



# Stories in Caribbean Feminism: Reflections on the Twentieth Century

CGDS 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Keynote Address, 1998

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Dr. Patricia Mohammed giving the keynote address at the CGDS 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary event, 1998.

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## **Preface**

Rhoda Reddock

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The UWI, St Augustine Campus

The Centre for Gender and Development Studies was established within The University of the West Indies system in September 1993. This marked the culmination of 11 years of lobbying, preliminary research and teaching by the Women and Development Studies Group, which had been established on each campus of The University of the West Indies (The UWI). The groups were formed in 1982, at a regional meeting called by Peggy Antrobus, then of The UWI Women and Development Unit (WAND) to consider the establishment of a programme and the recognition of the contribution which the Centre had made since its inception.

The main activities of the Centre, like other UWI departments, are teaching, research and outreach. Courses are disciplinary and interdisciplinary in focus and draw upon the varied approaches to gender analysis available from faculties and departments across the University. Although this approach to teaching is generally shared by all three centres, each has developed its own characteristics and each has an individual research programme on Caribbean masculinities, gender, science and technology, including gender and the environment and race/ethnicity, class and gender. A new area being developed is that of Gender and Sexuality.

The first gender-related course, AR301, piloted by Dr. Marjorie Thorpe, was introduced to the St Augustine Campus in 1986. Since that time a wide range of courses in literatures in English, Spanish and French, history, agriculture, sociology, natural sciences and other fields have come on stream. In 1997, the first group of graduate students entered to read for MPhil/PhD degrees; in 1998 an undergraduate Minor in Gender Studies was introduced in the Faculty of

Humanities and Education and in the year 2000, an undergraduate Minor in Gender and Development will be introduced in the Faculty of Social Sciences.

We at St Augustine were very pleased to have Dr. Patricia Mohammed deliver the address on this important occasion. Dr. Mohammed is a graduate of this campus (The UWI) and of the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague with which we have had a long and fruitful collaborative relationship. During the early phase of The UWI/ISS/IOP Project, she served as course director, with responsibility for organizing and managing a series of disciplinary and interdisciplinary courses on three campuses. She also organized the 1986 inaugural seminar out of which came the publication *Gender in Caribbean development*, edited with Catherine Shepherd and which is in its third printing. At the time of this lecture Dr. Mohammed was Head of the Mona Unit of the Centre for Gender and Development Studies.

In addition to her work at The University of the West Indies, as we will see in the pages ahead, Dr. Mohammed was also active in the women's movement of the early 1980's and was first co-ordinator of the Rape Crisis Centre of Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. Over the years we have had many opportunities to collaborate as Dr. Mohammed's work grows and develops in content and stature. The lecture reflects this growth and we are pleased to be able to bring this to you.

## **Message**

Barbara Bailey

Acting Regional Coordinator

Gender and Development Studies

It is my special pleasure to convey warm greetings and special congratulations from the other Campus Units and the Regional Coordinating Unit of the Centre for Gender and Development Studies to the St Augustine Unit as you recognize and celebrate the fifth anniversary of the formal establishment of the Centre. This celebration marks another milestone in the life and development of the Centre and is even more significant because it coincides with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the establishment of the University.

As I greet you, I would like to recognize those among you who were the early pioneers and visionaries and have been part of the Centre since its beginnings as the Women and Development Studies Group some sixteen years ago. Among this group are persons such as Marjorie Thorpe, Catherine Shepherd, Patricia Mohammed who is now Head of the Mona Unit, Jeanette Morris, Gordon Rohlehr and Bridget Brereton among others. Among these early pioneers I would like, however, to single out Dr. Rhoda Reddock, Senior Lecturer and Head of the St Augustine Unit, who through her dedication and commitment over the many years, has nurtured and spearheaded the growth and development of the Unit so that it now is a vibrant and visible aspect of the academic community of the St Augustine campus.

In many respects this fifth anniversary marks the end of a first cycle of events - initiation of an idea in 1982, development of the idea into a programme of teaching, research and outreach, implementation of a programme of Women and Development Studies finally leading up to institutionalization in 1993, of a programme of Gender and Development Studies across the three campuses of the University.

The intervening years between initiation of the idea and institutionalization of the programme afforded you the opportunity “to make vision a reality and to give vision a form”. This was only possible, however, through the collective effort on the part of many of you gathered for this celebration this afternoon; and I am sure that as you all continue the struggle to further extend the work of the Centre you are standing on the shoulders of these early pioneers and reaping the unearned increments of their sacrificial commitment and hard work which was carried out under very trying circumstances.

As with any new product the PR required to market and sell the product is never an easy task; this is particularly so when the product is Gender Studies. The mandate is to market this product not only as a legitimate academic discipline but also as an area of study that brings into question as well as the challenges of long accepted ideologies, power, structures and power relations. Your agenda is therefore both academic and political.

As might be expected, therefore, in the quest to establish Gender and Development Studies on the three campuses there have been driving forces and constraining forces. If the change process is to be maintained, however, the driving forces will have to overcome the restraining forces. I believe that many of you gathered for this evening’s celebration have been a part of the driving force behind the growth of the Centre at St Augustine. I encourage you therefore to continue the work which you have started and wish you all the very best for the coming years.

## **Stories in Caribbean Feminism: Reflections on the Twentieth Century**

Once upon a time, when the world was young, and women knew their places and men were assured of theirs. When women were the gatherers and the homemakers and men the hunters, protectors and providers, they all lived happily ever after... But was this the real story of the evolution of human culture, or is there another one waiting to be told? The history of most societies, if we look in the right places, is fertile with examples of women and men who did not conform and who challenged the limits of the time and space in which they lived. At one time women who disobeyed the unwritten rules were burnt as witches or consigned to the nunnery to spend the rest of their days. Yet history also redeems these same women who once defied the norms. Joan of Arc is an eloquent example.

In the introduction to his play *Saint Joan*, George Bernard Shaw wrote that "Joan, a village girl from the Vosges, in France, was born about 1412; burnt for heresy, witchcraft, and sorcery in 1431; rehabilitated after a fashion in 1458; designated Venerable in 1904; declared Blessed in 1908 and finally canonized in 1920. Of Joan he writes "she is the most notable Warrior Saint in the Christian calendar, and the queerest fish among the eccentric worthies of the Middle Ages... if Joan had been malicious, selfish, cowardly or stupid, she would have been one of the most odious persons known to history instead of one of the most attractive. If she had been old enough to know the effect she was producing on the men whom she humiliated by being right when they were wrong, and had learned to flatter and manage them, she might have lived as long as Queen Elizabeth". It took four centuries for Joan's full frontal attack on the patriarchal world to be openly forgiven, and that only by the first decade of the twentieth century.

Feminism to most people appears to be a twentieth century phenomenon, yet its roots precede the word by many centuries. The term feminism itself was

coined in the early nineteenth century by a man, French socialist Charles Fourier, “who imagined a new woman” who would both transform and be herself transformed by society. Some of this thought was no doubt influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* published in the late eighteenth century, in 1792. Wollstonecraft is described as the first major feminist, her book a trenchant critique of the debates on the rights of man which was bringing revolution to the United States and to France and considered threatening to the English parliament.” Wollstonecraft dared to take the liberal doctrine of inalienable human rights, and assume these rights also applied to her own sex. At this time they did not apply to women or to black slaves. Wollstonecraft's first book, a direct response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections*, was received with mixed emotions. On the one hand the response of revolutionary sympathizers was typical and supportive of her work. The conservative reaction from both women and men in London was cruel. She was called “a hyena in petticoats” by Horace Walpole, a writer of the time, and Hannah More wrote that “there was something so ridiculous in the very title that she had no intention of reading the book.” Today Wollstonecraft's first daring book is a classic in women's and gender studies and a must read for anyone wanting to appreciate the remarkable changes which have taken place in the status and social attitudes to women in Western society since the eighteenth century.

What influenced such women as Joan of Arc and Mary Wollstonecraft to defy norms of their time? Joan, of rural peasant stock, was the product of a pragmatic yet creative imagination, empty of selfish political motives. At least by the eighteenth century, Mary Wollstonecraft would not be burnt for daring to openly write what she believed to be true. By this time Wollstonecraft was welcomed as a champion of her sex when she travelled to France to improve her French and to see the Revolution first hand. Mary Wollstonecraft was born the eldest daughter of a small farmer of declining fortune in 1759, near London. Her father, angered by the steady erosion of his inheritance, frequently broke into a violent rage, and Mary often tried to defend her mother by throwing herself between them. Mary's upbringing was that of a gentlewoman of hard



times and much of her own education was self taught, due to her own intellectual curiosity. Women were generally encouraged to have accomplishments rather than sound education. From this relative obscurity in which she worked as a companion and a teacher, Wollstonecraft later joined ranks with others who had similarly progressive ideas. Her ideas about women's liberation were by no means geared to the abolition or estrangement from the other sex. Some of her main supporters in the end were men. It is useful to close this brief foray into her life story to say that, like all human characters, Wollstonecraft lived with the contradictions she also wrote about. She attempted to commit suicide over failure of a relationship with Gilbert Imlay, for whom she had borne a child, and later married William Godwin, at the peak of his career in British politics in 1796. She died in childbirth in 1797 after a brief but happy marriage with Godwin. Their infant daughter, also named Mary survived her, lived to marry the poet Shelley, and write the Gothic novel *Frankenstein*, another major classic of world literature. Ironically, at age 38, Mary Wollstonecraft, the prophetess of modern feminism, had died of one of the oldest scourges of womanhood - childbirth.

Why have I started a lecture on stories of Caribbean feminism extolling the virtues of European women who lived in other centuries and places? It is not to suggest that such challenges and creativity cannot emanate from within the Region and that a feminist tradition must be primarily measured against the western ideas and philosophy of sexual equality. My purpose in doing so was to first situate feminism in the Caribbean as part of a tradition of western intellectual thought and activism which long predates the twentieth century, although the use of the term feminist to describe women who were outspoken on the rights of their sex first appeared in English in 1890 to describe the suffragette women campaigning for the vote. The ideas of equality, whether they are of class, race or gender equality, are larger than the individual man or woman and are owned by no one society. They may be taken up and argued or struggled for differently in one society as opposed to the next, and in one

century as compared to the other, and from varying standpoints depending on what compels the issue to be raised.

The second reason I started with a broader reference point is to demonstrate the value of having the knowledge we do about these women – the way in which they have entered the literary and political text as a means of preserving both their memory and their ideas, and therefore what they have contributed to thought and struggle in their own societies. Thus I want to emphasize the value of recording the stories of our own struggles, in which ever way we choose so to do. What do we know of the women and men in the region who have struck a blow for gender equality? How were their ideas shaped? How many of them are researched thoroughly, have biographies written before social memory about them fades? This is not a self indulgent exercise, intent on glorifying a few characters who may stand out. There is a pragmatic goal attached to the recording of people and events. The history of most societies, particularly with the further democratization of historiography in the twentieth century, is about the people and events which shaped the society, its changes over time, its ideas and its specific cultural features. For example, a history of Trinidad and Tobago in the twentieth century without Eric Williams, his contributions, his ideas, as well as his idiosyncrasies, would not be representative of how this society evolved to date.

The recording of feminist history may itself be slightly different as the philosophy and theories of sexual or gender equality are still relatively youthful, even nebulous in some ways. The contributions to its spread are generally the work of many persons rather than one or two individuals. Perhaps the history of feminism needs to be written and recorded along the lines of an unfolding pageant, in which the different concerns, organizations, and anecdotes which document the major and minor roles played by various women and men as the scenes change, are jotted down and pooled as the story of feminism. This method also allows us to find the mode of expression which best reflects the style and questions which have concerned women of the region. We pride ourselves in

the Caribbean that we are very oral peoples. I think we are. Anecdotes are easier on the ear and at the same time provide the analysis or connections we are seeking to explain in a much more colourful and memorable way. They humanize events and bring alive the issues and ideas which they are intended to evoke. It is perhaps no coincidence that Trinidadian female author Merle Hodge's first major novel was called *Crick Crack Monkey*. Here Merle ostensibly deals with the complexity of class and race relations which typify Trinidad society, but, importantly, as they are experienced through the eyes of a young girl, thereby creating the necessary link with gender. Such stories become popular memory in the history of our societies, and they are inextricably linked to the way we see and define ourselves. Most crucially, the stories we record are legacies and lessons of struggle that we leave to future generations and these are then taken up and retold with their own flavour.

Clearly not all stories are fictional, but some are imbued with elements of fiction which may be necessary for the purpose of the time. For instance, in the writing of Jamaica's history, many historians have recorded the epic deeds of Nanny during the eighteenth century Maroon rebellion. In her own recovery of the role of women in Jamaican society, historian and stateswoman Lucille Mathurin-Mair dubbed Nanny the *Rebel woman*, the former a word which has particular resonance in the contemporary popular culture setting of reggae, dance hall and rebel music. To Nanny were attributed special powers in the maroon resistance to British enslavement: she was deemed to be the major strategizer and imbued with the capacity to repel bullets by "bouncing them off her backside". Whether the latter point was real or imagined, or in fact, despite the leadership of Cudjoe, Nanny was herself the superb tactician who imbued through the force of her personality and courage the loyalty and the following of the group. In her own lifetime, Nanny received 500 acres of land from the Government of Jamaica for herself and her people. By the 1960's, with the emergence of the nationalist movement and the need for national heroes, Nanny was admitted as the first National Jamaican heroine. It seems with time she has also achieved another status in Jamaica society. In 1994, on a royal visit

of Queen Elizabeth the Second, of Britain, to Jamaica, her Majesty was due to visit The University of the West Indies. As usual the Mona road to the university, potholed in parts, in good Caribbean style, was quickly paved, while the front walls of the university entrance were whitewashed sparkling clean. The morning on which she the queen was due to actually visit, with the first light of dawn, like a deep gash against the white walls, there stood the words splashed in dripping black paint "nanny a fi we queen" – an inexorable political statement if there ever was one. As a sequel to this story, but also part of its ongoing relevance, within minutes of discovery, the walls were repainted, not before a photographer friend managed to capture this marvellous stroke of graffiti on black and white film. He produced it as a post card and attempted to sell it through the University Bookshop, which refused to display it for sales; they argued that it presented a bad influence for students at the campus. I leave you to work out the contradictions of this.

The unfolding story of Caribbean feminism is riddled with the same contradictions placed on womanhood, and with women's challenges against these. The articulation by women in defining femininity is unfortunately taken as a personal insult or challenge to male authority or manhood. A retelling of the details of this story will reveal a script that is far richer than that to do primarily with gender relations between men and women, even if the individual life experience of women in relation to men, or placed within a patriarchal dominant society, does initially raise the consciousness of these ideas. We relate to the world through the way we experience it, and for most people, their sex, class, race, skin colour and, perhaps, level of education, inform the ways in which they experience and react to the issues which affect them in life. That some of this history is already unfolding is very evident in the work already being carried out by various scholars and activists, among them Rhoda Reddock, Linette Vassell, Rawwida Baksh Soodeen, Shaheeda Hosein, Halima Kassim, Sonia Cuales, myself, and many others who may not have been included here, but who will certainly be incorporated into the larger project entitled *The Making of Feminism in the Caribbean*, which this lecture begins to speak to. For

Trinidad and Tobago certainly, Rhoda has contributed immensely in her books *Women, Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago* and the life of Elma Francois, as well as in her compilation of a collection of writings of Clotil Walcott, while Bridget Brereton's *Gendered Testimonies*, the 1994 Elsa Goveia Lecture delivered on the Mona campus, region, and serves as a constant reminder to us that we need to look before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the range of sources women may have left behind such as diaries and letters, to further uncover the fragments of this story.

It would be good to bring some of these older stories into dialogue with the newer narratives of the twentieth century and see the harmony or disharmony they evoke in the telling of an unfolding feminist tradition and voice in the region. In this lecture I concentrate on some which have been recorded from about 1900 onwards. In *Voices of Women in Jamaica*, Linnette Vassell reprints a 1905 speech by Miss Anna Marvin, the Principal of Shortwood College (a Teachers' Training College in Jamaica) on "A Good Woman."

The ideal woman must be pure. As we fence round our little gardens to keep out intruding animals who will spoil them, so young girls must fence themselves round, to keep their bodies and minds pure and holy. Self-respect is the best fence, for if girls really respect themselves, they will not allow themselves to do, or say, to listen to, or even to think what is degrading or impure.

The Jamaican proverb for this kind of control is "tie the heifer and loose the bull," an old time saying which is being challenged by men themselves today, including Barry Chevannes, who has written considerably on the construction of masculinity. The argument being raised is that the kind of freedom which men are allowed, does not prepare them for the responsibility which they must undertake in adulthood: it may in fact do them a disservice rather than provide

them with the privileges which it assumes. Maybe we women should recommend that they change it to "tie the bull and loose the heifer' now... after all 'the times they are a changin.'"

In 1988 I did an interview with Mrs. Drobotie Naipaul, a Trinidadian of Indian descent, Brahmin caste, and the mother of V.S. Naipaul, two years before she died. She had this to say about the role of women.

Well, you have to be obedient and do your duty and not too much as people say, "backchat." If you feel something offend you, you go in your room or something and you sit down and cry and give vent to your feelings and then you come out...

You see a woman has a place in this world and when she abuse that place, she has lost the thing they call womanhood because she is no more that woman...

My sisters always felt the same way about their duty as wife and mother. It was an honour to me - everyday practice meant that I have a duty to do every day and must fulfill my duty every day.

Miss Marvin's dictum in 1905 that young girls must be fenced in and Mrs. Naipaul's convictions that Indian women should know their duty, are separated by eight decades, yet the notions are more or less similar. There is a remarkable recurrence of ideas pertaining to gender over the centuries, although these ideas vary by age group, ethnic group, religion, caste, society and individual predispositions. Even within the same ethnic group and historical time, there are competing ideologies. Another example, illustrates this point. Stella Abidh was the daughter of C.C. Abidh, school master and county council representative of

Couva in the 1920's. When Stella attained the marriageable age of 16 she refused to marry the suitable boy her grandmother had picked out for her, her mother having died when she was a child. She chose instead to teach at the Presbyterian school in the village. Stella recalls that when she was a child she would hear her father say that if he had a son he would send him to medical school, because if he had had the medical skills his wife would not have died in childbirth. One day Stella read in the newspaper about the first Indian woman who had become a nurse, one Rosalie Sanowar, and she began applying to do nursing. The replies came through her father and he approached her with it. "you know this letter is coming to you. Now I see you want to be a nurse. Tell me, if I give you a chance to be a doctor will you take this?" She said yes. To my knowledge at this time there were few, if any local women doctors, and certainly no local Indian woman who had done medicine. So the story continues that C.C. Abidh went to the Reverend Scrimgeour, the head of the Presbyterian church, to ask if he would facilitate his daughter going to Canada to do medicine. Rev. Scrimgeour's reply was typical and insightful of the attitudes to the local "native" population by missionaries in the early decades of this century. "I would not send a daughter to do medicine. Indian girls are morally weak and would not be able to stand those pressures." C.C., a fighting man, was not to be distracted. He went back to Stella and said this is what Rev. Scrimgeour said to me, but I want you to promise me that you will not be one of those Indian people to put me down if I give you this chance. "The rest is history and a still untold story of how Stella went on to continue and qualify as a medical doctor, come back to work as a District Medical Officer in South Trinidad, and, recognizing that most of what she was treating could be prevented, she chose to continue her specialization in Public Health. She became one of the first women to insist that attention to public health was necessary for a developing society concerned with the welfare of its peoples.

What do we know of the influences that shaped the early stirring of consciousness among Caribbean women, and how have they, regardless of class or race origins, defined the issues which affected all women in the society? What were the so-called feminists doing at the time? Well for one thing many of

those who spoke on behalf of women may not even have considered themselves feminists. Look for instance at the tone of this letter to the editor in the *Trinidad Guardian*, dated April 8, 1919, titled "Pity the poor wives."

Sir, kindly allow us a space in your valuable paper to call the attention of the Government and also to ask your kind support to help and advise us, the poor wives, sisters and daughters of the heart less proprietors of small dry goods stores in the island. We are a class who cannot strike, petition or grumble. Like dumb animals, we receive only food and a set of kamers (clothes), and no salary .... If the Government is going to shorten the hours of shop clerks, please include us in the schedule as we have been advised that when the shops will close at 7 or 8 o'clock, we will have to continue work as usual to 10 or 11 o'clock every day. Signed "Wives, Sisters and daughters."

Some women were clearly more outspoken and conscious of the political way in which these issues should be raised. Nellie Latrielle was a white Jamaican woman whose father had migrated from England in the 1840's. She was a committee member of the Child Saving League established in 1916, a founding member of the Women's Social Services Club, and active in the organisation's campaign for the vote in 1918 to 1919. She was concerned with the economic conditions of women of the poorer classes and involved in a domestic worker's training programme which she operated from her own premises at Rosedale Avenue.

The same premises were later sold to Amy Bailey, for the establishment of the Housecraft Training Centre.



Campaigning for the vote for women in 1918, Nellie wrote:

What are the qualifications of our women voting in Jamaica? I own no property, I pay no taxes, but I am deeply interested in the question and am delighted to think the day and opportunity is at hand when women may help in the questions that perplex our rulers. I don't think the silence of my sister Jamaican is due to indifference. What they may need is a leader; a qualified intelligent capable woman who will stand to the fore. I was in England at the most acute stage of the suffrage question and was deeply interested in the movement and listening to its wonderful speakers ... today I read your editorial and look around at my country women, who in those days were taught to look upon women wanting the vote as lost souls.

The lack of women who could provide leadership on public issues appears to be a major concern of early feminist activity in the region as we also see in Trinidad. From her research on women's political participation in Trinidad, Reddock recorded that on 28 August 1924, a newspaper editorial entitled "Women in Council", observed that so far women had given no public demonstration of their views and worse still, when the case was being put forward in the Council, none of the leading feminists of Trinidad (if there were any) had been present to encourage and applaud their champion. From this the editorial concluded that the political consciousness of women had not yet reached the articulate state. But was there a political consciousness of a different kind, not easily translated into the language of debates, party politics and state machinery of the time?

Rhoda Reddock recounts the life story of Elma Francois who was born in 1807 in St. Vincent and migrated to Trinidad when she was 22, leaving behind her 18-month old son to be cared for by his grandmother. Elma Francois was a founder of the Negro Welfare Cultural and Social Association which itself was responsible

for the formation of three major trade unions in Trinidad - two of which survive to the present - the SWWTU and the Federated Workers Trade Union, now part of the National Union of Government and Federated Workers (NUGFW). Elma's predisposition as a young working girl in St Vincent already displayed that of an inordinate concern for the conditions of working men and women.

According to Jim Barette, her long time friend, comrade and companion, Francois would sit and talk to him for hours about the conditions of life of poor people in rural St Vincent. Francois's interest and self-motivated intellectual curiosity about politics and the Black working people led to her own self-education on such issues. Jim Barette recalls that it was because of this they met. Barette, who later also became involved in the Negro Welfare Association and the Hunger marches of the 1930's led by Butler, admitted that at this time he had had no previous political or public speaking interest and had been quite content to leave the running of politics to the "whites" like Cipriani. "I said to her, 'where you learn all of this?' She replied, 'You must read, and you mustn't read stupidity. Look around you. Do not think that this is the right way for people to live? Look at those Indians sleeping on the ground ... Those Church people talking, but you think God meant people to live like this?'"

From the mid-twenties onwards, especially among the black and coloured middle class, women become increasingly active and outspoken on many issues, some which were dealt with under the rubric of social work, others which are more militant and outspokenly feminist. Gema Ramkeeson remembered some of the initiatives that became respectable for women to be involved in.

We recognized that there was a need to help but in the 1920's there was nothing. How was it to be tackled? We did not know? Then along came Audrey Jeffers who did as she learned in England. She set about forming her Coterie of Social Workers, who took the lead in setting up day nurseries

and creches where children and babies could be cared for during the day. She organized homes for blind women and men. She inaugurated a school feeding programme where meals were given free or for a penny for those who could pay.

Ramkeeson was born in 1910 and was extraordinarily active both in the Church and in a host of women's organizations which mushroomed from the forties onwards. She writes that as a school girl she came under the influence of Mrs. Beatrice Grieg, a Scotswoman who encouraged her first initiatives to organize young girls in Cedros where she lived, and Audrey Jeffers. In a delivery to the inaugural seminar in Women and Development Studies in 1986, (which unfortunately due to health reasons she could not attend but to which she sent a written paper), Gema Ramkeeson observed:

Today we can enumerate the tremendous strides our women have made. We know of female senators, ministers of government, judges, lawyers, professors of education... We can go on and on. At the beginning of the twentieth century, we were none of these. Nevertheless, as a social worker myself, I can be proud of the pioneering contribution we have made. I look now at you educated women, professionally trained, 'financially secure', independently minded, with every possible profession and opportunity open to you. And as you stand at the threshold of the twenty-first century, I envy you.

For those who were openly and self-avowed feminists in those salad days, there is a striking resonance with the attitudes to feminism today. Una Marson was a journalist, playwright and poet born in 1905 in Jamaica. Among her

accomplishments was the founding of the Jamaica Businesswoman's Association. She had this to say in 1937:

There has always been a tendency among the male of the species generally to sneer at even the mention of feminism. The very word conjures up in their minds chatty meetings of frustrated spinsters who are sublimating their normal instincts. They used to be called "blue stockings". At one period in England they were nearly all termed suffragette because they were fighting for women's suffrage.

Nesta Patrick recalls that in the 1950's when the League of Women Voters would venture into Laventille and St. James in cars to encourage women to vote, proclaiming the slogan "Your vote is your precious right", the men would stone the cars and shout "Women eh have no right to vote, dat is man's business" while the women themselves would taunt them with, "What all you want us to do, that is men's work." *La plus même chose.*

I have lingered on the women and the period of the earlier decades of the twentieth century as this past is intricately locked into the present debates within the region, in ways which are not immediately self evident but which close analysis will reveal. It also establishes how ideas about feminism and feminist organizing change over time, and hopefully create greater credibility that a movement which can span at least a century, and perhaps even be gaining momentum, is not rooted in shallow ground. One of the aspects which I have not dealt with, but is worth noting, is that of collaboration across the region. This defined some of the early initiatives and is particularly evident in the post-sixties when new ideas were again infused into this continuing struggle for gender equality.

One of the common elements which is to be found in the pre-fifties and post-sixties feminist struggle is that of extra-regional influences and regional collaborations and initiatives. The 1960's ushered in a new era, the "modern" woman, although this business of what is modern is itself a perplexing thing. Perhaps for every generation the next one is modern. For example, as far back as 1935, in a calypso entitled *Women will Rule the World*, Atilla warned Trinidadian men.

How different are the ladies of long ago  
To the modern women we all know  
If you have observed you are bound to see  
The sex has changed entirely  
Long ago their one ambition in life  
Was to be mother and wife  
But now they need clothes by the bale  
Always smoking cigarettes and drinking cocktails

The ideas of feminism from the 70's onwards which began to spread across the globe like a virus, clearly caught on in all the islands. For instance, in 1981, when the CWP - Concerned Women for Progress - was formed in Trinidad, so was the CWP or Committee of Women for Progress in Jamaica. To my knowledge, since we were the ones who named the former, and we had not yet come into contact with the latter, the acronyms and similarity of the names were purely coincidental, understandably so. Both groups in fact began as women's arms to small left politics groups. By 1963 and 1964, women had founded the later more autonomous organizations which succeeded and emerged out of the CWP, first The Group and second Working Women, were both more explicitly female centred and focused. These early alliances with the left and with the men who supported and in part were able to empathize with the different conditions women faced, need, in my view, to be celebrated as part of the history of

second wave feminism in this society. It certainly made things lively in another way - as for some of us, these alliances were also romantic as well as comradely. Needless to say, women's groups allowed women the privilege and the right of having to go out of their homes to attend the numerous meetings – probably retaining the same function for some of us as the women who formed the social clubs - or were part of church women's organizations, doing good works for the community. There was a witty little quip coined by either Michael Als or Kim Johnson, I don't remember which, but in the way of jokes, indicates the still subtle male control over women's mobility in society. They used to tease us: "You say you going to meeting. Yuh mean you going to meet him".

The idea of a "meeting" now summons up a dreadness in my mind, but feminist meetings in those days used to be fun. We met at the Bank and General Workers offices, upstairs an ice cream and chicken and chips shop on Eastern Main Road in Laventille. Meetings and final arrangements for the next project would invariably end around ice cream or chips if we couldn't afford chicken. Some of the activities we took on were foolhardy even if they were inspired by good intentions. For instance, one Christmas we joined forces with the Consumer Protection Movement and organized a Don't Buy campaign, analyzing in the heydays of socialist thought that capitalism's greed was fed by lavish Christmas spending, which poor people could ill afford. As one of our stratagems, we produced a T-shirt painted with the traditional Santa Claus figure whom we dubbed Santa Jaws, and in retrospect a rather unattractive poster, saying "Don't Buy, Be Wise" or something equally inane. We deployed members with cars and in groups of four, armed with the same ugly posters, and pails of flour and water paste, went around town and the bigger malls then, including Valpark Shopping Plaza, to Port of Spain and St. James sticking up these posters nearer to midnight hour when we determined that the traffic of people and cars would be lighter. We had not counted on the police cars patrolling of course, so the pasting up became a real adrenalin pumping exercise, a rapid slap of the gluey substance against a pristine wall, one slopping glue, the other pasting

posters, and another one on the lookout for police or irate store owners, and then we were on our way.

There were some close shaves that night, but we had all agreed to meet up in St. James, and of course, everything must end with an old talk about who say what and who did what. And the only place open that time of the night was the College in St. James Main Road the favorite hangout of the strong arm of the law. So we ended up drinking with some of the same policemen who had cause to stop some of us in our goodly endeavours, to curb spending. I suspect our efforts made very little, if any, dent in the shopkeepers' pockets, but it sure taught us a good deal about organizing and teamwork. These were wilder, freer and certainly safer days, it seems for women. Eventually we had to stop having meetings or activities late at night as it gradually got more unsafe to be driving home on your own.

An interesting coincidence was when The Group decided to have a weekend retreat at Mayaro in 1983. We rented a beach house on the seaside, and of course we all traipsed down there, ostensibly to have discussions and create closer links, which we did. Alliances are not arbitrarily made, and the ideas of sisterhood were strong and vibrant in these heady days, and most importantly, we believed in it.

On the Sunday afternoon, we were all liming in and around the house, when lo and behold, a string of leggy girls in the briefest bikinis were suddenly being lined up against the rustic wooden fence and a few coconut trees which fronted our beach house, with a male photographer clicking away instructing them to face this way, shift a leg that way and so on. It turned out that these were the contestants in an impending south beauty show. The irony did not escape us. They had arbitrarily chosen the house we were staying in to pose against. Yet one of the very first daring statements we had made in Trinidad and one of the public activities we had carried out as the CWP was the picketing of a beauty

contest in the Jean Pierre Complex about three years earlier. We had a picket line supported by men and women, and the newspaper treatment of our efforts was far kinder than the slurs of the patrons going in to the show.

There were also sobering if humorous episodes which taught us some lessons that have served us well. The assumption that, as self-affirmed feminists, we spoke for all women was quickly dispelled. We had decided as one of our projects in the CWP to work with the "under privileged women" in Laventille, the working class sloganeering of the left movement clearly influencing the choice of projects and activities we tended to undertake. We had the theory right, made our contacts through Brother Resistance who lived on the hill, and set up a meeting with some women one Saturday afternoon, figuring out that this is the best time for them, and so on. We even tried to dress the part. Most of us were professional and middle class in our orientation, and in those days, rootsiness was expressed by the jeans and plain T-shirt to affirm solidarity with the masses.

A few women of the Laventille district we had targeted turned out to meet us that Saturday evening in the little parlour on the steep hill against which we maneuvered up and parked our cars precariously. They listened to us for a while, checked us out up and down, and finally, one of them echoed the general consensus of their group. "Who are you to come and tell us how to organize our lives and tell us about how to be a fulfilled woman and how to deal with our men?" she said, "All yuh who don't even know to be woman yuhself, wearing pants like men." Abashed, we withdrew from the top of the hill, certainly for me never to return again. What is interesting is that this story remained equally vivid in the mind of another CWP member of the time, Gaiety Pargass, who, like me, tells it when she wants to make a point about respect for others' experiences and circumstances about which one cannot make superficial presumptions. It took a decade more for the western feminist movement, with the advent of post modernist thought, to admit that there was no universal female voice, that women were differentiated by class, race, colour and society and that these voices needed to be identifiably different, even while unity in the struggle was sought. We had learnt that lesson very early.



Interestingly enough, Nesta Patrick had a similar story to tell about the intervention of the Coterie of Social Workers three decades earlier in the same territory of Laventille.

The responses to the Coterie's efforts to provide social services, arrange child care and so on, were met with – “all yuh tea ladies who could only drink tea - then sit around in your drawing room and talk we bad.” And again it was the recurrent idea that as women they had stepped out of their crease. “Why all you women doing job that men suppose to do”. I would like to think that there is no right or wrong on the part of either group, but a lot of lessons to be learnt on what we do and how we learn what our capacities are. Often the actions which some women have undertaken for others have been misread or misunderstood, yet they sometimes have far reaching effects which we ourselves do not anticipate.

Rhoda Reddock, an early member of the group WorkingWomen - a group which is still active - reminded me that the rampant societal debates which went on about the passage of the Sexual Offences Bill in Trinidad and Tobago were first started by this group. In 1986 WorkingWomen got wind that such a Bill was being introduced into Parliament, and finally, after much searching, located a copy of the Bill and found it was a very progressive piece of legislation. The members of the group decided to have a public forum on this Bill, sensitizing people to the issues it raised and the concerns for women.

Among its other clauses the Bill sought to decriminalize homosexuality, make a criminal offence of sex with minors under the age of 14, and introduce the penalty of marital rape. The public forum opened up the Bill to other interested groups such as church organizations, lawyers, doctors and social workers and in the one sense acted as a major sensitizing agent in the society at large about issues pertaining to and contained in this Act. Rhoda Reddock pointed out that ironically, perhaps due to the public debates and censure which then took

place, the Bill was altered and watered down in some parts, so that eventually when it was passed in 1987, homosexuality was criminalized to explicitly also include women as offenders, that women who had sex with boys under 14 could also be convicted, and the famous Clause 4, which related to marital rape, only applied to married couples who were separated or even if they share the same residence, who had lived separate lives. According to Reddock, perhaps if they had left it alone, the Bill would have been quietly passed in its original form. Then again it might not have been passed at all, and to date, Trinidad and Tobago remains one of the Caribbean societies which has consistently introduced progressive legislation to deal with issues such as sexual offences and domestic violence.

One of the most remarkable stories which needs to be told of the latter part of this century is of the coincidental and accidental ways in which successes are achieved, sometimes far beyond the original vision of any initiator.

Over twenty years ago, Clotil Walcott started campaigning about the conditions of women who worked in the chicken factory in which she was also employed and later, linking this to the question of wages for women's work, also formed the National Union of Domestic Employees with the apposite acronym of NUDE. In the early eighties, the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague was engaged in a project of examining women's struggles and Clotil, through Rhoda's presence in The Hague at the time, was invited to the ISS. There she came into contact with Selma James, ex-wife of C.L.R. James, who was also one of the founders of the Wages for Housework Campaign of British socialist feminists. Recognizing the links with what Clotil was engaged in in Trinidad, Selma James suggested that Walcott could become the representative of the Wages for Housework Campaign in Trinidad. So Walcott returned with renewed zeal on top of an already energetic mindset and began to write numerous letters to the editor and dredge up support for this campaign. Her letter writing and efforts caught the attention of Senator Diane Mahabir-Wyatt who took the matter to the Trinidad and Tobago Parliament, and Trinidad and Tobago

became the first country to take up the recommendations for recognition of housework in the Gross Domestic Product passed by the Nairobi Conference on women in 1985.

So progressive was this move, that in 1995 at the Beijing World Conference on Women, the Trinidad and Tobago legislation was used as the model to inform the drafting of the world conventions on unwaged work, which this conference identified as crucial to the continued recognition of women's role in social formation and in the economy.

1998 finds us now with fewer 70's-style feminist organizations and groups, but with NGO status; others such as the regional Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action, Women and Development Groups at the University, Rape Crisis and Women's Crisis Centres. We also have organizations which now involve men explicitly in the challenge which gender has raised for masculinity itself as, for instance, Fathers Incorporated in Jamaica and Men against violence against Women or MAVAW in Trinidad have emerged.

Some of us are no longer young and are perhaps less idealistic, but we are more pragmatic about what we can still achieve in our lifetime. The generation of second-wave feminists is still to be found as the ringleaders behind some of these initiatives. Cathy Shepherd, Jacquie Burgess and Tara Ramoutar work with CAFRA, and so did Thelma Henderson until her death from cancer. Gaietry Pargass is involved in Human Rights activism to save both male and female prisoners from the death penalty. Rawwida Baksh Soodeen, once Coordinator of CAFRA, now heads the Gender and Youth Desk at the Commonwealth Secretariat in London, and Gemma Tang Nain holds a similar position with the CARICOM Secretariat.

On all three campuses of The University of the West Indies, for the past fifteen years there has been an ongoing project to introduce gender studies, first

through voluntary efforts by Women and Development Studies groups and through the pioneering work of Peggy Antrobus and Joycelin Massiah in Barbados. Successors to the earlier initiatives in which we participated, Rhoda Reddock and myself head the St Augustine and Mona Campus Centres for Gender and Development Studies, and there is another located in the Cave Hill headed by Eudine Barriteau. On the Mona Campus a Regional Co-ordinating Centre for Gender and Development Studies is headed by Dr. Barbara Bailey, while it also boasts the first professorial appointment in Women's Studies, a post held by Professor Elsa Leo-Rhynie.

When we teach gender studies at the campus level, many of the students who do our courses are introduced to the feminist movement and to feminism, which to them appears as another dying *ism* along with socialism, Marxism, communism and in this day and age, perhaps idealism itself. Feminism 70's-style may already be a thing of the past in other ways as well. For instance, about two weeks ago Rhoda Reddock came up to Mona to attend another conference, and since she was going to be physically on this campus, we told the gender studies class she would be coming to do a guest lecture. "Miss she still alive" they asked incredulously. Perhaps it was just the idea to a student that if you read somebody's work in a book they must be dead, but it might also be that the ideas we expressed and the issues we raised are no longer relevant to the new generation – the same way that the concerns which Nesta Patrick and Gema Ramkeeson raised before that appeared old hat to us, and they had also moved on and forward from the concerns raised by Una Marson and Amy Bailey and Elma Francois before them. There are nonetheless continuities and recurrences, some of which I have noted and which may be useful to transmit to the new kind of activism possibly emerging through tertiary level education in women's studies now available at The University of the West Indies. But *the language of struggle*, as with everything else, must change, and, as we learned years ago, it is not our place to speak for others, in this case the younger generation who will define their own problems from their life experiences, and perhaps already are addressing them in ways inscrutable to us.

In his book *Age of extremes, The short twentieth century 1914 to 1991*, British historian Eric Hobsbawm devoted nine of the 600 odd pages to the feminist movement of the 1960's onwards. That he included the feminist movement at all as part of the chapter of "The Social Revolution" is itself significant. The twentieth century, in my view, has been the century in which the idea of gender equality has seeped into human consciousness in a manner which is difficult if not impossible to ignore. Perhaps one of these days, when the history of the twentieth century Caribbean is being written by future generations, the voices of women and the stories of feminism will have helped to shape a more self-confident and humane space which we call home, and will not have to be relegated to footnotes of history.

That feminism is challenging and upsetting is clear, otherwise there would not be the responses to date to its various manifest forms. We don't really know what it augurs for the future, but any movement informed by unselfish and sincere motives about the good of others cannot be reduced to the trivial pursuit of personal gain or glory. Perhaps, as Fidel Castro observed, we have to wait for history to absolve us after all. But the story of feminism has not yet ended. The third chapter has just begun.



CGDS staff and associates at the CGDS 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary public lecture, 1998.

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