



## Social Media and Feminist Social Change in the Caribbean: An Interview with Ronelle King on #LifeInLeggings

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## **Abstract**

In this interview, Ronelle King, founder of the hashtag and organisation, #LifeInLeggings in Barbados, discusses her experiences in raising awareness and advocating for policy to end gender-based violence in the Caribbean. The interview focuses on her motivation to build awareness about sexual violence through a feminist consciousness, the reception she received by other Caribbean women and men and, last, her evaluation of social media as a tool for organising. King converted the momentum of #LifeInLeggings on social media into a young women-led organisation dedicated to policy change in Barbados. Her movement adds to the growing interest in cyberfeminisms in the Caribbean and to the longer study of social movements for gender justice in the region.

**Keywords:** Caribbean feminism; youth; gender-based violence; social media

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## **Introduction**

Ronelle King is a twenty-four year old feminist activist in St. Michael, Barbados. She created her first e-mail address at the age of nine. At 14-years old, she discovered online literature, blogs and social media personalities that promoted women's and LGBTQ rights. Her story offers an example of the many young Caribbean women who develop their feminist consciousness with more accessible scholarship and popular readings on the internet, and not in the academy. In this interview, I aim to illustrate the potential of youth-led feminist organising in the Caribbean for gender justice with social media.

By the 1970s, in the study of development, previous convictions about economic indicators as the most significant measurements for social progress were weakened when experiences of greater inequalities accompanied target levels of economic growth (Kabeer 2003). Particular attention was made to gender, especially the experiences of women who were seen to be "left behind" by development approaches. For this reason, violence against women and violations of women's human rights are not marginal, but central to the construction of development policy. In November 2016, young women in the region took to social media to discuss experiences of sexual violence with the trending hash tag #LifeInLeggings. The stories ranged from personal experiences about abuse by family members to sexual harassment in capital cities, a walk of harassment on the way home from school or cases of rape that occurred in the home or in a taxi. Male dominance does not always require a set of organised patriarchal practices because they come to constitute social life for men in the form of privilege. Men's patriarchal domination and control can be channelled in less overt ways in public, especially against young women by the policing of female sexuality (Sen 2002, 144). Verbal assaults, outspoken judgements of their dress and action and worse, sexual violence and harassment are everyday occurrences of violence against women in the region. This is evidenced by Ronelle King's experience of violence and coming face-to-face with inadequate responses of the enforcement arm in the justice system – a story that too commonly occurs for women and worse, is too commonly accepted to

be the norm. Hence, in order to empower the state as an agent for gender justice, beyond legislative frameworks and parliamentary priorities, a cultural shift in the language and social relations is important to advance the political imperatives of gender policy.

Feminists throughout the region hosted a series of public fora to address the trauma and possible solutions since #LifeInLeggings. These discussions were led by young women, especially lesbian and queer, in and out of the academy. As this powerful conversation began to inform news headlines throughout the region, some men initiated an anti-women's rights campaign of victim blaming on women who shared their stories with the reactionary hash tags #LifeInPants and #EggplantEntries. The aim of this online backlash was to invalidate the movement created by women that challenged men to think about their complicity with rape culture.

In Jamaica, the political militancy of the Tambourine Army and strong showing of civil society support in Trinidad and Tobago for the #LifeInLeggings regional solidarity march highlight the potential of youth feminist organising in the region and unveil some of the possibilities and limitations of activism today. At The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, the UWI Socialist Student Conference organised a creative exhibit, titled "Wall of Justice #LifeInLeggings," that encouraged participation among the student body to share experiences of pain and healing in relation to sexual violence. Writing experiences on post-it notes, in a display that lasted six hours, we received over 60 stories about rape and sexual assault from students. As a socialist feminist activist, I was moved to further advance the feminist aims of our organisation. For this reason, I interviewed Ronelle King, founder of the #LifeInLeggings movement in Barbados. As the discussion unfolded I became interested in the following questions:

1. How did the #LifeInLeggings movement transition from an online discussion to an organised movement?

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2. What is the impact of online activism and youth organising on state policy and decision-making?
3. Why is activism around policy important for the lives of young Caribbean people today?

I position this interview as a feminist discussion from the perspective of Caribbean youth. While some scholars have noted the decline of women's organisations in social and political life in the English-speaking Caribbean (Henry-Wilson 2004, 59), young voices of a new generation of scholars and activists have given energy and added to the intersectional analyses of the movement, especially in the area of sexuality, to help sustain the women's and feminist movements. The #LifeInLeggings movement illustrates the potential for Caribbean social change and activism around gender policy through the creative use of technology. As a medium this interactive frame that is being built between feminist discourses and the use of social media platforms arguably expands the kinds of feminist mobilisations that can occur. In particular, this digital conduit's capacity to mobilise within and outside of the academy potentially answers a long-standing critique of Caribbean feminisms: its dislocation from the lives of everyday women. Caribbean feminists have always strived to ground their theoretical analyses in everyday life; #LifeInLeggings and similarly situated movements have expanded the participation and co-writing of such grounded theorising.

## **Background to the Movement and Organisation**

**AS: As a founding member of the Life In Leggings organisation, could you share a brief assessment of the personal and social contexts in which your organisation emerged?**

RK: Life In Leggings: Caribbean Alliance Against Gender-based Violence was founded to tackle the rape culture and gender-based violence in the Caribbean region. The movement began with an online hashtag, #LifeInLeggings, that created a safe space for women who experienced sexual harassment and sexual assault. Women, encouraged by solidarity, were empowered to speak out on their social media platforms about their experiences. The hashtag went viral, making an appearance in countries all around the globe.

Going viral in eleven other Caribbean countries; Trinidad & Tobago, Dominica, Jamaica, Belize, Antigua & Barbuda, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent, Grenada, Guyana and The Bahamas, while making an appearance in others where there was a language barrier such as Haiti and in the South American continent, Brazil. The diaspora greatly assisted with the hashtag trickling into international countries such as the United Kingdom, USA, Canada, India, China, Japan, Denmark, and Belgium. As a result, the hashtag was featured in Knack Magazine, the BBC, India Times, Stop Street Harassment and a number of regional and local blogs and media sites. However, it particularly championed the experiences of women and girls throughout the Caribbean region and its diaspora as this was the community it originated from and the community it wanted to challenge.

Life in Leggings was born out of frustration due to personal experiences of sexual violence and street harassment. I recently had an experience of almost being kidnapped in broad daylight. My confidence in the ability of the police to protect me dwindled when they refused to take my statement regarding the

incident because they deemed it a waste of their time. I was on my way to work and was offered a ride to which I politely declined. My attacker tried to pull me into the vehicle and I ran away in the opposite direction to a friend's house where I called my workplace to let them know I'd be late and why. I went to the police station to make a report where I was met with a nonchalant attitude by a male police officer. After requesting somewhere more private to talk as there was an audience, he dismissed my request and began to engage with the audience to reaffirm to me that no one cared so it was not necessary to go somewhere private. When I began to recount my experience, the officer did not engage me citing that he had other work to do so he'd be doing it while I spoke as well as assessing if it was really an issue that would require him to take notes of my experience. During my retelling, the officer would at times chuckle and act as though I was over-exaggerating my experience. I was gutted and immediately left in tears. I returned to work, attempting to move on with my life.

The lack of access to justice through the police force for women is well known. I thought about ways to shake up the system to address rape culture. However, it would be months before I actually did something impactful. #LifeInLeggings was purposely coined to dispel the myth that only certain types of women are harassed and are deserving of their assault or abuse because of the way they are dressed. Leggings is a "controversial" piece of clothing. While in most places it is an accepted piece of clothing to wear as pants, in the Caribbean it is not. Wearing it without a top or a dress that covers the private area creates the perception that you are "slack" or inviting sexual harassment which isn't true. Due to this, we thought it would be the best example to show the clothing has nothing to do with street harassment. Plus, [the phrase is] heavy on alliteration.

The success of the hashtag provided documentation of all varieties of violence against women in the Caribbean. It showed the need for an organisation which championed equal rights yet understood the socio-economic complexities of the differing Caribbean countries in order to create a lasting impact. It also highlighted that the message of equality needed to be presented in a way that

was both accessible and flexible, with [an NGO] structure enabling independence and support and a method that could be applied to other countries.

**AS: On November 20, 2016, Barbados celebrated 50 years of independence. Your feminist activism sustained public attention on women's experiences in everyday life – public transport, at schools, on street corners, in the workplace, etc. How does the concept of 'gender' offer a critique of citizenship in Barbadian society?**

RK: The emergence of the hashtag sparked national discussion about gender inequality not only in the context of sexual violence but also how men and women are socialised. One of the much needed discussions that emerged from the topic of discussion was how our present is heavily influenced by our colonial past. How women, despite attaining some rights, still suffer from the patriarchal values our society upholds and that while some progress is great, we still have much further to go in order to achieve gender equality. Many women are still seen as property and not people; and, the more marginalised they are, the less they are seen as a person deserving of rights. We are finally coming to a place where women are holding their government accountable for their obligation to ensure that as citizens they are protected from all forms of discrimination.

There was a woman who shared an experience where she was turned away from the police station after being raped. Her clothes were torn as a result of the attack and though she tried to explain this to the police, they still refused her citing an archaic law about "dressing decently" when going into a government office. She had to go home, bathe and change her clothing to then give her statement, be taken to the hospital to have a sexual assault forensic exam (rape kit) performed where even there she was re-victimised. The doctor who came was male and she described him as rough and unprofessional. Her case was eventually tossed out because the rape kit's evidence was not collected properly ruling it unusable. Under the hashtag she was able to find a voice to tell



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her story and appeal to government officials to ensure that no woman has to experience what she did. Due to her resilience, her story was one of many that were told to the committee members when we represented civil society at the 67th Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.



Reclaim Our Streets march in Bridgetown, Barbados on March 11, 2017.  
Photography by Ebonnie Rowe (Honey Jam Barbados).

## **Responses to #LifeInLeggings**

### **AS: What has been the response of the state to #LifeInLeggings? And, was there any impact on Caribbean policy formation?**

RK: The state has been supportive thus far. We've had female politicians not only coming forward to share their story but showing interest in policy reform as it relates to protecting women from gender-based violence. There's a lot of work to be done but this interest has also shown that violence against women and girls affects women at all levels. We are currently looking at the Sexual Offences Act, Minor Offences Act and the recently amended Human Trafficking Bill to propose amendments that are more inclusive and offer a wider range of protection for all women, especially those who are marginalized. We are also looking at archaic laws which re-victimise underage girls when they try to escape abusive situations to provide them with an avenue to receive justice as well as creating support systems to aid them in their healing.

Barbados recently amended the Domestic Violence (Protection Orders) Act in 2016 but there is still an Employment Sexual Harassment Bill that has been pending for more than a decade. Since the conversation about sexual harassment has been ongoing, discussion about finally passing the bill has been the topic of both government and civil society.

We wrote one of two shadow reports in response to the state's report for our fifth to eighth periodic review and delivered one of two oral statements for CEDAW. In both reports we highlighted the sexual harassment bill. As a result of this action, it was brought up by the committee during the state's review to which we were witness so we heard when they said that they would complete it by the end of the year. We intend to hold them to it and follow up on its progress throughout the year.

### **AS: What have been the responses by men in the region to #LifeInLeggings?**

RK: If I am to be completely honest, it's been a mixed bag. However, it's been more positive than negative. I've been seeing a number of men checking their privileges and recognising their role in eradicating gender-based violence. There was a particular thread on Facebook about how they'll be keeping an eye out for the men who believe they're entitled to women's bodies around crop over events so that the women can have a chance to enjoy the festivities as well. On the flip side, I saw a Facebook live video about a guy who really thought women were just whining about the attention they were "asking for". He even at one point asked how else do we expect men to approach us. Re-affirming that some men do not actually know how to respectfully approach a woman and more importantly, how to take rejection without reacting violently<sup>1</sup>.

Everyone has a role in eradicating gender based violence, especially men. Men can get involved by holding their friends and fellow man accountable for their actions. They can volunteer with NGOs whose mandate is to eradicate gender based violence and end rape culture. One of the most important things they can do is listen to the experiences of the survivors without dismissing them and use it to reflect on their actions in the past and the ways they have contributed to the problem so that they can be better in the future.

We currently have a male volunteer who is engaging in domestic violence prevention training as a representative of the organisation so that he could be an agent of change. These are the kind of actions that can benefit the movement.

AS: What role, if any, did the #LifeInLeggings have in advancing LGBTQ justice?

RK: I think we've only touched the surface when it comes to advancing LGBTQ justice but we're working on ways to making their injustices more visible. Our platform was inclusive and provided them a judgment-free space to break their

silences and in return receive the support that they deserve. There is much more that we'd like to do and are in the process of doing.

We'd like to offer sexual and physical violence services and support systems which are specifically tailored to and for the LGBTQ community. Services that are professional, respectful and judgement-free for survivors who choose to disclose their identity; public service announcements which include the LGBTQ community and highlight the issues they face regarding physical and sexual violence.

We do have members of the LGBTQ community in the organisation, including one member who is extremely open about her sexual identity and has the responsibility of Acting Director when I am out of island on a mission. She is also a project facilitator for the organisation and liaises with possible partner/ organizations who share the same goal.

Before the movement came about there was a story posted in the gossip column, Pudding & Souse, in our newspaper, Nation, about a masculine-expressive lesbian being raped with the headline, "Male Medicine". The LGBTQ community and quite a number of Barbadians were outraged at the post and demanded an apology. I believe that was an introduction into the ways women in the LGBT community are affected by gender-based violence. We are working towards creating more inclusive and specifically tailored spaces for them to increase access to justice and healing.

**AS: What was the response by Caribbean feminists in the academy and activists to your movement?**

RK: It was phenomenal. They were some of the first people to catch wind of the movement and help facilitate it in their respective countries. The Institute for Gender and Development Studies has been a huge pillar or support for the

team and participants.

During the 16 Days of Activism they made space in their showcases across the universities for the experiences of the survivors. Lecturers at the Cave Hill Campus such as Dr. Tonya Haynes<sup>2</sup> began documenting the stories and the movements of the organisation. They provided us with data and research whenever we requested and helped to facilitate some live panels. In universities around the region the same applied, academics such as Dr. Gabrielle Hosein at The UWI St. Augustine [Campus] wrote about #LifeInLeggings in her column at the Guardian Newspaper in Trinidad and Tobago<sup>3</sup>. Activists of both genders were extremely willing to throw their support behind the movement and disseminate the message of #LifeInLeggings across the region. It was because of their efforts that we were able to co-ordinate and execute a simultaneous march titled Reclaim Our Streets across seven Caribbean countries in less than three months. The idea for the march came about early in December 2016, when we were transferring the online conversation to a more physical space. I conceptualised the Reclaim Our Streets: Women's Solidarity March which was a civil society-led regional march around International Women's Day organised by our organisation, Life In Leggings: Caribbean Alliance Against Gender-based Violence Through Education, Empowerment and Community Outreach.

The march took place in Barbados, Saint Lucia, Trinidad & Tobago, Dominica, The Bahamas, Guyana and Jamaica. The intention of this march was to be a stepping stone in creating support systems that educate the public about the trauma caused by sexual abuse and ways in which the community can come together to prevent abuse, protect and create conditions in which victims of abuse can be healed. It was a political pledge by each country to unite to end gender-based violence together. We marched in memory of the women and girls we lost, in solidarity with the survivors of gender-based violence and for future generations of girls who have yet to come so that they may never experience what we did.

The successes were that we made people pay attention and realise that this was not a fad. We were serious about our mandate and we would no longer be suffering in silence. We marched along the paths we would normally take alone with hundreds of other women and whereas we'd normally be afraid to speak out against the harassment, we were shouting and verbally fighting back. It was empowering. People poured out into the streets from shopping malls in Barbados to watch us, cars stopped and honked in support, even our police escort chanted along.

Our shortcoming was because of the political uprising that threatened the march; we lost a bit of funding from an international human rights entity which is unable to participate if there is political unrest. Due to this happening a month away from the march, we had to scramble to secure just the bare minimum to be able to still have the march. All our efforts up until the morning of the march were invested in just getting the march to come off without a hitch so we were unable to properly advertise and advocate for the wide range of women who would have initially been invited to march. We no longer had the funding to accommodate women who were elderly and disabled. We didn't have the funding to properly advertise it as a safe space for sex workers to join us, etc. We didn't have the funding to provide seating and emergency services for pregnant women or injured women though they still came to represent. However, it was a learning experience and we intend to do better in the future.





Women's Rights March and Rally in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago on March 11, 2017. Photography by Mickel Guanfranco Alexander (Guanfranco Media).

**AS: There were intense debates on social media about Jamaica's Tambourine Army's aims and strategies. Still, there were many voices of solidarity in the region that supported the Tambourine Army's defence of children and victims of gender-based violence. I believe that their organisation put front and centre the emotions that are embedded in activism when deep considerations are made on the racial, classed and gendered textures of our Caribbean societies. The Tambourine is a metaphor of breaking silences with noise and it can also be employed as a weapon against injustice. What is your assessment of the developments in Jamaica which took a very different course from mobilisations in Barbados?**

RK: Each Caribbean country is different and violence against women, while it is a regional problem, affects women more severely in different countries. In Barbados, a social discussion at a national level emerged and this was significant but every country had to address their challenges as they saw fit. The Tambourine Army in Jamaica was a movement of radical women who dealt with a very horrible situation. They spoke out against the tolerance for the death

of women and the pain of abused children. Society as a whole needs to do better. They said that a woman being killed was not normal. While I may not have taken their approach to our situation in Barbados, I can understand why women in Jamaica, who wanted to be taken seriously in their calls to end violence against women, did it in the way that they did. I think we should focus less on trying to police the ways in which the Tambourine Army got the attention of the public and ask why this approach was required in order to get the public's eye.

### **Social Media Organisation**

**AS: The #LifeInLeggings hashtag mobilised thousands of Caribbean women's voices in December 2016. The hashtag became a symbol for public speaking out against the pervasiveness of rape culture and sexual violence against women. The hashtag #LifeInLeggings was later transformed into an advocacy NGO. Can you discuss the relationship between online and 'offline' organizational activism?**

RK: The relationship can be described as complimentary. Social media activism is used mostly to bring awareness to the issues that affect us and this can lead to reform. It has the power to bring people from all over the world to participate in important conversations. It delivers us the information in real time and provides us with an opportunity to receive fair and balanced coverage with little to no bias. It also gives us a platform to call out injustices and problematic behaviours such as misrepresentations and inaccuracies. Not to mention, it is accessible for persons who may not be able to join the conversation offline.

When the conversation has begun online, it's important to transfer it offline so that those who didn't participate online could also be aware of the issues. Also so that the constitutional and legislative framework can be set out and the community outreach programmes can be developed to protect persons who



are affected. Due to the fact that most persons are on social media, online activism has the potential to get more people involved.

**AS: What is your opinion of the future of Caribbean feminism's online activism and cyberfeminisms?**

RK: With movements such as the Tambourine Army, Leave She/Me Alone and LeveDomnik popping up after #Lifeinleggings, I think there will be lots more Caribbean feminist movements willing to resist misogyny masquerading as culture. Creating spaces on the internet to discuss and bring awareness to the issues that affect women using feminine solidarity to shut down any misogyny that may come their way. That's a future I am looking forward to being a part of.

**AS: And can this future for gender justice online have an impact on the involvement of the state in our offline lives?**

RK: I hope that there will be a more gender aware state, one that understands the complexities of gender relations in a developing country such as ours. We need to think creatively about how we tackle these issues as an island. The state should not just change laws by the dictates of international law and conventions, rather they should see the importance of ending all forms of discrimination against women as central to development. In addition, the relationship between women's rights and gender equality activists and the state should be complimentary. The state cannot fulfil its mandate on its own. In the future, I want to see deeper relationships for these actors. Our issue right now with the state is the policy blindness around gender; especially how it affects marginalised women. Conservative politicians put little effort into making relationships with gender activists but they are the ones who head the ministry and the relevant bureaux of affairs. Therefore, I want the complete opposite and see greater support for the women in civil society and the issues they raise to end gender inequalities. Then we will see a much more inclusive constitutional and legislative framework that reflects the interests of women and all their

experiences.

## Conclusion

Ronelle King's experience organising #LifeInLeggings expounds the political terrain that Caribbean feminism operates in today. When there are high consciousness-raising moments for women online, these women run the risk of having their concerns invalidated or of opening themselves for attack; when there is an expression of support by the state for the causes of the women's movement, inaction with policy implementation impedes any progress; when men have a choice to join in solidarity to challenge men to end rape culture, complicity may have the last say. At the same time, her experience highlights the power of politicising the everyday experience of Caribbean women with the strength of people throughout the region. Whether young people are gaining political consciousness online or offline and policy makers respond to each sphere differently, there is an unquestionable impact made by those who use all fronts to meet Caribbean people where they are.

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<sup>1</sup> I critique the male backlash to the #LifeInLeggings online discussion: Sanatan, Amílcar. 2016. What #LifeInPants, #LifeInBoxers, #EggplantEntries Don't Get. Published December 2, 2016. Blog, <http://www.amilcarsanatan.com/lifeinpants-lifeinboxers-eggplantentries-dont-get/> . Accessed July 23, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Tonya Haynes is a lecturer at the Institute for Gender and Development Studies, The UWI Cave Hill Campus and the founder and blog curator of *CODE RED for gender justice!* (<https://redforgender.wordpress.com> )

<sup>3</sup> A version of Dr. Gabrielle Hosein's column is posted on her blog: Hosein, Gabrielle. 2016. *Diary of a mothering worker*. Post 229. Published December 7, 2016. Blog, <https://grtscene.wordpress.com/2016/12/07/2559/> . Accessed July 23, 2017.