

## Women's Organizations in the Caribbean Community from the 19th Century to Today

by Rhoda Reddock

Women in the English-speaking Caribbean have been members of women's organizations since the 19th century. In the main, these have been religious-based women's organizations, especially of the various denominations of the Christian Church. In this region the organization of women was particularly important as in the late 19th and early 20th century it was the main mechanism for transferring and inculcating Western European values of women's place, the sexual division of labour and social and domestic organization.

The large-scale organization of women continues to take place within religious bodies. On the one hand religion represents a legitimate space within which women can freely participate outside of the home, without question or need for justification. On the other it provides that spiritual solace and community in a world in which hard work, social and economic and physical or emotional violence are the order of the day.

The large-scale mobilization and organization of women has also occurred within the labour movement and political organizations. The early labour movement (from which many of our political parties emerged) was a much more amorphous grouping than present-day trade unions. In particular the very broad concept of "worker" which was used facilitated the participation of persons involved in a wide range of economic activities.

Today, women continue to be members of unions, especially in those occupations dominated by women.



*Pregnant Woman*, artist unknown  
(WOMANSPEAK, Dec. 1990)

Nevertheless, even in these unions, few attain or accept leadership positions. Today, the trade union movement, in spite of a significant female membership, continues to be a male-dominated institution not only in its leadership but in its concerns and style of operations.

The re-emergence of the women's movement internationally in the late 1960s and early 1970s ushered in a new era in the Caribbean women's struggle. Unlike the earlier movement, this impact has been broader and has touched many more aspects of personal and political life than its forerunner earlier in the century.

Interestingly enough, many of the first women to be influenced were the stalwarts of the traditional women's organizations from the era of the 1950s, many of whom were heavily involved in nationalist political parties which emerged at that time. It could be said that the new consciousness seeping into the region reminded these older women activists of the marginal posi-

tion they still had within their political organizations and societies as a whole.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s also, small groups of women began to meet and discuss their situation, many influenced by the ideas emanating from the radical black power, anti-war, new left and women's liberation movements of North America and Europe. The contradictions among the various strands of this new left politics were felt most by the women of these movements. One writer recalls the launching of the women's section of the national Joint Action Committee in 1971 (at the suggestion of the brother). This encouragement, she noted, had the "cautioning clause that this auxiliary, supportive arm was to have nothing to do with what they labelled "white women's liberation" in North America and Europe" (Henderson, 1988:).

Many of those small groups, like the Jamaica Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (JARA) in Jamaica and the Committee for the Defence of the Rights of Women in Trinidad, or even Women Against Terror in Guyana, comprised middle-strata women, many members or associates of small left-wing political parties, but not many. It is interesting that at both levels the Caribbean women's movement has been activated and propelled by women schooled in the male-dominated political culture.

In spite of the strong radical bent in Trinidad and Tobago, one of the earliest of the new women's groups to be formed was the Housewives Association of Trinidad and Tobago. Launched in 1975, its objectives in-



cluded "the task of encouraging the exchange of information and ideas for the promotion of joint action among women in the national interest (Henderson, 1988:365). In its short active life, this group was able to mobilize a national membership (including Tobago). And although it concentrated on consumer issues its main contribution was a published survey on the conditions of work of domestic servants.

In 1977 the Sistren Women's Theatre Collective, one of the first of a line of feminist-oriented autonomous women's groups was formed. Unlike many others, it had a predominantly working-class membership, and used drama as a workshop and performance tool for consciousness-raising and entertainment.

By the 1980s, small radical or feminist-oriented women's groups mushroomed throughout the region, beginning with BOWAND in Belize in 1979, an outcome of a WAND Workshop, and followed by the Concerned Women for Progress in Trinidad and Tobago which by 1985 had spawned The Group (1983) and Workingwomen (1985).

Other organizations included the Committee for the Development of Women in St. Vincent and the Grenadines (1984), the Belize Rural Women's Association (1985), Sisi Ni Dada of St. Kitts/Nevis (1985), Red Thread of Guyana (1986) and most recently the Women's Forum of Barbados (1988). The activities of these organizations, many of which have quite a small membership, have been

concentrated on consciousness-raising internally and among the wider public through activities in popular education, income-generating projects, skills training (in both traditional and non-traditional areas), media watch and development or alternative media - radio programmes, videos, newsletters, films, exhibitions, and slide-tape shows.

Although small and voluntary in membership, the impact of these groups has usually far surpassed their size. This influence has usually been achieved through campaigns on relevant issues which have been able to draw in a wide cross-section of women including women from the more established and traditional women's organizations. Among the more successful of these were the campaign against violence to women in St. Vincent and the Grenadines in 1985-86 and the campaign over the Sexual Offences Bill in Trinidad and Tobago during the same period. The issue of sexual violence

has been a key factor in mobilizing women throughout the region. This issue which includes domestic violence - sexual abuse of children, rape in unions, wife battering, rape, incest, sexual harassment in the workplace and other forms of sexual assault has served to be the one issue capable of uniting women of all classes, races and ethnic groups. In the Caribbean region, it has been the one factor which has brought to women some understanding of body politics and its relationship to the wider socio-political and economic system. As noted by Patricia Mohammed, the impact of this new consciousness was felt in the media where the lyrics of calypsoes, one of the popular indigenous musical genres of the region began to reflect women's resistance to, and men's rejection of male violence towards women.

These developments have served to radicalize the established women's organizations and force them to refocus away from charitable works to their



*Birthing Dolls*, artist unknown (WOMANSPEAK, Dec. 1990)

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original concerns, the emancipation of women. Changes can be discerned (for example) in the activities of the YWCA which at least at a regional level began to concern itself much more with issues of women's health, young women and world peace, and among women in church groups (mainly of the established Christian churches) where, for example, the Barbados Mothers Union (Anglican) has taken up the issue of sexual violence and the ordination of women priests. In Barbados and in Trinidad and Tobago, the Business and Professional Women's Clubs have both established institutions to assist battered women while the Soroptimists have concentrated their efforts on women and work.

Among the non-Christian religions, the influence has also been felt. In Jamaica, women within Rastafari have begun to assert their identity and while one representative of the organi-

zation, Mada Wadada (Mother Love) found it impossible to conceive of a women's group of women and for women, she noted that - "More and more internationally the sisters adopt new strategies to achieve economic independence and consequently independence of their children" (Mada Wadada, 1988).

Similarly in Trinidad and Tobago the Hindu Women's Organization formed in 1987 seeks to mobilize the Hindu woman, and "deal specifically with matters affecting the Hindu woman and her relationship with the wider society" (Gopeesingh, 1988).

Suffice it to say there has been some influence on the labour movement but much less than in other areas. Women's committees have been established in some unions to replace women's auxiliaries but in spite of an ILO/DANIDA regional programme for women trade unionists, real change has been minimal. Individual women and groups of trade union women have been active in the movement, but they have not really been able to check the male-dominated core of the labour movement.

In 1985, the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) was formed. It filled a long felt need for a progressive feminist-oriented network of Caribbean feminists and feminist organizations. The significance of CAFRA lay in its decision to challenge head-on the prejudice and negative assumptions traditionally associated with the concept of feminism. In so doing, it sought to define a Caribbean feminism which links women's subordination with other systems of subordination - race, class and nation, and to go beyond traditional boundaries of language and culture. CAFRA membership now includes the Dutch-, English-, French-,

Spanish-, and American-speaking Caribbean as well as women in the Caribbean diaspora.

Programme activities include support to women's groups/organizations in the region in research/action on women in agriculture, women's history and creative writing; communication/information and collaboration across linguistic barriers, and the establishment of a documentation base for use by individuals and organizations.

Around 1987 another regional network, Women for Caribbean Liberation (WCL) was launched in St. Vincent. Headquartered in Antigua, this group initially emerged as a network of women associated with socialist-oriented political organizations who had met in Antigua for the First Caribbean Women's Encounter. So far their activities have focused on women's work and the popularization of information on developments in Haiti.

From the above one can get the impression of a well-developed and effective women's movement within this region. Developments however are uneven, both within countries and within the region. Daily, women activists are coming to terms with the fact that achievements so far have only scratched the surface and the lives of the majority of women are yet to be touched. The impact of the present world economic crisis does not make our task any easier.

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