

From Matrons, Typists, and Turnkeys to Officers: Women, Gender, and State Authority in Guyana's Disciplined Services, Late Colonial Period – 1975

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Abstract

This research examines how women entered Guyana's disciplined services from the late colonial period to the International Women's Year in 1975. It focuses on the prison, police, and army services, tracing Guyanese women's movement from prison matrons, police typists, and turnkeys responsible for female prisoners, to early military specialists, and finally to formal recognition as officers and agents of state authority. This paper argues that Guyanese women were first admitted to these institutions through duties associated with femininity, for example, juvenile care, clerical work, moral regulation, the custody of women, and support for male officers. These restricted roles were ways in which Guyanese women claimed visibility and authority within institutions historically engineered for men. The analysis draws on Guyana's police histories, newspapers, institutional reports, Guyanese women's organizational records, and existing scholarship on gendered armed forces in Guyana. It places three moments in conversation: the British Guiana colonial prison matron system; the recruitment of women into the British Guiana Police Force in 1953, including their work as turnkeys and typists; and the entry of women into the Guyana Defense Force/Women's Army Corps in 1967. By ending in 1975, this research situates Guyana's local institutional changes within the wider global women's rights agenda marked by the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City. This research also contributes to Caribbean women's history by showing that women's pursuit of equality was not confined to politics, law reform, or civil society, but was also fought inside the prison yard, police station, and military barracks, spaces where gender, discipline, citizenship, and state power met.

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