

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The collision of feminisms, sexuality, and trafficking in persons in the Caribbean—A place for Kempadoo

Cherisse Francis 

School of Law and Society, St. Mary's University, Strawberry Hill Campus, Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, UK

Correspondence

Institutional Affiliation: School of Law and Society, St. Mary's University, Strawberry Hill Campus, Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, UK.
Email: cherisse.francis@stmarys.ac.uk

Abstract

The existence and development of feminist scholarship and practice have been revisited by feminist anthropologists and sociologists exploring it among the gendered cultural and historical dynamics of the Caribbean. Feminist Caribbeanists' pioneering efforts that fit within this theoretical family have challenged the Global North status quo to shape new ways of "doing feminism." Kamala Kempadoo's trailblazing efforts take up this mantle and expand feminist possibilities. This article traces the evolution of Caribbean feminisms, attending to the dynamics and contentions using the voices of foundational feminist Caribbeanists as context. It celebrates Kempadoo, foregrounding examples of how she has been central to cementing this work and disrupting exogenous discourses. Through these examples, I highlight the intersectionality of Caribbean feminisms, cite feminism as a "decoding tool" for social phenomena and explore the need to continue Caribbeanist scholarship. Standing on Kempadoo's shoulders, it introduces excerpts on how my own work is influenced by and expands Caribbean feminisms through Indigenous methodologies, amplified voices, and critical literature. In essence, the article argues that feminist anthropology as a discipline can gain much from applying Caribbean feminisms. Though not homogeneous, Caribbean feminisms continue evolving and deserve recognition as a unique knowledge producer.

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INTRODUCTION

Women's experiences in Caribbean societies have often been reduced to a hegemonic existence measured against Eurocentric ideals (Barriteau, 1995; Haynes, 2020). What it meant to be "feminine" during slavery and colonization was premised on the expectations of a European White woman: pious, innocent, a mother, and submissive to a man as the head of the household (Beckles, 1998). To varying degrees, women's roles, "place," and sense of being were and to some extent still are determined by their race and class, all remaining subordinate to the patriarchal nature of these former plantation communities. Caribbean women consistently defied these expectations to pursue their own modes of existing. Resultantly, Caribbean feminisms developed in response to the region's broader social and political conditions. Since the 1980s when Caribbean feminist scholarship blossomed, scholars have grappled with the tensions between the knowledge produced from experiences of Caribbean women and what was recorded or considered to be accepted understandings. As Hosein (2019, 71) noted, "Caribbean feminist scholarship has long put gender and sexualities in intersection with other identity categories, as well as masculinism and heteropatriarchy at the heart of Anglophone Caribbean nation-statehood as it was constituted through colonisation and, later, post-independence politics."

This article reflects on Caribbean feminist scholarship as a site of "knowledge production" and action offering policy reform initiatives, developmental programming, and "corrective" data. It reflects on Kamala Kempadoo's work as seminal to these processes and explores how feminist anthropology can unravel some of the perceived inconsistencies on Caribbean women's experiences while championing the usefulness of the individual perspective. First, a brief review chronicles the evolution of Caribbean feminisms for a non-Caribbean audience, noting the foundations of Kempadoo's scholarship. Although the piece foregrounds Kempadoo, the praxis of Caribbean feminisms is collective, and other voices necessarily arise in discussions. Then, the article celebrates two areas where Kempadoo has successfully challenged the status quo and articulates the questions that remain. It explores the spaces where a need persists for further Caribbean study in trafficking in persons (TIPs) and sexuality. These examples supply a case study of Caribbean feminisms generally and in the sociocultural study of intersectionality, anti-trafficking in persons (ATIPs), and sex work. This autobiographical informed research will close with critical reflections on how Kempadoo's work has informed my own research and reinforced the need to continue pursuing social science and anthropological scholarship from a Caribbeanist perspective.

Caribbean feminisms—For better or worse

From the 1960s and 1970s, "feminism" as a global movement was progressing into scholarship and theory, rather than purely into grassroots activism. Many European and American feminist scholars finally recognized the benefit of linking gender equality to broader struggles. Caribbean developments followed a similar trend segueing into evidence-based intellectual traditions to expand understandings of what had previously been only lived experience. One of the nascent aims of Caribbean feminist scholarship was offering critical perspectives to Eurocentric ideologies and their ill-fit for post-independence Caribbean societies.

Problematically, describing regional experiences in the same way as Western feminisms homogenizes Caribbean feminisms and insulates them from important regional events (McDonald, 2016, 54). Through their scholarship, Caribbean feminists instead established our “golden thread” as decolonization, social justice, and intersectionality.

On the basis of these underpinnings, by the 1980s, academics and activists started influencing public policy based on Caribbean women’s diverse experiences in sexuality and sexual engagements, family life, and the economy (Barriteau, 2003a). The persistence of these early individuals produced a strong body of literature promoting Caribbean feminisms as a scientific knowledge producer. Through analyzing and theorizing the multiple, shifting dimensions of Caribbean women’s lives, Barriteau and Mohammed for instance sought to “correct” the “writing out” and “minimization” of women done by record keepers and intellectuals (Barriteau, 2003a; Mohammed 2003; Providence, 2005, 67–68). From their vantage point, different approaches are needed to study and identify Caribbean women.

During the 19th and early to mid-20th centuries, Caribbean countries faced numerous social and economic shocks such as a declining sugar industry, large-scale economic emigration of mostly Black males, political instability, and shifts in foreign investments (Harrison, 1991, 75–179; Newton, 2004). These conditions forced women to become sole income earners and household heads. Unsurprisingly, as most women had little formal education or formal economic engagement, they struggled to find viable economic activities in traditionally masculine roles (Massiah, 1986). To eke out a living for themselves and their dependents, many turned to the informal economic sector, including sex work (Harrison, 1991, 178–179). Though these efforts ensured survival, they did not fit the colonial blueprint of family, labor, or morality. Thus, women who stepped outside “feminine” roles were labeled as destabilizing and subversive (Beckles, 1998).

Furthermore, in the 1950s and 1960s, Caribbean women capitalized on broader labor and political unrest to highlight their marginalization through organizing. These “grassroots” feminist spaces critiqued “Western” feminisms as being elitist, classist, and exclusionary (Lampart, 1987). Instead, they prioritized advancing economically disadvantaged women. Unfortunately, the contributions of these movements were again neglected when independence projects commenced. This sidelining prompted Caribbean women’s collectives to become more formalized and expand their focus to reproductive rights, domestic violence, and political representation.

Theory such as Barriteau’s Caribbean feminist lexicon fostered indigenous interpretations of these historical conditions (Barriteau, 2012). Barriteau’s lexicon explains how gendered power relations have been produced and employed throughout various levels of Caribbean society. In turn, this scholarly engagement rebuts the claim that feminism falls outside Caribbean intellectual tradition and interests (Haynes, 2017, 30, 47). It also advanced previously omitted knowledge on how women of color participated in plantation society, using their bodies as resistance and their later contributions in nationalization projects. Through these lenses, it became clear that Caribbean women have created and used “feminisms” to challenge the gendered status quo, influence policy change, and contribute to Indigenous knowledge, displacing dominant (mis)understandings of their societies all with the objective of improving Caribbean women’s public and private lives (Haynes, 2017; Reddock, 2007). It was against this shifting backdrop that Kamala Kempadoo found her footing as an academic and advocate.

Kempadoo’s contributions to Caribbean feminist scholarship

Kempadoo became a pioneer in Caribbean sex work, sexuality, and TIP research. In this region, sex, familial relationships, and money are taboos, not to be spoken of in public.

Nevertheless, these topics are foundational to Caribbean society. From the 1990s, Kempadoo used feminist ideas to “decode” current notions. As a Caribbeanist and sociocultural scholar, Kempadoo has critiqued Global North feminist approaches while repositioning these narratives for Caribbean realities. Her process has become “corrective feminist scholarship,” making meaning about Caribbean existences from Caribbean experiences while creating new approaches and methods of understanding (Bolles, 1993, 154).

Two noteworthy contributions Kempadoo made to challenging and creating sociocultural and anthropological perspectives are as follows: her intersectional approach and her use of feminist approaches to demystify existing social phenomenon in the Caribbean. Her extensive works from then until now are a case study on the impact of Caribbean feminisms and unravel the complexities and apparent incongruence of regional experiences against global interpretations. For her, the rise of feminist studies “challenged and confirmed earlier representations of sexuality in the British-speaking Caribbean” (Kempadoo, 2002, 5). Despite her various accomplishments, Kempadoo has raised questions about the work left to do in Caribbean feminist scholarship.

Some early Caribbean thought-leaders argued that the “development” of Caribbean feminisms replaced the organic foundations of activism and social change with academia (Andaiye, 2009). This evolution was complex because although the Caribbean’s diversity is worth celebrating, it presents a challenge for anthropologists and sociologists in explaining these societies. Thus, creating generalized categorizations was easier. Kempadoo (2004, 60) observed that unfortunately, as time went on, many concepts such as women’s sexuality, labor, and morality that prompted the development of Caribbean feminisms became subsumed in gender scholarship. This heterogeneity across “multiple disciplines, periods, areas of study and aspects of life” obscures the contributions of feminist scholarship (Sheller, 2012, 24).

The unresolved homogenization continues to produce skewed understandings of women who planted the seeds of Caribbean feminisms long before the term “feminism” was globally adopted. Prevailing discourses focus on women’s bodies, skin color, and sexual practices rather than advocacy or leadership. Gentles-Pearl (2025, 143) writes about Queen Nanny of the Maroons. Queen Nanny is believed to have led her people’s resistance against British colonizers in the 1720s and 1730s. However, the major folklore about Nanny tells that she liberated her people by using her “ample buttocks to catch their bullets and hurl them back at her attackers.”

In response to this misdirection, Kempadoo advocated for an intersectional and interdisciplinary approach to feminisms. Intersectionality is now conventional in social science research, but Caribbean feminists have long been working in this way. Andaiye (2009) suggested that Caribbean feminisms are naturally “intersectional” because they need to address all forms of exploitation, subordination, and discrimination—particularly those that have traditionally been “ignored or downplayed.” Kempadoo added the dimension of history into her sex-work research noting that women’s agency falls against a backdrop of exploitation and vulnerability. Women’s choices to enter various sexual encounters follow a generations-long survival mentality necessitated by transatlantic slavery and post-emancipation emigration. This approach also connects to gender identity indirectly responding to masculinist studies that arose to “correct” the perceived bias toward women that feminist literature provided with the aim of restoring colonial ideologies about women (Kempadoo, 2011). Kempadoo’s critical writings bring a contemporary, Caribbeanist approach to intersectional scholarship drawing connections from the past and highlighting the intersections of gender, race, and other identity markers that shape Caribbean society.

Additionally, Kempadoo’s perspective cultivates the understanding that sex work is an integral part of the region’s history, standing “at the nexus of at least two areas of women’s

existence”: as an extension of racialized sexual relations and as labor (Bush, 1990; Kempadoo, 2001, 40). This nuance shifts the discussions from traditional morality narratives and provides fodder for those lobbying to destigmatize sex work. Her intersectional scholarship also expands the understanding of how Afro-Caribbean, Indo-Caribbean, and mixed-race women experience gender inequality differently due to their racialized histories. This work reflects the origins of Caribbean feminisms and remains fundamental for activists and academics engaging with social justice issues.

Kempadoo’s second but connected critique concerns the thematic evolution of Caribbean feminist proposed that despite decades of literature, Caribbean sexuality has barely been touched and that this silence has led to “conflicting and contradictory ways.” She repeatedly revisited this idea and how it limits attitudes to women’s agency, sexual relations, prostitution, and vulnerability to exploitation. One of Kempadoo’s main tenets is that a dominant heteropatriarchal “image” exists regarding sexuality and sex work in the Caribbean. According to Kempadoo (2001, 40), literature, including some feminist standpoints, cite sex work as an exploitative endeavor still inextricably tied to colonialism and the “control exerted by European men” over non-White women. She opined that these views silence and omit the perspectives of many Caribbean women (Kempadoo, 2011). Multiple regional scholars have interrogated the juxtaposition between the vulnerability and insecurity of Caribbean women and their resourceful living tradition of female economic autonomy. Kempadoo furthered these thoughts concluding that some Caribbean women engage in sexual entanglements to escape violent relationships or for pleasure rather than the productive purpose treasured during transatlantic slavery (Cabeza, 2009; Kempadoo, 2011, 16). None of these narratives are contradictory; as traditional analyses suggest, they just illustrate the multiplicity of individuals in Caribbean societies.

To explain the perceived disconnect, Kempadoo reframed the discourse on formalized sex work and other transient sexual encounters explaining how Caribbean women and girls have strategically leveraged their sexual allure in a new account that celebrates Caribbeanness. Overtime, she has called for more rigorous sexuality studies that acknowledge that the “disorderly terrain of Caribbean sexuality” does not fit neatly into gender constructs and that we must draw inferences from masculinities, family life, and hegemony (Kempadoo, 2004, 62). As a part of social reality, better sexuality research would be useful for several disciplines, including migration, tourism, and globalization studies (Sharpe & Pinto, 2006).

The following section will reflect on the dissemination of Kempadoo’s contributions and the ongoing need for Caribbean feminist studies. It will further explore instances where mainstream feminist scholarship has heeded Kempadoo’s calls and the limitations where it has not.

Leading by example: Kempadoo’s use of Caribbean feminisms to “decode” sexuality, TIP, and feminism

Kempadoo has made headway in arguing that sexuality, sex work, and TIP are separate concepts “mishandled” as a mash-up of ideas owing to the religious and morality-based ideology retained from our former colonial masters. Her scholarship has revealed how the conflation and, in some instances, ignoring of these concepts creates harms for sex workers, trafficked persons, and miseducates the public at large.

In the idyllic Caribbean landscapes, frequent occurrences of “friends with benefits,” “outside women,” or “sweethearts” stand in stark contrast to the stigmatization and criminalization of the exchange of sexual favors for tangible goods or services, that is, prostitution and the widespread condemnation of “sex outside marriage.” Kempadoo was one of the earliest

scholars to describe the region's complex "sexual-economic entanglements" within academic literature in a way that Caribbean people recognize and "foreigners" understand.¹ As mentioned, her writings approach sex work as labor to be interrogated within local social and economic structures.

Historically, Caribbean islands have been "sex havens for the colonial elite," which are now frequented by sex tourists (Kempadoo, 2004). Kempadoo (2004, 9) commented that the heteropatriarchy within these postcolonial territories "privileges heterosexual, promiscuous masculinity, and subordinates feminine sexuality." That privilege allows men, including European sex tourists, to be welcomed into our society, but condemns the Caribbean women servicing their fantasies. This double standard reinforces the racial and gendered colonial power dynamics that continue to affect Caribbean women. Despite or perhaps because of these occurrences, many women engaged in the sale of sexual labor are not victims of masculine power but are displaying highly empowered pragmatism coupled with sexual agency (Kempadoo, 2011).

From Kempadoo's perspective, Caribbean feminist scholarship should include "sex worker demands as part of our feminist theorizing" and "build strategies for change" (Kempadoo, 2001, 44). Before "lived-experience" and "co-creation" were commonplace in humanities and social sciences, Kempadoo undertook inclusive research among Caribbean sex workers utilizing her scholarly platform to amplify their voices (Kempadoo, 2002, 2011, 2020). Kempadoo has suggested that understanding the complexities of sex work in the Caribbean would contribute to policy change on gender equality, improve the lives of autonomous sex workers, and aid with the identification of exploited persons. Given the context of our sex-work scene, purely legal anti-prostitution responses may worsen stigmatization while increasing the punitive measures that constrict trafficked persons, but research could mitigate these consequences (Lobasz, 2009, 338). As a testament to her impact, Kempadoo is often the authoritative source cited by sex-worker advocates, including the Caribbean Sex Work Coalition (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2016).

Kempadoo's calls for more rigorous sexuality studies in the Caribbean have been joined by Phillips (2017, 323), who argues that "by condemning all foreign sex workers as 'trafficked,' Caribbean governments obscure the multiple realities in which sex work takes place," and Nixon (2016, 114), who investigates how consensual, transactional sexual relationships in the Caribbean "may be accepted culturally" but are "not embraced completely and can become sites of moral panic if they intersect with sexual minorities and youth/adolescents." Though supported by other Caribbean luminaries, this finding remains controversial for national governments and abolitionist actors who support anti-prostitution frameworks (Anderson, 1986; Barriteau, 1995; Momsen, 1993). This is not surprising as Caribbean governments have frequently been complicit in "regulating sex and managing sexuality through certain norms of morality" as well as social security concerns (Alexander, 1991, 133). Consequently, as Spear (2024, 56) critiques, the reluctance to do more contextual sexuality studies in the region facilitates the continued exploitation of sex workers based on "a politics of dependency and constructed narratives of victimhood." Outside academia, Kempadoo's scholarship has influenced the advocacy of practitioners and sex-worker rights organizations, including the Caribbean Sex Worker Coalition, Tikkun Olam Belize, and Jabez House Barbados. They have worked steadily toward challenging discriminatory discourses such as the "forced" versus "voluntary" dichotomy, as well as better labor rights and health services for sex workers since the mid-2000s. This shows early promise regarding what heeding Kempadoo's call could achieve.

Apart from sex-work research, Kempadoo has brought Caribbean feminisms into TIP scholarship. Most TIP discourses in the Caribbean are constructed by foreign entities that lack "historical and structural analysis" (Phillips, 2020). Others have circumvented this topic due to its political implications, but Kempadoo used intersectional Caribbean feminisms to explore

the actors and actions in TIPs and ATIPs. She incorporated other strands of her work such as race, history, culture, and sex work to present a holistic picture.

In the 1980s and 1990s, feminist researchers in the Caribbean were prompted to identify TIP as an offshoot of prostitution and violence against women. When Kempadoo suggested that some sex workers are autonomous and should not be identified as “victims,” she was an outlier (Kempadoo, 2001, 40–41). Nevertheless, this notion gained slow traction, and in a 1996 report, Kempadoo and Vargas (1996, 44) presented TIP as a part of forced labor and slavery-like practices. The report suggested that the Caribbean should shift the gaze on prostitution to being a labor issue, even though it involves “many violent and coercive practices for women” (Kempadoo, 2001, 40–41; Vargas & Kempadoo, 1996, 44). Although this outlook has not yet become pervasive as evidenced by numerous news items that conflate sex work, TIPs, and migration (Madden, 2019; Smith, 2020), there is now more support for this train of thought inside and beyond Caribbean shores. Anecdotally, as a practitioner I see several changes in the behavior of public officials as well as in legislation such as Guyana’s Combatting Trafficking of Persons Act of 2023 that explicitly speaks to victims “within Guyana” and indicates that all sex work is not TIP.

Kempadoo (1999, 21–22) presented one of the earliest records of ATIPs efforts in the Caribbean noting that when the issue was first raised in 1978, it did not generate much State attention, even though combatting TIP is globally considered a State obligation. The impetus to address TIP in the Caribbean was and continues to be largely external. Most Caribbean ATIPs legislations, campaigns, and efforts stem from Global North creations such as the Palermo Protocol (United Nations, 2000). Over the last 20 years, Kempadoo has condemned this extraneous influence as ineffective for Caribbean realities. She decries the overinvolvement of the U.S. government as their national policy dictates the counter-trafficking activities pursued and the metrics used to measure progress (Kempadoo, 2007, 79–80). Caribbean governments have rejected several U.S. interventions, but due to fear of losing funding or risking international reputational ruin, the region often acquiesces to U.S. demands. Given the impact of recent U.S. pauses on developmental aid, Kempadoo’s concerns have become a present reality. Fortunately, it opens an opportunity for Caribbean stakeholders to consider indigenous research and ATIPs approaches.

In a 2007 article, Kempadoo underlined another element of the TIP conundrum: TIP’s conflation with migration. Migrants are hired in high-demand, precarious industries that provide little financial or other security (Kempadoo, 2007, 83). These conditions along with the lingering nationalistic sentiment from independence struggles and the narrative of TIP as an immigration issue create exploitative conditions for migrants. To illustrate the difficulties, Kempadoo referenced Indigenous Guyanese Amerindian women, noting that in Barbados, these women were framed as “[i]llegal migrant sex workers” and perceived as immoral and indecent (Kempadoo, 2007, 79–80). As a result, they became prey to racial harassment, detention, and deportation. National government officials leveraged the societal stigma surrounding migrants (especially females from racial minorities), making Indigenous females a vehicle for conflating ATIPs with sex work to push anti-migration mandates rather than addressing TIP (Kempadoo, 2007, 79–80, 83). Kempadoo’s early understandings and analysis have become to baselines for Caribbean researchers to explain the treatment of certain migrants.

Furthermore, when writing on the Caribbean sex trade, Kempadoo (1998, 131) stated that the “light-skinned,” curly haired, mulatto, migrant sex workers are likely to command better working conditions than “local” Afro-Caribbean prostitutes. These descriptions harken back to slavery when “mulatto” persons were the product of illicit and often nonconsensual relationships between White planters and Black or Colored enslaved women. Their very being transgressed societal rules and symbolized the power of slave masters over Black female bodies—making these women “erotic and sexually desirable yet outcast, pathologised and

defined as economically attractive” (Kempadoo, 1999, 15). Following emancipation, “mulatto” became a substitutable term for “prostitute” across the region referencing those colonial dynamics. The paradox between being desired but not belonging is replicated in the region’s sex-work and TIP arenas chiefly through the emotive imagery and messaging surrounding victimology. It is inevitable that race would play an integral role in all aspects of dialogue, policy, or developments in the Caribbean. However, apart from the discussions of a few critical legal scholars, race and racism are usually intentionally distanced from TIPs and ATIPs efforts (Kempadoo, 2016a, 7; Raza, 2023, 65). Kempadoo encourages researchers and practitioners to reconnect these distanced discourses by highlighting the racialized elements, perceptions, and manifestation of TIPs and ATIPs in the Caribbean. As has been shown before, she beautifully cross-pollinates this work with sex work and sexuality.

There is still quite some way to go in understanding TIP and distinguishing it from migration and sex work. However, feminist approaches can help us to get there. Taken together, Kempadoo’s claims support the conclusion that while connected, the three phenomena should not be conflated. Apart from producing clear illustrations about why these ideologies have become merged, Kempadoo’s arguments add to regionally relevant and intersectional interpretations that have implications for policy change and new scholastic developments.

Overall, Kempadoo’s work is rooted in Caribbean feminist thought, with global influence. Her critique of global ATIPs initiatives and her advocacy for sex-worker rights have informed feminist and social justice movements worldwide (Kempadoo, 2005). By centering Caribbean and Global South experiences, Kempadoo advocates for a decolonial feminist framework that addresses the specific sociohistorical contexts of these regions. Her analysis challenges dominant narratives in global development policies, pushing for more inclusive and regionally grounded constructions. Through these multiple discourses, Kempadoo has cleared some pathways for emerging scholarship pursuing issues of gender, sexuality, sex-work, labor, and TIP from a Caribbeanist perspective as the following section will discuss.

Standing on the shoulders of giants—Emerging pathways in Caribbean feminist scholarship

Rather than being pushed to the margin, Caribbean feminist scholarship is *pushing* margins. Mohammed (2003, 5) insightfully noted that “feminism is no longer a concentrated set of ideas shared by specific groups and individuals who advocated rights for women, but a consciousness of gender which has been internalised more universally and individually and has dissolved like sugar in coffee, throughout society.” She suggested that newer generations of feminist scholars encounter feminism in a way that her contemporaries may not universally agree on or accept (Hosein, 2011, 119; Mohammed, 2003, 27). From my perspective, feminisms in the Caribbean have always been “like sugar in coffee”—some granules dissolve fully to run seamlessly through everyday life, while others sink, remaining present, dense, and weighty. Emerging Caribbean scholars like myself are reclaiming feminism, reviving the Caribbean-first ethos that lends to our intersectionality, and proposing new methodologies and theoretical perspectives on our way of “doing feminism.”

As Stuart Hall (2018, 21) suggests, identity is a never-completed process of becoming. While writing this article, I identify as a young, Afro-Caribbean feminist scholar doing interdisciplinary research. I critically investigate the sociocultural evolutions of Caribbean society, particularly local understandings of TIP, slavery, and migration. My research reflects my identity, and the ability to articulate my positionality is informed by decades of scholar-advocates such as Kempadoo who presented Caribbean voices in national, regional, and international spaces. In my experience, my peers are not blind to where feminisms started. In fact, we rely

on Caribbean feminist histories as references and sources of conviction. As Haynes (2017, 50) noted, we acknowledge the “limitations” of the field but use these biases to free ourselves from preconstructed notions.

When writing this article, I reflected on the persistent influences during my journey toward academia. As an undergraduate law student in the Caribbean, I drew upon the writings of Patricia Mohammed (1998, 2002b, 2003), Eudine Barriteau (2003a), and Kamala Kempadoo (1998, 2001, 2004, 2011) for my essays, which I had not yet recognized as “socio-legal.”² In 2018, I boldly emailed Professor Kempadoo when I began considering PhD research. Though she could not supervise my project, she encouraged me to pursue this dream with an institution and a focus that represented the Caribbean. Throughout my doctorate, I returned to Caribbean literature and poetry written by or about our women for reassurance, strength, and inspiration as much as for content. Now, as a researcher, I still search Kempadoo’s scholarship for grounding, reliable data, and methodological guidance.

Driving Caribbean-centric ATIPs research

My research interests overlap with those of Kempadoo on TIPs and ATIPs in the Caribbean. Through my legal career, I became intimately aware that the Caribbean ATIPs field faces challenges that were either unrepresented or misrepresented globally, because of how the region is categorized and evaluated. I began to question this positioning. My questions had no apparent answers and would eventually lead me to research.

As a legally trained individual spending most of my time in court, I questioned the usefulness of TIP legislation to achieve “justice” for trafficked persons. Although I was a stakeholder, I found it difficult to access data on the number and types of trafficked persons in the region, or their cases, though I knew from anecdotal evidence that convictions remained low. Second, there was little to no consolidated evidence tracing TIP in the Caribbean and how stakeholders were responding. Consequently, I followed the example set by Caribbean governments and began using the U.S. State Department Annual TIP Reports to measure “progress.”

According to the TIP Reports, “progress” is measured by the number of prosecutions, the prevention of TIPs, and the protection and assistance of victims usually in that order of importance (Haynes, 2019, 3–4). Based on my engagement with Caribbean ATIPs stakeholders, I noticed that their efforts in “eradicating TIP” do not align with this priority list. Additionally, the U.S. Government has threatened to remove non-humanitarian, non-trade-related foreign assistance to any low-ranked country. This is where my intersections with Kempadoo’s scholarship began. Her extensive works critique the over-involvement of the U.S. government in Caribbean ATIPs affairs and contend that their one-size-fits-all approach fails to acknowledge important regional dynamics (Kempadoo, 2016b, 26).

From this point on, my scholarship became influenced by the foundations laid by Kempadoo. The more research I pursued, it became clearer that the ATIPs system’s construction is fundamentally flawed. For a long time, ATIP was informed by morality discourses and premises of benevolent humanitarianism. These “good intentions” were thought to unify communities, allowing TIP to receive media coverage, causing ATIPs activism to skyrocket, and leading most countries in the region to create new, responsive policies, laws, and enforcement mechanisms.

However, as we now know, ATIPs policies and practice affect and enable “racial and ethnic profiling, racial discrimination, and racial or ethnic othering” (Kempadoo & Shih, 2023, 1). Instead of helping with the inequalities of TIP, “anti-trafficking has heightened and justified the discrimination and profiling of non-White people throughout the world” (Kempadoo & Shih, 2023, 2). Due to this “collateral damage,”³ neither the enacted legislation nor protection efforts

and prosecutions can achieve their stated goals. These areas of “harm” were where I felt I should concentrate my attention. To explore these contentions, I needed to look beyond the spaces that Kempadoo explored. She began the process of exploring power structures, discourses, influences, and consequences in this field. However, there were glaring gaps revealed directly and indirectly through her works, which underscore the need for further Caribbeanist feminist scholarship.

As a researcher embracing the critical approach that Kempadoo promoted, my scholarship departs from hers in three meaningful ways. First, I focus on a narrower geographic area. Second, I engage with a larger number of global discourses as contributors to the Caribbean understandings, and finally, I propose a wider conception of power and stakeholders in Caribbean ATIPs efforts.

Caribbean representation is notably absent from discussions on “historical and global power relations” (Kempadoo, 2016b, 26). In ATIPs, Caribbean territories are often completely omitted from research for “lack of data,” resulting in ATIPs discourses constructed by foreign entities that lack “historical and structural analysis” (Phillips, 2020). Scholars make detailed commentaries on the application and development of ATIPs ideologies and stereotypes in Africa, Asia, Europe, and even “the Americas,” but there is a dearth of similar dedication to the Caribbean (Langberg, 2005, 129). Kempadoo (1998, 131) has provided empirical data on TIP in the Caribbean, but this has largely been accounts of sex trafficking in the Francophone Caribbean. To her credit, this provided a baseline for understanding TIP and some of the existing approaches to combat it. Missing from the literature was a representation of the reality of the Caribbean backed by detailed research. Thus, current ATIPs campaigns and materials in the region are rife with “stereotyping, compounding human trafficking with migration, sexualisation/erotisation of women, victimisation, role of anti-human trafficking organisations, data shortcomings, and oversimplification of human trafficking” (Szablewska & Kubacki, 2018, 114). Consequently, I isolated the Anglophone Caribbean as a research focus and explored the extent to which a “Caribbean-centric” ATIPs approach would be helpful. Using framing theory and a feminist lens, I interrogated anti-trafficking through Caribbean law, culture, and discourses. This approach has enabled me to establish subregion’s uniqueness and propose reforms that reflect our history.

Key to Kempadoo’s notions has been the idea that ATIPs efforts in the Caribbean are dictated by external influences and entities. Broadly, I agree with this assertion, but my findings have led beyond the anti-prostitution and anti-migrant discourses that feature in Kempadoo’s research. Instead, I have identified four major global discourses that add to the external ATIPs influence in the Caribbean: anti-slavery, anti-migration, anti-prostitution, and feminist discourses. Each of these narratives is driven by various exogenous stakeholders and has achieved various levels of success in the region. Deconstructing their motives from a Caribbean feminist viewpoint inspired the understanding that ATIPs framework relies on moral panic and public acceptance to succeed. Further research on the implications of these dynamics in the Caribbean is still needed. However, moving beyond Kempadoo’s heavy focus on sex trafficking and anti-prostitution rhetoric has enabled me to foreground cultural and historical elements such as race, coloniality, slavery, and gender that became intrinsic to my work.

Additionally, Kempadoo’s presentation of the Caribbean ATIPs sector presented fierce arguments on the power structures involved in this construction. From her examinations, the U.S. Government is portrayed as an overseer dictating the rules and parameters to the region. While I agree with the assertion that the United States has been overactive, from my perspective in the Anglophone Caribbean, the “anti-trafficking sector comprises a series of multi-levelled state and non-state actors which are difficult to compartmentalise due to their interconnectedness” (Francis, 2024, 298). My research reconstructs the meaning of power to

be more aligned with influence than dictatorship and recognizes that there are roles for external entities such as the U.S. government, national governments, and even non-state actors for ATIPs in the Caribbean to meaningfully move forward. With the recent change in the U.S. administration and their policy decisions, this analysis supported my earlier recommendation that the Caribbean must look inward.

Though my conclusions and patterns may differ from what Kempadoo established, the aim remains the same: disrupting the narrative and rewriting the status quo, making my own meaning from what I see around me and in the research. The insights that I have been able to garner through the pathways that she cleared have emphasized the need to continue emerging and evolutionary Caribbean feminist scholarship.

Collective conscious and methodological musings

Methodologically, Kempadoo has recorded the impact of positionality and power dynamics on research. Growing up in the Caribbean you are socialized to believe that knowledge from “foreign” is higher quality and more critical. This aligns with the trend of this article thus far regarding the challenges and resistance of Caribbean feminisms being separate from global tendencies. Thus, it is critical that Caribbean feminist scholars continue to research in a way that protects our unique perspectives. Kempadoo (2001, 45) adds a varied view on this insider–outsider separation. She wrote that being a complete outsider with no long-standing relationship to Caribbean culture and society limits the interpretations that the researcher can make about that society.

This methodological matter can also be determinative for participant engagement and research findings. In her seminal work *Sexing the Caribbean*, Kempadoo (2004, vii) acknowledges her “outsider, ivory-tower ways” as an academic looking into a community who she relies on for research. This awareness facilitated an allyship with her research participants, which has instructed how I conduct research. Recognizing the connectivity of Caribbean cultures, my insider–outsider positionality enhanced my sensitivity while researching the ATIPs field that I previously helped to build.

By disregarding traditional power structures and embracing interdisciplinary work, regional scholars have been able to imagine expansive perspectives to feminisms that challenge the accepted narratives. Caribbean feminist theory has been used on a range of topics, including literary arts, crime, citizenship, and even emotions such as love (Haynes, 2017, 33). The importance of this practice is that as Kempadoo (2004, 62) proposed, data from these fields can be used to broach other less considered topics like sexuality. In doing so, current Caribbean feminists are able to maintain the originality and critical nature of activism, theory, and research, as well as responding to emerging challenges and threats such as persistent patriarchal norms, the lingering effects of colonialism, and the impacts of climate change on the lives of Caribbean women.

Kempadoo and others in her generation have validated Caribbean identity and the power that comes from knowing that you are not alone. Their divergent paths reassure the younger scholars like myself that no matter how we come to the work or the method we chose to express it, “Caribbean Feminisms” can be our intellectual home.

CONCLUSION

This article concludes where it began, noting that the strength and potential of Caribbean feminisms lie in “its unwillingness to confine knowledge within the boundaries of the existing

paradigm” (Mohammed, 2002a, xvi). This examination of Kamala Kempadoo’s contributions into the Caribbean feminist landscape offers a nuanced lens to feminist anthropology generally, revealing the meaning and influence to be drawn from different modalities of Caribbean feminist work and the way that historical and cultural aspects of regional identity demand a different research ideology and practice. Kempadoo calls attention to the relationship between gender oppression, economic structures, and colonialism. She insists that a Caribbean feminist agenda must address these intersections to be effective in tackling the realities of Caribbean women.

To those engaged in critical trafficking, sex work, and sexuality study, this consideration of Kempadoo as a pioneer adds gravitas to arguments that sex work, TIP, and migration should not be conflated. Furthermore, the research establishes that understanding Caribbean sexuality in situ could aid with interpretations of these phenomena. The latter part of the article speaks to the legacy left by Kempadoo in the way that she has laid the foundations for younger feminist scholars like myself to reclaim the term feminism and use our own experiences as evidence and methodology. Overall, Caribbean feminisms have stimulated conversation, created theory, and changed the lives of women in the region in tangible ways.

ORCID

Cherisse Francis  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7788-3085>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In developing her perspectives critiquing TIP in the Caribbean, Kempadoo would have been influenced by and writing contemporaneous to scholars such as Sharma and de Shalit in the Global North. However, this piece intentionally cites Caribbean scholars and examples to celebrate this underused literature.
- ² In the Caribbean, socio-legal work often works alongside anthropology and other disciplines such as history and cultural studies to find and make meaning from our culture which has been heavily influenced by colonisation, the transatlantic slave trade and various waves of exploitation.
- ³ This article applies the term ‘collateral damage’, as used by Kamala Kempadoo to refer to the unintended or associated harmful consequences which result from activities carried out under the guise of combatting trafficking. One example she gives is of women who were supposedly trafficked in Guyana and forcibly removed from their place of work, shamed for being involved in sex work, detained by police and in some instances deported. See Kamala Kempadoo, ‘Countering Human Trafficking: Introduction’ (2016) 65 *Social and Economic Studies* 1, 2.

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