief, the records speak to poverty among working class women and their experiences with state sponsored relief. They reveal that women operated in communities to navigate the complex bureaucracy of poor relief during the 1930s.

Very few monographs and articles explore the working of poor relief structures or focus on the experiences of persons receiving state funded assistance in the Caribbean. To date, Janet Speirs' (1999) MPhil thesis located at the University of the West Indies Mona Campus is the only research that explores the cultures of relief-giving that were sanctioned by Jamaican parochial boards in the post emancipation period. Speirs argues that each parish established its own culture of relief giving, such as instituting almshouses, which were shaped by local race and class discourse on poverty. For scholar Margaret Jones (2013), poor relief was a branch of public health. In her study, *Public Health in Jamaica*, Jones posits that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century medical relief became an important provision of poor relief because it supplemented the inadequate health care system in Jamaica. Poor relief's most important function, Jones argues, was to save a life through medical assistance (33).

Jones' work forms part of an expanding body of literature that explores public health policies in the Caribbean. Historian Juanita de Barros (2014) contends that public health policies extended the civilizing mission of the metropole by continuing to mark black and/or colored bodies and their home environments as impure and unhealthy. She goes further to argue that British and elite creole white and colored women were key propagators of anti-black and colonial discourse when implementing public health initiatives, especially in the areas of maternal and infant health (Barros 2014:2-4). Similarly, social and labor historians

such as Henderson Carter, Leonard Fletcher, Patrick Bryan and Richard Hart engaged poor relief only as part of a general analysis of workers' conditions (Bryan 2000; Bryan 2002; R. Carter 1986; H. Carter 2012; Fletcher 1992; Hart 1992).

These scholars start from the position that colonial poor relief provisions were inadequate and failed to provide necessary assistance to those in need. The literature, therefore, starts from this premise and explores alternate cultures of relief giving created by Afro-Caribbean communities in response to debilitating socio-economic conditions, such as friendly and burial societies (Bryan 2002; Richards 1998). This paper, however, does not seek to challenge the underlying premise of the scholarship as the poor relief assistance provided by the Jamaican colonial state was indeed inadequate and served to reinforce class, race and gender stereotypes and divisions within society. Examining poor relief through the lens of public health, however, limits our understanding of the ways in which imperial institutions such as poor relief operated and adapted to local colonial contexts. In addition, such an approach fails to illuminate fully the experiences of paupers navigating the system. Poor relief records, though produced by government officials, reveal nuanced conversations about poverty, especially urban poverty and provide snapshots of family life and friendships among members of the working class. By focusing on the experiences of Lester and Edwards, this article provides insights into the ways in which paupers, more specifically women, navigated poor relief bureaucracy.

The experiences of women as ascertained in the K.S.A.C. records reveal that the poor relief infrastructure was a far more complex system, reaching beyond its intimate relationship with public health and had a significant impact on its recipients. This paper intervenes in the scholarship by using an under-utilized archive to provide a woman focused approach to assess the experiences of Jamaicans on poor relief.

The Structure of Poor Relief in Jamaica

Jamaica, along with other British Caribbean colonies, adopted and adapted imperial institutions and legislation associated with Poor Relief. Prior to emancipation, historian Cecily Jones argues that in islands like Barbados poor relief catered to the poor white community and was essential in reinforcing white power in slave societies (Jones 2007: Chapter 1). After Emancipation, however, poor relief formed part of a larger infrastructure that regulated the movement of black labor and contributed to race and class discourse by labeling the black community as amoral, shiftless and non-productive. Colonies like Jamaica and Barbados maintained a parish-based poor relief system and did not adopt a

more centralized system until the late nineteenth century.

In 1885, the Jamaican colonial state combined both philosophical premise of the British poor relief system and the structure of the Scottish poor relief system as the basis for the restructuring and centralizing of the Jamaican poor relief infrastructure. This new poor law placed oversight of poor relief in a body to be called the Board of Supervision (Colonial Office [CO] 137/520/58; CO137/526/6; CO137/526/9; CO137/526/12; CO137/526/28-29; CO137/526/31).¹ In keeping with imperial poor relief practices, Caribbean colonial officials consistently held the “pauper morally and physically culpable for his condition” (Carter 1987:15). Colonial authorities, therefore, took a punitive approach to dealing with the poor by instituting various tests and criteria to assess the need of assistance.

The Jamaican poor relief system provided two forms of assistance: outdoor and indoor relief. Outdoor relief was considered temporary assistance and included monetary, nutritional, medical and burial assistance. Paupers received outdoor relief for a short period of time up to about six weeks. For example, both Ellen Edwards and Sarah Lester received relief as outdoor paupers. Indoor relief was generally provided to the terminally ill, mentally and physically disabled, those suffering from debilitating diseases, the aged and infirm or pregnant women in need of assistance. It was within this context that Sarah Lester was moved to the poorhouse (also known as the almshouse) when she became terminally ill. Other persons on indoor assistance went to the lunatic asylum. Ideally, institutions such as “the almshouse,” in the Caribbean, and its counterpart in Britain, “the workhouse,” allowed for greater ‘discipline’ and ‘control’ to ‘engender moral reform and industry’ (Fox-Piven & Cloward 1971:13). Colonial Caribbean almshouses, however, operated as infirmaries, a temporary asylum for the mentally and physically disabled and provided rudimentary palliative care for the aged. Many who were admitted never returned to their communities. Almshouses therefore signaled to local Caribbean communities that inmates lacked a familial network that would care for them in their last days on earth. Frances Fox-Piven and Richard Cloward similarly conclude that “poor laws” stigmatized applicants as failures and “announce[d] to the world that poverty is a crime” (Carter 1987:15; Fox-Piven & Cloward 1971:31).

Under the Jamaican poor law, in order to qualify for relief applicants had to prove that they suffered from physical and mental disabilities that prevented them from working. As a consequence, within the culture of the Jamaican poor relief system, one’s ability to prove disability, debility or destitution through tangible reflections of poverty—sickness, starvation as well as physical and mental disabilities—took precedence over those for whom assistance would prevent them from suffering from debilitating poverty. It was this focus on “disability” and “debility” that has

led historians to focus more heavily on medical relief and how poor relief supplemented public health. Being able to work (“able-bodied”) effectively disqualified persons seeking temporary relief. This tiered system of destitution placed the able-bodied at the bottom of the application process, thereby making them less likely to access assistance until they became so destitute that they were unable to fend for themselves. The only exception to this rule was women with children or other dependents who could not work because they were the main caretakers of others.

In Anglo-Caribbean historiography, regional wide labour unrest during the great economic depression of the 1930s precipitated the nationalist movement and propelled political decolonization throughout the region. Very little, however, is known about how poor relief functioned during this period or the ways in which economic insolvency exacerbated existing tensions around access to scarce resources within existing relief giving structures. By 1930, limited financial resources restricted the number of paupers approved for relief as well as the amount of relief distributed to successful applicants. This engagement on poor relief during the 1930s, therefore, expands our understanding of the government response, through the poor relief system, to the social and economic crisis and allows us to ask how was relief distributed to men and women during this period (Bolland 1995; Hart 1992; Post 1969).

At the start of the great depression only a small portion of the Jamaican population received aid through the state. Poor relief figures during the period under review suggest that the demand for assistance was miniscule given that the island’s population in 1938 was 1,173,645. Between 1930 and 1938, the pauper population grew from 8,931 to 12,152 thus accounting for nine and fifteen percent respectively of the island’s population during that period. Of this 1938 figure, 9,975 persons received outdoor relief (Board of Supervision 1928; Board of Supervision 1938).² These figures, however, refer only to the number of persons approved for relief and not the number of persons applying for relief. Given that we know that the 1930s was a period of great economic insecurity throughout the region, especially with the closure of economic opportunities overseas, it is therefore fair to assume that the number of persons in need of assistance was significantly higher than the records suggest.

The Kingston and St. Andrew Corporation (K.S.A.C.) recorded a steady increase from 2,727 in 1930 to 3,187 in 1938. This is in stark contrast with rural parishes as well as the suburban and urban areas in the parish of St. Catherine, which recorded slightly less than 1,000 relief recipients over the corresponding period. Women disproportionately received outdoor relief while only slightly more men received indoor relief. According to the annual reports of the Board of Supervision, the rate of women on outdoor relief incrementally increased from 1,661 to

1,920 between 1928 and 1938 for Kingston and St. Andrew. Contrastingly, only 528 men were placed on outdoor relief in 1938 (Board of Supervision 1928; Board of Supervision 1938). The number of men receiving indoor relief (admittance to the Corporation Poor House) rose from 265 in 1927 to 404 in 1938. For the comparative period, 243 women were admitted into the corporation poor house in 1927 and increased to 332 in 1938 (Board of Supervision, 1927; Board of Supervision 1938). These figures indicate that gender played an important role in determining who received relief as well as the type of assistance an applicant was granted. Women especially those with dependents (such as an aged, ill or disabled relative or children), as a category of applicant, received assistance not because they suffered from debilitating diseases or disabilities but rather because they were caretakers of the young and the aged.

Nonetheless, demands for state sponsored assistance occurred within the context of great financial insecurity. The cost of running the system was astronomical. Poor relief consumed up to 66% of the parochial board's revenue for the western rural parishes like St. Elizabeth, Hanover and 50% of Kingston and St. Andrew's revenue (Board of Supervision 1938). Due to the reality of limited economic resources, parochial boards required poor relief officers to tightly regulate access to relief. In the 1937 Board of Supervision's annual report, Edith Clarke, Secretary of the Board of Supervision, posited "that the arrangements for poor relief [were] cumbersome and expensive from an administrative point of view; and in practice [could] only cause hardship and inconvenience" (Board of Supervision 1937:171; CO 950/137).

The Role of Inspectors of Poor

Ellen Edwards' and Sarah Lester's experience with Mr. Phillips occurs within this larger context of socio-economic insecurity which was aggravated by significant administrative upheaval in the K.S.A.C. poor relief office between 1932 and 1934. On April 23, 1932, the mayor of Kingston suspended Mr. Richard W. Ferguson from his post as Inspector of Poor for Kingston and St. Andrew on the advice of the Corporation Solicitor. Administrators at the K.S.A.C. appointed Mr. D.S. Phillips, a second class Clerk, to act in his stead. The Mayor of Kingston then hired a private accountant to examine the accounts of Mr. Ferguson and of the Assistant Inspectors of Poor for the K.S.A.C. During the investigation, several assistant Inspectors throughout the parish were suspended from their posts and their accounts reviewed. On June 2, 1932 the police arrested Mr. Ferguson and charged him with the falsification of accounts. Eventually, Mr. Ferguson was cleared of all charges and by 1934 was reinstated as Inspector of Poor. In his absence, however,

Mr. Phillips was forced to acquaint himself with the over 1,000 paupers who passed through the Poor Relief Office in Half-Way-Tree during the weekly payment to paupers (Public Local Records, Kingston 2/6/397 (1929 -1934);23 Apr 1932).

Inspectors like Mr. Phillips and Mr. Ferguson occupied a precarious position. Administrators expected poor relief officers to be diligent in their efforts to protect the interest of the state. As part of their general duties, inspectors visited registered paupers to ensure that they were deserving of the relief they received. In 1924, for example, Mr. Ferguson struck Mrs. Mary Wilson from the pauper roll after he discovered that her claim of being widowed was false. Mr. Ferguson found her husband not only alive, but also living with her at their home in Kingston (*Minutes of the Pauper Committee* 2/6/171 (1923-1928): 17 Dec 1924). Inspectors, however, were also expected to represent the interests of paupers before the poor relief committees to ensure that they got the type of relief they needed and deserved. These officers interacted daily with the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of poverty and through these experiences, they re-interpreted, manipulated and bent existing legislation so as to select recipients worthy of receiving relief. Policing the poor was an essential part of the work of poor relief officials. More importantly, it is through the interactions between relieving officers and relief that we are able to access the lives of the working poor.

The “policing” of relief recipients was not specific to the Jamaican administration. Rather, it was ingrained in the global fabric of poor relief. Given the limited research on poor relief in the Caribbean, engaging the ways in which relief officers policed the poor broadens our understanding of how demography, geography, labor, race and class tensions shaped relief giving in the region. For example, in St. Vincent poor relief fell under the portfolio of the police force. Outdoor relief was the dominant form of assistance granted to applicants in the island as the St. Vincent administration maintained one pauper asylum for a population of 57,000 (CO 950/368: 3 January 1939). In Barbados, immigration laws, settlement legislation and the poor relief law operated as a mechanism of social control to regulate the movement of labor. Settlement laws required paupers to return to the parish of their birth to request relief. In contrast, Jamaica, a significantly larger island with a larger population, had no settlement legislation, which in turn facilitated the extensive internal migration that has shaped that island’s development. The absence of settlement legislation meant that transportation assistance was a valid and popular relief request (Fletcher 1992:188).

Consequently, consistently visiting approved paupers as an essential part of their duties made poor relief officers aware of changes in the socio-economic condition and familial ties of the recipient. The Jamaican

poor relief administration could not function without poor relief officials. Accordingly, as in the case of Mr. Ferguson, administrators reacted punitively towards inspectors who failed to fulfill their duties. Administrators and other inspectors of poor believed that constant changes in the personnel of the administration made the system more susceptible to instances of fraud by the “pauper community.” Inspectors were expected to establish relationships with paupers in receipt of relief. Changing personnel disrupted old relationships and placed new inspectors in unfamiliar territory. Mr. Phillips lamented that news of Mr. Ferguson’s suspension “spread through the pauper population quickly,” and he declared that “he was on the look-out for cases which would excite his suspicion.” It was his increased vigilance and policing that eventually brought, Ellen Edwards’ activities to light (Public Local Record, Kingston 2/6/397 (1929-1934): 30 May 1932).

Women and Poor Relief

As seen in the previous section, the criteria for accessing relief—disability, debility and destitution—was arbitrary and evolved in response to the limited financial resources available to the government to alleviate hardship among applicants. Poor relief officers were guardians of these limited resources and determined who deserved state assistance. In the absence of a direct policy governing the treatment of women under the Poor Law, we are forced to infer from the records how relief officers responded to female applicants. What the records reveal is that able-bodied women with dependents (children, disabled and ill relatives) were more likely to receive relief than able-bodied men.

Colonial officials repeatedly attributed poverty among women and children to the breakdown of gender roles in society, more specifically irresponsibility of male breadwinners and the poor health of the population. This narrative pathologized black masculinity and black families and positioned women as abandoned women in need of rescuing. In her 1938 testimony before the West India Royal Commission, Edith Clarke, Secretary to the Board of Supervision, positioned women with children as persistently being in an economically untenable situation. She argued that in one month the Board had 31 applications from one parish, of which 29 were for women, who had been granted relief on account of children. These 29 women had a total of 97 children, none of whom were receiving any contribution from a father (Board of Supervision 1936; CO 950/137: 10 Nov 1938). Reiterating the view that the irresponsibility of men was the underlying cause of pauperism among women, Edith Clarke concluded that the existing structure of relief could not continue to maintain female headed-single parent family units unless efforts were

made to improve the quality of life of the average Jamaican. Until then, Clarke posited, many of these women and/or their children would repeatedly rely on the colonial state for assistance (CO 950/137: 10 Nov 1938).

Clarke's analysis, as well as the position of poor relief officials, was grounded in middle and upper class gender stratification that positioned men as the main breadwinners and women as dependents. Consequently, this would position women with children on relief as abandoned women in need of care and protection. This evaluation of working class women, however, ignored the complex cultural perspectives on marriage, women's work and family that existed in Jamaica. Work formed a fundamental part of the daily lives of the majority of Afro-Jamaican women. They dominated the local agriculture, market systems and service industries and were more likely to engage in internal migration (Roberts 1957; Vassell 1998; Moore & Johnson 2004; Mohammed and Shepherd 1991).³ Given the limited economic opportunities available, these women relied on their extended families and communities to care for their children as they continued to search for economic opportunities.

Socially conscious and sensitive to the plight of working class women, Edith Clarke was one of several middle class women who worked to empower and alleviate the plight of poor black women. Clarke's work as the Secretary of the Board of Supervision gave her extensive insight into the conditions of poor Jamaicans. She along with other socially conscious women such as Amy Beckford Bailey and Una Marson established and worked with public health and social service voluntary organizations such as the Save the Children Fund (1935), the Women's Liberal Club (1936) and the Birth Control Association (1939) that targeted black women by providing social service interventions to improve their quality of life (Brodber 1986:10; Gregg 2007). Amy Bailey, more specifically, wrote editorials in the *Public Opinion* focusing on the exploitation of poor black women in the workforce who due to substandard wages were unable to make ends meet (Gregg 2007:20). These women felt a sense of urgency to intervene in the poor socio-economic condition under which poor women lived.

In her assessment of colonial gender policy after 1865, historian and Activist, Linnette Vassell argued that colonial gender policy positioned women's role in society as nurturers and developed policies that limited the access of all women, regardless of class, to upward professional mobility, equal pay and benefits (Vassell 1998:192). In fact, Governor Arthur Richards in 1942 released a memorandum outlining, among other things, the preference of male to female civil servants and that the posts of First Class were to be "reserved for men with family obligations" (Vassell 1998:194). While this policy had a direct impact on women in the middle and upper classes, poor women were limited to domestic

service and trading due to limited access to education. Scholars such as Richard Lobdell and Giselda Eisner argue that women's participation in the Jamaican labor force steadily declined between the 1891 and 1943 censuses despite their dominance in service industries in urban centers such as Kingston (Lobdell 1988; Eisner 1961). Historian and activist Joan French posits that between 1921 and 1943 the entire female labor force declined from 219,000 to 163,000 and that there was an overall decline in the number of women working in agriculture as laborers (French 1988:39). More specifically, women's employment in agriculture, the largest area of employment for the region and the island, declined from 125,000 in 1921 to 45,600 in 1943 (French 1988:39). Several factors could have contributed to this including increased use of technology as well as discriminatory hiring practices that preferred men over women in light of limited international and local employment opportunities during the depression and the second world war. The loss of employment for women, therefore, had implications for their ability to provide for their families. Limited access to economic opportunity, therefore, would have contributed to the high numbers of women on the pauper roll (Lobdell 1988; French 1988; Hart 1992).

Nonetheless, in the hands of the poor relief administration, contemporaneous discourse on marriage and instability of the black family were tools to restrict access to limited poor relief resources. Closer inspection of the records reveal that social respectability and marriage did not guarantee relief and there were cases in which receiving assistance potentially undermined women's ability to recover from a temporary period of economic insecurity. Once individuals qualified for relief, especially indoor relief, they had to turn over any property or assets they owned to the parish's poor relief office. For example, at the December 17, 1924 Pauper Committee Meeting in Kingston it was decided that Sarah Ann Roy should give up her still, an apparatus for distilling alcoholic beverages, to the Corporation before she could be restored to the Pauper Roll (*Minutes of the Pauper Committee 2/6/171 (1923-1925): 17 December 1924*). Sarah Ann Roy's case suggests that she was previously on the roll and was removed because she owned assets. The confiscation of assets in lieu of relief often served to keep the women dependent on state relief for survival and undermined their ability to achieve economic independence once off the pauper roll. Invariably, women were more likely to combine resources, thus creating communities of support that ensured their survival during economic hardship.

Ruthlin McKay was able to receive relief for herself and her four children. On September 3, 1930, members of the Corporation Poor House Committee (CPH) of the K.S.A.C. discussed the case of Ruthlin McKay and her four children who were deported from British Honduras.

According to the records, earlier that year the inspector sent McKay to the poor house and her children went to the Maxfield Park Children's Home. The Home, which was also maintained by the Corporation and located next to the poor house, admitted infants and children below fourteen years of age. Members of staff noted that McKay had on her person £3 when admitted and the Corporation hoped to recuperate the cost of upkeep for the children. It was concluded, however, that the colonial state would appropriate the three pounds to recover the cost of transporting McKay and her family from British Honduras to Jamaica. The minutes of the Corporation Poor House committee were silent on what happened to McKay's husband but noted that Anabella Robertson of 5 Chancery Lane in Kingston removed Ruthlin McKay from the poor house. The record did not say where she went but her children remained in the Maxfield Park Children's Home (*Minutes of the Managing Committee* 2/6/172 (1928-1930): 3 Sept 1930).

Throughout the 1930s, the Jamaican colonial government funded the repatriation of thousands of Jamaicans who were unemployed as a result of the closure of economic opportunities in the region. While the records are silent on the reasons for McKay's deportation, what is clear is that she neither had the financial wherewithal to pay for the trip for herself and her children back to Jamaica nor did she have a place to stay upon her return. The latter might have occurred because she was unable to notify family members or friends either prior to or upon landing that she had returned to the island. It seems, however, that once her extended community realized that McKay was in Jamaica, they came and got her. It is possible that both McKay and Robertson decided it was best to leave the children in the care of the state until McKay was in a position to care for and support them or until they attained fourteen years at which point they would have to leave the Home.

Having children and other dependents did not always guarantee support. For example, in 1921, a widow, whose name was never provided, applied to the Inspector of Poor, Kingston and St. Andrew, for help for herself and her five children, all under the age of eleven years. The Law officers of the Crown decided that some mothers, like the widow, were not entitled to poor relief because they "were healthy and capable of earning the means of subsistence and were not 'wholly destitute' within the meaning of the law." Thus reinforcing the underlying premise of poor relief, that applicants must prove the three D's—disability, debility and destitution in order to qualify for relief. The statement "wholly destitute" connoted that applicants must have no extended community support AND also suffer from a debilitating illness. One would expect that the widow would be the exception to the rule because her economic position could be attributed to the death of her husband. Being healthy,

therefore, worked against her application for assistance (Public Central Records, Kingston 1B/75/120).

The widow's case generated extensive debate between the Board of Supervision and parish parochial boards. The Board of Supervision sent out a memorandum to the parochial boards suggesting an amendment to the 1886 legislation to make provision for women who, by unfortunate circumstances such as death, were left behind to take care of children. Eight of the fourteen parochial boards wholly or theoretically agreed with the proposed change to the legislation. However, the St. Thomas and St. Catherine Parochial Boards advocated the separation of the mother from the children, who would then be placed in either the Maxfield Park Children's Home in Kingston or the Rio Cobre Children's Home in the parish of St. Catherine (*Minute Paper, Summary of Replies* 1B/75/120). For many operating in the religious community and the colonial administration, women with children on poor relief were considered unproductive citizens and burdens to the Jamaican economy. Poor relief records, therefore, reveal the arbitrary manner in which class, race and gender discourse shaped how poor relief officials responded to demands for assistance. In theory, both the colonial government and women's organizations were committed to promoting the Victorian two-parent household. It was within this framework that the government privileged male labor over the labor of women, thereby reinforcing women's dependency on men for economic support. But in practice, women, like the nameless widow who adhered to contemporary socio-cultural practices of family values, were condemned for demanding assistance necessary for their survival (Moore & Johnson 2004:96).

In the case of the widow in 1921, the proposed separation could have been fuelled by two additional factors. Changing the law essentially redefined the criteria to apply for relief by shifting the focus away from debilitating illnesses and the absence of community support to explicitly catering to able-bodied women with children in economic distress. Though women with dependents demanded a significant amount of outdoor relief, changing the law would in the long run increase the demand on poor relief in the island. Additionally, it is possible that administrators believed that admitting the widow's children would remove impediments to her economic mobility at least until they attained fourteen years of age. According to both the Poor Law and the Industrial Schools Act, the parochial boards assumed guardianship of children admitted to state run children's institutions where administrators would provide for the basic needs of children—food, clothing, shelter and education.

The response of the parochial boards also brings into question the state's willingness to implement policies that helped women who adhered to gender norms which the state along with religious organizations

advocated. Historians such as Patrick Bryan, Brian Moore and Michele Johnson posit that the colonial state and religious bodies centered marriage, with the man as the main breadwinner and women staying in the home, as one of the most important indicators of morality and the only appropriate context in which to have a family (Bryan 2000:92-93; Moore & Johnson 2004:96-99). In their view, all other types of domestic unions failed to meet the socio-cultural standards of respectability and civility. Administrators' willingness to separate the widow from her children, however, effectively punished the widow and ignored the fact that her socio-economic circumstances were caused by the death of her husband. Poor relief officials used her physical condition as an able-bodied person and social respectability as a tool to limit widow's access to relief.

Experiences of women are also found at intersection of poor relief and public health and they reveal that marriage did not untangle the web of class tensions that existed in Jamaican society. Between February and July 1936, the Pauper Committee of K.S.A.C. appointed a sub-Committee to enquire into the conduct of Nurse Kathleen Mills, a Parochial Midwife. On February 25, 1936, Nurse Mills helped deliver twins to first time mother Mrs. Mavis Bramwell of Smith's Lane, Kingston. Upon her arrival, Mills found Mrs. Bramwell in mid labor, very weak, with a temperature of 104 degrees. Despite this, Bramwell successfully gave birth to twin boys. Nurse Mills never returned after leaving Mrs. Bramwell on the 25th. Subsequently the twins died on the 26th and 27th respectively and Mavis Bramwell, was admitted to Jubilee Hospital on the 3rd March "in the most neglected condition." She died two days after admission (*Minutes of Subcommittee 2/6/174*: 28 July 1936).

Nurse Mills testified that Mrs. Bramwell had ulcerations on her buttocks and other parts of her body and lived in general squalor and argued that she believed that she might become contagious and infect other patients if she remained in Mrs. Bramwell's presence (*Testimony of Kathleen Mills 2/6/174*). Nurse Mills swore that she contacted Mr. Ferguson, the Inspector of Poor for K.S.A.C., to have Mrs. Bramwell admitted to the Corporation Poor House (CPH) for medical care. She testified that Mr. Ferguson told her that members of the community stopped him from removing Mrs. Bramwell to the poor house. Inspector Ferguson, however, denied receiving a request from Nurse Mills and claimed that he received burial requests for baby boys from the father, Mr. Bramwell, shortly after their deaths but neither the father nor Nurse Mills had informed him that the mother was desperately ill. He declared that it was the responsibility of parochial nurses to contact the District Medical Officer (DMO) in dire situations so as to facilitate admissions to the Public Hospital or Jubilee Maternity Hospital. Based on the findings, the KSAC suspended Nurse Mills for two months.

The conditions under which Bramwell lived were not unusual for the period. Numerous commission reports including the West India Royal Commission of 1938-1939 (also known as the Moyne Commission) spoke extensively of the poor conditions under which the poor black community lived. Inadequate provisions in potable water, housing, sanitation and underemployment were cited as the main causes for ill health and the spread of diseases in the Caribbean colonies (Macmillan 1936, Reprinted, 1971:78, 84, 91).⁴ Several nutrition commissions throughout the Caribbean attested to the fact "that the diet of laboring population must be classed as bad" (Simey 1946:13). The situation was worse among the urban poor who had no access to land and were dependent on extremely low wages. Mrs. Bramwell's living condition and by extension, her poor health was a testament to pitiable conditions under which the working poor lived. Existing public health campaigns targeted the living conditions under which the poor lived but more specifically mothers but Mrs. Bramwell's debilitated condition qualified her for immediate medical relief and admittance to the poor house (Barros 2013).

According to the Nurse Mills testimony, the community prevented Ferguson from moving Mavis Bramwell to the poor house for treatment. Almshouses in Jamaica suffered from overcrowding, poor sanitation and diet as well as inadequate housing facilities. Every year, during inspections of almshouses, the Board of Supervision complained of inadequate sanitary facilities for men and women, the absence of well-trained staff, poorly maintained tuberculosis and maternity wards, poorly kept records and the refusal of Parochial Boards to adopt diet regulations and attend meetings associated with the management of poorhouse committees. Compared to other parish poor houses, K.S.A.C. almshouse suffered from the greatest overcrowding. The almshouse was built to accommodate 500 inmates yet in 1936 it housed a daily average of over 700 persons. Most persons admitted to almshouses suffered from incurable illnesses, general poor health or extreme destitution. Edith Clarke described the poor conditions under which inmates lived on a visit to the St. Elizabeth Almshouse in 1936:

some inmates lying on mats on the floor; one of these was a very old immaciated [*sic*] man, another a child of 5 years with ulcers on the buttocks and spine... There was a separate room for TB cases. It contained an infant and a young woman about 19 years. The infant was lying on a heap of dirty rags in a wooden crib with no mattress. There are 4 female nurses... they have no qualifications and 2 are illiterate. The so-called night nurse is an old inmate.... (1B/5/77/57, 1936: 6 April 1936)

It is important to note that since the nineteenth century many Jamaican and other Caribbean colonial populations equated admittance to the poor house (also known as almshouses) with disfiguration and social

alienation (Carter 1991:22). These institutions often housed the chronic sick and physically and mentally disabled as well as pregnant women and those with communicable diseases. Members of the public were well aware of the poor conditions under which persons in poor houses received aid and many did everything in their power to deter admittance. General resistance by parochial boards to improving conditions at these institutions had a tangible effect—some persons admitted to almshouses on a temporary basis never returned to their families. It is possible that members of Mrs. Bramwell's community believed that entry to the poor house would exacerbate her condition and result in her death. Mrs. Bramwell's, Sarah Lester's and Ellen Edwards' experience with poor relief should be placed within the larger socio-economic context of institutional dysfunction, chronic poverty, and debility that shaped the daily lives of Jamaicans. Women attempted to exercise agency in the poor relief system but the survival of those at the intersection of poor relief and public health was undermined by discrimination and negligence.

In the case of Sarah Lester and Ellen Edwards, Acting Inspector of the Poor, Mr. Phillips guarded the limited funds available for the relief of the poor while the women in the narrative, however, are positioned as persons seeking to exploit the system. When Mr. Phillips discovered that Sarah Lester had died two years earlier in the Corporation Poor House, he sent for a detective to question the woman who held Sarah Lester's pauper ticket. She confessed that her name was Letitia Gray and that Sarah Lester lived with her prior to her death in the Corporation Poor House. Gray was also a registered pauper but Mr. Phillips confiscated her ticket three days before when Mariam Satchel presented Gray's ticket for payment.

The narrative provides insight into the ways in which communities of women negotiated the bureaucracy of poor relief to provide for their dependents. According to poor relief records, in 1930 Sarah Lester lived with Letitia Gray and received outdoor relief (possibly medical relief) since ill health prevented her from working. Due to her worsening medical condition, the Inspector, possibly Mr. Ferguson, transferred Sarah Lester from outdoor to indoor relief by sending her to the Corporation Poor House. It is possible that Letitia Gray, though able to work, qualified for outdoor relief as Ms. Lester's fulltime caretaker. She may have received either monetary or nutritional assistance. Ms. Lester's death in 1930 would have allowed Letitia Gray as an able-bodied woman to seek employment and, therefore, be removed from the pauper roll. The failure of the poor relief officer to verify the change in Letitia Gray's home situation allowed both Gray and Lester to remain on Kingston's pauper roll as approved outdoor relief recipients for two years after Lester's death. The oversight also allowed Letitia Gray to give Lester's pauper

ticket to Ellen Edwards and Miriam Satchel to obtain Gray's pauper ticket so that they too could claim monetary outdoor relief.

It is possible to conclude that Letitia Gray was using Sarah Lester's financial relief to supplement her own economic situation while at the same time sharing her own money with other women around her, like Ellen Edwards and Miriam Satchel. In the end, Letitia Gray was arrested and charged with receiving money under false pretenses, and as a consequence was removed from the pauper roll. Despite these consequences, Gray provided supplemental income to enhance her quality of life and those in her inner circle. It was unlikely that Ellen Edwards or Miriam Satchel would qualify for assistance again as long as Mr. Phillips acted in the position of Inspector of Poor, which he did until Mr. Ferguson returned in 1934 (*Notice of Action* 2/6/397, 1929-1934: 17 August 1933).

Taking a woman centered approach to examining poor relief records reveals the inconsistencies in the state's position on relief giving, women's employment and working class families. Administrators viewed the presence of able-bodied women like McKay and the widow on poor relief as tangible evidence that home life among the black laboring population was both dysfunctional and unstable. Reports of the Board of Supervision repeatedly highlighted that demand for assistance was highest among women with 'illegitimate' children with no men to assist them, but the archive reveals that the issues facing women on requesting assistance existed in complex socio-economic circumstances.

The experiences of Letitia Gray, Mariam Satchell, Ellen Edwards, Ruthlin McKay, Mrs. Bramwell and the nameless widow reveal three things about poor relief in Jamaica. Within the Jamaican poor law, relief was granted to those who had a disability, suffered from ill health and lacked family or support system. Women with dependents were the exception to the rule and received assistance on the basis that the role of caregiver for a child or someone in need of assistance. Limited financial resources, local socio cultural and class based discourse on the black family, marriage and poverty however, ultimately determined their access to relief and defined the experiences women had with poor relief officials in Jamaica during the 1930s.

Poor relief officers were absolutely essential to the working of the Jamaican poor relief administration. Parochial boards relied on these officers to guard the limited resources available for distribution and as a result, paupers were viewed as persons ready to exploit the system. Visiting paupers and keeping poor relief records up to date kept relieving officers abreast of changes in a pauper's life. Disruptions in the offices of poor relief officials opened the door for paupers like Letitia Gray, Miriam Satchell and Ellen Edwards to take advantage of loopholes in the system. Ultimately, these disruptions within the administration

created poor relief records, which are a rich archival resource, that allows us access to the lives and experiences of average Jamaicans and their responses to the complex bureaucracy of the poor relief administration.

Women operated in communities to survive in the Jamaican economy and navigate poor relief bureaucracy. Though women with children were most likely to receive assistance, having dependents did not guarantee relief. Very often parish administrators argued that a mother's ability to work negated the need for assistance from the state even if that need was caused by the death of the main breadwinner. In the case of female-headed households receiving assistance, local socio-cultural discourse on the instability of the black family reinforced the perception that these women with children were a burden to the poor relief administration. Many of these women relied on each other to navigate the complex bureaucracy of the poor relief administration and used their dole to support each other. Poor relief records, therefore, illuminate the ways in which persons on poor relief and relief officers interacted with each other and navigated urban poverty. More importantly, these records humanize persons on state assistance and provide us access to their names and glimpses of their lives.

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Notes

- ¹ Mr. Craig of the Clarendon Parochial Board introduced the idea of establishing a central body to regulate the running of Poor Relief in the island, similar to the institution that existed in Scotland, in the Legislative Council in 1885. His idea received the support of Governor Norman who encouraged him to push ahead with a bill. However, the parochial boards viewed the instituting of a central body as an affront to their newly attained freedoms under the 1884 constitution.
- ² These figures do not include those receiving assistance as inmates

in Bellvue Hospital and Industrial Schools.

- ³ In the last thirty years a significant body of literature building on the anthropological and sociological studies from the forties and fifties provide extensive evidence of high levels of women's participation in the workforce in Jamaica and the Caribbean. The paper, however, seeks to make an intervention in the historiography of the 1930s, the labour movement and decolonization by highlighting that poor relief records are useful for accessing the voices of the economically dispossessed.
- ⁴ In most Anglo-Caribbean territories, the bulk of the most fertile land, even in territories with an extensive peasantry system, was concentrated in the hands of a few people. Workers in islands like Barbados, Antigua and St. Kitts, were wholly dependent on the sugar industry for employment while in Jamaica, labourers balanced seasonal jobs on the sugar estates with odd employment. In other islands, inadequate land allocations of five acres or less forced peasant farmers to eke out a living by selling the surplus after personal consumption on the local market or where possible, for export. In Barbados, though five acres was officially held as the minimum needed for a decent subsistence, 77% of smallholders (18,000 out of 176,000) owned less than one acre.

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