

Women's Alternative Media in the Caribbean

by Suzanne Francis Brown, Hilary
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This overview is based on information from women involved in working with alternative media and media practitioners. While it is already comprehensive in coverage, it is still an incomplete picture of women's work on alternative media.

Two groups, the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) and the Women and Development Unit (WAND), work on women's issues at the regional level.

CAFRA, based in Trinidad and Tobago, is a research-oriented organisation which produces a regular newsletter: *CAFRA News/CAFRA Novedades*, published in English and Spanish with occasional articles in French. *CAFRA News* reports on regional projects and programmes and informs members on related events in member territories. CAFRA has produced several videos on gender issues (e.g. *Women in Agriculture*).

WAND in Barbados is also research oriented and has produced a range of publications, including a newsletter *Womanspeak!* which looks at issues affecting Caribbean women; a series of Occasional Papers; an International and Regional newsclip service *New-Woman Struggle* and a continuing series of articles concerning Women and Development to stimulate discussion and debate in the Caribbean region.

New-Woman Struggle is put together with material from various journals, pamphlets, papers, monographs, newspapers, etc. on the struggles of women in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Financial constraints reduced the number of issues from six to two a year. *New-Woman Struggle* is the revised and renamed (in 1989) version of *Woman Struggle*, which first came out in 1982.

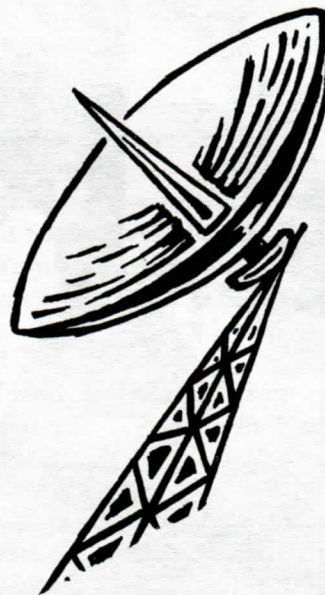
WAND was also involved in the production of a number of videos, slides, tapes and radio programmes.

Together with the Caribbean News Agency (CANA), WAND produced a radio series for women also entitled *Womanspeak!* which ran for a period of approximately eighteen months in the early 1990s. The programme was distributed to radio stations across the English-speaking Caribbean and provided a forum for women voices.

At the national level, many more women are active in alternative media.

In Barbados, the Women's Forum, initiated by some women's organisations, have done poetry readings of the works of women poets together with public analysis on a number of issues, for instance, cervical cancer, structural adjustment and domestic violence.

A few Barbadian theatre companies have from time to time put on productions aimed at highlighting the contributions of women. For example the Stage



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

One Theatre Company, was responsible for *Lights*. This production, based on improvisations of real life experiences entwined with poetry and dance went to Antigua and Dominica with Stage One in 1985. Four years later it went to Trinidad in a production by WWB Productions. Stage One was also responsible for staging *For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Not Enough* - an American play depicting the lives of black women.

In Jamaica, Sistren Theatre Collective/Sistren Research is a non-profit women's collective, which uses drama as a popular education tool for analysing and exposing the situation of Jamaican (and Caribbean) women. The group was established in the 1970s. Sistren has become well known locally, regionally and internationally since then. It collaborates with a wide range of women's groups and developmental NGOs throughout the region to bring a gender perspective and strengthen the Caribbean women's movement.

Major elements of its work include: research; the production and presentation of plays on issues affecting working class women; workshops; and videos (e.g. a docu-drama on the life of two early Jamaican feminists: *Miss Amy & Miss May* and *Buss Out*, on women's lives and shelter problems, technically facilitated by Phase Three Productions; *Sweet Sugar Rage!* on women and trade unions in the sugar belt). Two docu-dramas on the lives of two outstanding Jamaican women are being produced: Louise Bennett, poet, folklorist, actress and legend, and Edna Manley, mother of the modern Jamaican art movement.

Sistren is also involved in publications (books, e.g. *Lionheart Gal*, based on experiences of its members; booklets, and *Sistren Magazine*) and income earning projects such as the production of saleable items including cards, calendars and T-shirts.

Sistren Magazine is a publication of 32 pages, produced three times a year. It has grown out of a newsletter, set up in 1979 which became a news magazine in 1984. While still focusing on Sistren members and activities, it also seeks to highlight issues of concern to women in Jamaican society. Its circulation of 1,500 copies reach, mainly through subscription, women in Jamaica, the Caribbean and beyond.

The Social Action Centre (SAC) is a community action organisation with member groups across Jamaica. It often uses video cameras as a tool for educating members and recording events. In collaboration with the Association of Caribbean Economists (ACE) it

has produced a booklet (*Hooked on Debt*) and video series - together with ADA and WAND on the national debt (*Debt Crisis: An Unnatural Disaster*) and its impact on women (*Carrying a Heavy Load*) - both technically facilitated by Phase Three Productions.

SAC also utilizes popular education techniques such as drama, song and dance to educate the people they work with, the majority of whom are women.

The Association of Development Agencies (ADA) is a grouping of Jamaican NGOs. It distributes a networking newsletter to a membership locally, in the Caribbean and to relevant organisations beyond. Gender issues are regularly dealt with in the ADA/FYI Newsletter.

ADA has been involved in hosting seminars on development issues including gender, the production of videos (together with SAC and WAND) and in the use of media by community groups. In many



instances the material generated in these seminars has become the basis for publications on development issues, designed to assist in educating groups mainly at the community level. ADA has published a booklet *Publishing for Development*, that explains the basics of writing and publishing to grass root groups.

Women's Media Watch (WMW) is a small group of women, established in 1987, concerned with the portrayal of women in mainstream media and advertising products such as calendars.

WMW monitors the media, writes letters concerning examples of unfair or stereotypical portrayal of women, and has a programme of educational activities (from workshops for the general public to lectures at the University).

WMW produced together with Phase Three Productions a video *Behind the Images* on media links to domestic violence.

Some organisations working with women participate from time to time in the production of alternative media, but are not involved on a regular basis. Examples are Woman Inc., Women's Construction Collective and Women's Centre. Others have just their own newsletter, like the Centre for Gender and Development Studies (previously Women and Development Studies) and the Association of Women's Organizations in Jamaica - an umbrella organisation.

Woman Inc. is sometimes included in media panels looking at problems facing women. It runs the Crisis Centre and a shelter for abused women. Its branch in Western Jamaica produced together with Phase Three a video

on domestic violence and incest, *Behind Closed Doors*.

Women's Construction Collective trains women (to date more than 500) for work in the Jamaican building and construction industry. The Collective has been using video very successfully as a tool in introducing itself to potential members, specially in rural areas. The video contributes to breaking down the stereotypes that militate against women working in the construction industry.

The Centre for Gender and Development Studies at the University, Mona Campus, publishes three times per year its newsletter the *Women and Development Studies (WDS) Mona Group Newsletter*. The Centre also organises regular discussions and occasional seminars on women's issues, among them women and the media.

Some of the WDS seminars are audiotaped and available from the WDS office. WDS also promotes and sells publications on gender related issues.

Women and Gender Studies has been discussing with the University of Suriname the possibility of setting up gender specific courses in Suriname.

A newsletter is put out by the Women and Development Studies at St. Augustine, the University of the West Indies campus in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Association of Women's Organizations in Jamaica (AWOJA) distributes a networking newsletter. It reappeared in 1993 after a two and half year of absence. Otherwise AWOJA is not particularly involved in media work.

Antigua

In Guyana the group Red Thread undertakes programmes focusing on employment and education. It has been involved in seminars on gender issues. Red Thread consists mostly of working class women. It has produced a series of newsletters and booklets based on women's testimonies and (especially rural) women's lives. Red Thread also makes use of popular theatre, photography and products like calendars.

In Belize the Belize Rural Women's Association (BRWA), the Belize Organization for Women and Development (BOWAND) and Society for the Promotion of Education and Research (SPEAR) are the most active groups where women and development issues are concerned.

BOWAND puts out its own magazine, titled *A Woman's Turn*. Health, politics, home and garden products, sexual discrimination, women's rights, housing, and profiles of leading female personalities are some of their issues. BOWAND has worked with Great Belize Productions in the production of audiovisual material.

SPEAR is a development oriented NGO concerned with a range of issues including gender.

In Dominica, the Dominica Council of Women (DNCW) produces a bimonthly newsletter, *Intouch*. The DNCW was established in 1986 in an effort to get all women's groups under one umbrella.

The Women's Bureau in Dominica collaborates with the Movement for Cultural Awareness (MCA), which focuses on popular theatre and popular research.

Koudmen - a bimonthly newsletter - is published by the Small Projects

Assistance Team (SPAT). It deals with issues including gender and the environment. SPAT has a Women's Department. SPAT's programme supports women, small farmers, cooperatives, youth and disabled persons. Its staff are experienced in multi-media productions and gender-relations. SPAT uses popular theatre, video, booklets and pamphlets to get its message across. Its material is used by the Adult Education Unit of the Ministry of Education, which organizes training island-wide. The majority of the participants are women.

In St. Lucia, the scope of the Folk Research Centre (FRC) - created in 1973 and officially established in 1983 - is much broader than women's issues, but the latter are included in the FRC's agenda. The major objective of the FRC is to promote research into St. Lucia's culture, and to explore and clarify the role of culture in the development of people. The FRC has produced over 150 radio programmes on the folk culture of St. Lucia and publishes a newsletter.

Teyat Pep-la is the French creole name for St. Lucia's Popular Theatre group. It works directly with community residents to build awareness of issues such as rape and other community concerns. Staff and volunteers are trained community animators.

In Trinidad and Tobago the Banyan Film and Video Collective produced several videos on topics concerning women, including: *Women and Calypso* (with Rhoda Reddock and Niala Maharaj); *The Image of Women in the Media and its Relation to Violence against Women* (written and presented by Niala Maharaj); *God Give Us the Talent*, *The Hucksters of Dominica* (together with SPAT and the Economic

Belize

Grenada

Jamaica

St. Lucia

Suriname

Barbados

Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean - ECLAC); *Women in Action* (part of the Caribbean Eye series) and *Triumphs*, a series of five videos on women and their achievements.

For the Rape Crisis Centre, Banyan produced *Surviving Rape* - an hour long programme of live drama sequences and discussion used on television and in small groups for sensitizing audience to the issues of rape, reactions of the police, mate and family.

The National Association for Mass Education (NAME) in St. Vincent and the Grenadines has a much wider scope, but women and development issues are included. NAME was established in 1986 with the main objective of providing education opportunities for all St. Vincentians. NAME publishes on a variety of topics and has its own newsletter.

Rural people and families are the main focus of the organisation for Rural Development (ORD) also in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Over 50 per cent of its field and volunteer personnel are women. ORD produces a newsletter.

The Agency for Rural Transformation (ART), established in 1981, in Grenada aims to assist the overall development of women, youth, farmers, fisherfolk and agricultural workers. It has a resource library with information on women and social issues, among other topics.

Grenada also has its Popular Theatre Organisation (GPTO) that addresses community concerns, among which are women's issues.

Film/Video productions

The Caribbean region has many commercial video/film produc-

tion houses/organisations. Some of them link with NGOs to help production of programmes empowering communication. In Jamaica, the management of Phase Three Productions - a husband and wife team - is deeply committed to development issues, especially those dealing with women, although commercial productions form the basis of its continued operation and success.

Whenever possible, Phase Three assists NGOs with video projects in the whole range of production activities: scriptwriting, camera work and post-production. Without this assistance, a number of valuable development videos would not have been produced as professionally: Some examples are *Ease the Struggle* - a dramatic production on population control, *Jacks Hill*, *The Little Community that Could* on preservation of the environment

Banyan in Trinidad and Tobago has a similar approach. The organisation was founded by two men but the production crew between 1987 and 1991 was predominantly, and at times wholly, comprised of women. This team was responsible for photographing, directing, writing and presenting the weekly cultural magazine programme *Gayelle* between 1989 and 1991. During that period, a 26-part series for young people on AIDS called *Body Beat* was written and directed by a woman and produced by Banyan for the AIDS Education Committee in Trinidad. Banyan produced various videos on topics related to gender.

Banyan was involved in the video production, *The Hucksters of Dominica* together with SPAT and ECLAC.

Dominica

Guyana

Martinique

St. Vincent and the Grenadines

Trinidad & Tobago

Recently two women and a cameraman, who worked with Banyan, formed a company called Earth TV - with a special environmental interest - which continues to work very closely with Banyan.

In Belize, Great Belize Productions started as a production house in 1982 and expanded in 1991 to become a full service broadcaster with the opening of its Channel Five. Much of its production work continues to be for NGOs, especially women's groups, says the male founder director.

Great Belize Productions produced *Folk Medicine: A Belizean Tradition*, for the BRWA. It also works regularly with the Belize Family Life Association and BOWAND.

Several female alumni of Great Belize Productions have started their own successful production companies.

Film Festivals

Female Caribbean film makers and/or women in film activities got some attention during some recent Caribbean Film Festivals.

The Martinique Film Festival was founded and organized by a woman and in one festival carried the theme of women.

At the Jamaica Film Festival 1993 the Gala Premiere showed the film *Simeon*, made by the Martinican woman film maker Euzhan Palcy. One evening in the programme was devoted to a panel discussion on Women in the Media that involved screenings of films and discussions. Several other films featured in the festival were either about women or by women producers.

One of the Festival's symposia dealt with "The use of participatory development in Jamaica." Suggestions were made by participants to form a video cooperative or an association of participatory small format video producers and the formation of an NGO that specialises in participatory video services for NGOs.

Workshops

Several workshops have been held on Women and Development Issues and Alternative Media. Most of these workshops produced reports and booklets including Caribbean People's Development Agency (CARIPEDA) based in St. Vincent and the Grenadines; 1990 workshop in Guyana for development workers across the region; Organising Women in Urban Situations (ADA/Oxfam); Caribbean Perspectives for the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women Worldwide (Caribbean Conference of Churches); and Publishing for Development (ADA/CARIPEDA).

Material for this article was supplied by: Sheila Stuart (WAND Barbados); Audrey Matura (Belize); Stewart Krohn (Belize); Diane C. Haylock (Belize); Marcia Forbes (Jamaica); Maria Protz (Jamaica); Joan Ross Frankson (Jamaica); and Christopher Laird (Trinidad and Tobago).

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