

Women in the struggle

By Janet Jagan

(Text of an address given by Janet Jagan at the Seminar on women called by the Caribbean Council of Churches and held in Barbados in September, 1975).

To begin with, we are, with the exception of Cuba, part of what is called the Third World, the poorest nations of the world. Poverty is one of the overwhelming factors that confront our people of the Caribbean. It is also one of the main factors which affect the lives of the women and children of this area and which basically concerns us in our discussions here on the status of women.

I am supposed to discuss where we are in the Caribbean from the political standpoint, but politics concerns all aspects of life and thus I may have to intrude on some of the topics assigned to other members of this panel.

Poverty means unemployment and we know that unemployment is high in the Caribbean. In Guyana, unemployment appears to be over 25%. It is so high that the government's statistical bureau will not release figures on it. A GISRA Survey showed that $\frac{1}{3}$ of all youths are unemployed and $\frac{1}{3}$ underemployed. Once unemployment is high, women face fewer opportunities for jobs, women face greater job discriminations and women end up at the lowest rung of the economic ladder.

In the Guyana Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security for 1971, in an analysis of given occupational divisions, it shows women account for only 15.7% of the distribution of jobs. Yet women make up approximately 50% of the population. Cer-

tainly, that is not a fair or reasonable percentage and indicates no real advancement for women.

The 3rd Latin American Seminar held in Lima, Peru this year convened by the Women's International Democratic Federation and held under the auspices of UNESCO, discussed the fundamental aspects of the elimination of discrimination against women in the field of education, technical and vocational training and access to various professions and occupations.

Among its decisions were these:

- (1) That 1975 should be a year of action to make governments adapt measures to enable women to exercise their rights in full.
- (2) That in those countries where radical changes have not yet taken place, women must take part in their people's struggle to bring about such changes.
- (3) That laws discriminating against women must be revised, amended or repealed, that existing discriminations in the professions and occupations can only be eliminated through radical change in the socio-economic structures.

These and many other decisions of that Conference are fundamental to our discussions on where we are in the Caribbean, with particular reference to the position of women, particularly during 1975, International Women's Year.

Can women in the Caribbean really enjoy equality, the full right to education, to jobs that are not just menial and reserved for women — like nursing, domestic service, secretarial, agricultural labourers, waitresses, etc., unless there are radical changes in the socio-economic structure?

There is only one Caribbean country that has achieved this radical change, Cuba, which has fully embraced a different economic pattern and way of life known as socialism. Cuban women are the only fully emancipated women in the Caribbean and for that matter, in our whole hemisphere. They enjoy full educational opportunities with men, there is no unemployment to push them into the lowest paid and least desirable jobs. There is no poverty to deprive them of the joy of seeing their children grow and develop without all the heart-breaking agonies of malnutrition and diseases. And prostitution, which cynics and chauvinists claim is the oldest profession of women, has been totally eliminated.

What do we find in the rest of the Caribbean where Heads of Governments give lip service to progressive economic developments, radical changes and even women's equality?

I'll speak about Guyana which I know better, but I am sure many of my references apply to the other areas of the Caribbean. The impression which is being given, the public image, is that because a few women enjoy status as Ministers, Members of Parliament and are in some top posts, Guyanese women enjoy equality. This is, of course, superficial. We must look deeper. The government, too, has proclaimed its acceptance of the principle of equal pay for equal work.

But what is the reality? A government appointed Tribunal to examine claims of workers in the sugar industry for better pay conditions, just a few weeks ago made awards. These include one that goes entirely against the concept of equal pay for equal work. The award of the Crane Tribunal concerns

weekly pay when work is not available (sugar is a seasonal industry). If a worker works 90% of the days available for three consecutive crops, the entitlement is \$25.00 per week for men and \$20.00 for women. And if he or she works 75% of the days available, the entitlement is \$20.00 per week for men and \$15.00 for women.

And this arises from a government appointed Tribunal and is accepted by the Ministry of Labour. And incidentally, the same Ministry of Labour sponsors a woman's body known as the Council on the Affairs of Women (CASWIG) which is supposed to look into the rights of women!

Take a brief look at maternity benefits set up under the Guyana National Insurance Scheme. A woman worker has to work for twenty weeks prior to confinement before she is entitled to free maternity leave. But employers dismiss women workers as soon as they see signs of pregnancy. In the sugar industry they are dismissed from work in the 3rd month and thus are not entitled to any maternity benefits, even though they are contributors to the National Insurance Scheme.

I took part in some official discussions on this subject in the Labour Code Commission. The representatives of the employers explained that they removed the women from work for their own protection. I had to remind them that they did so, not out of concern for the health of the women, but more from the profit motive—that they feel they couldn't get as much work out of women in a state of pregnancy.

Father Campbell Johnson recently reported that in a GISRA Survey carried out five years ago, 25% of

the girls interviewed, had been subjected to immoral pressures. These pressures he said, all hinged on corrupt employment practices and girls seeking employment are confronted with sexual demands by employers. In a forthright statement, he said: "This is International Women's Year. Will it produce anything more than parades, speeches and rallies? There has been talk of removing from the statute books, all laws and ordinances discriminating against women. This is a praiseworthy undertaking. But would it not be more praiseworthy to remove from real life a highly discriminatory practice against women which abuses and exploits their womanhood?"

Frequently, we see in advertisements in Guyana newspapers ads for jobs for women to "sleep in". I was horrified one day to see an ad in the paper I edit, inviting country women to apply for work at a notorious night club, as waitresses to sleep in. It was, of course, immediately removed. But this is a method of enticing girls, badly in need of jobs, to the city where they are trapped into prostitution. Incidentally, prostitution is growing enormously in Guyana, and I am sure in the other Caribbean countries. Socialist Cuba, I repeat, has totally wiped out what was once, the highest prostitution rate in the Caribbean. And, in fact, prostitution does not exist in any of the socialist nations.

The laws of Guyana provide for a minimum wage for shop clerks. But because of job hunger, employers exploit the situation and force women workers to sign for the receipt of pay lower than the legal minimum, if they want to keep their jobs. But even though this has been brought to the attention of the Labour Ministry, it still exists.

Crime is to a great extent, a result of poverty and

crime has risen so drastically that women cannot, with safety, move about as they wish. One journalist, calling on the police to protect Guyana's women, noted that there are 21 cases of rape before the June sessions of the High Court in Demerara. He noted too, that rape in the socialist countries is almost unknown. He called on the government to try rape cases in Chambers, with the public excluded. Only recently in the USA there was the case of Joan Little, a Black woman who had been raped by a White attendant, whom she killed in self-defence. All the horrible details of the sex offence were publicized and the defendant was made to describe in minute details all that took place. What a terrible offence to her womanhood!

The Guyana Government, in the 60's, following an election promise, set up a Committee to look into the conditions of domestic workers. The report, known as the Campbell Report, made sound recommendations on several matters including minimum pay and maximum hours of work for domestics, who are a most exploited group, some working for as low as \$25.00 per month. Despite frequent calls for the implementation of this Report, it still remains pigeon-holed. The only conclusion we can come to is that those who pay lip service to changes, and in Guyana they are talking about socialism, don't want to make any changes which will upset the privileged positions of those who employ domestics.

In the 40's and 50's we fought for and won the right to universal adult suffrage. Before it was introduced, following mass protests including thousands of women, very few women had the right to vote. The vote then had been based on property and income qualifications which only a very few privileged women could meet. Now, although the right to vote has been won, it has, in practice, been denied.

At the last elections held in Guyana in 1973, by the use of fraud and force, men and women were denied the right to elect the government of their choice. I met hundreds of women who told me that after waiting in line to vote, they were informed that they had already voted. This was done by a fraudulent system of wide scale forgery of proxy and so called postal votes. But even those who voted did not have their votes recorded when the gov't interfered with the ballot boxes which were taken over by the army and kept in Army Headquarters for long periods, as much as two to three days. So, in practice, Guyanese women are denied the right to vote at National and Local government elections.

In health, education and housing, women also suffer grave hardships because of the existing conditions. Pre and post natal care is on the decline, because the government spends less on social services and more on the Army and Police. In the Georgetown Public Hospital expectant mothers sleep two in a bed, while waiting for delivery. Malnutrition is growing and becoming so great a problem that a special clinic for such cases had to be opened at the Georgetown Public Hospital. A nutrition expert of the World Health Organisation at a recent Conference in Vancouver, Br. Columbia said that malnutrition is "primarily a manifestation of social injustice". Referring to the so-called "development decade" the specialist, Dr. Moses Behai said that it was geared to increase the gross national product of underdeveloped nations as an index to their problem. "No proper consideration" he said, "was given to insuring the redistribution of increased wealth. Hence the increased production tended only to make the rich even wealthier than before".

This is the core of our problem in the Caribbean. Wealth continues to remain in the hands of a few (whether they are West Indians or foreigners) while the masses continue in poverty. The old phrase "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer" applies to the Caribbean where we see the development of a growing elite, throwing out revolutionary language as a sop to the oppressed. But without taking a radical swing towards socialism, the social injustices will remain.

In Guyana, we were told that the government's five year plan ending in 1976 would bring 65,000 new housing units to relieve the housing shortage. But this year, the Housing Minister admitted in a private discussion with civil servants which, by error reached the public, that the goal could not be reached. Yet the Guyana Government continues its false slogan of feeding, housing and clothing the nation by 1976. Instead, thousands of Guyanese families live under the most deplorable housing conditions. And for the first time, we have seen whole families sleeping on the streets, with no place to go. Yet socialist Cuba was able to embark on an impressive housing scheme to solve a huge problem left over by regimes which had for decades, neglected the social needs for the people.

Education for girls is still not on an equal footing as that for boys for several reasons. The technical schools cater mainly for boy students, with only a few girls obtaining admission. The largest dropouts from primary and secondary schools are girls. One of the reasons is that working mothers — having to work to meet the mounting costs of living, have to take their daughters out of school to look after younger children. In the whole of Guyana, there are only 4 creches. Without creches, it is almost impossible for women with small children to work. Again, when we look at

the socialist countries, we see that they have admirably solved this problem.

The Lima Conference, referred to earlier, stated that discrimination against women can only be totally eliminated if boys and girls receive the same education in the same schools. How else can our women obtain better employment unless, like men, they are better equipped and live in a society of full employment?

In one area, however, the Guyana government has accorded equality to girls and boys — that is for compulsory national service, which is being widely opposed in Guyana. Those of us who stand up for women's rights would agree to this, if like some nations faced with imminent danger of external aggression, it was necessary to mobilize the whole nation to defend the country. But this is not so in Guyana where compulsory National Service is used as a means of coercion and discrimination and where parents of girl children deeply resent their children being forced to at end camps far away from parental supervision.

The cost of living continues to rise in Guyana, as in all the Caribbean countries, because of wrong economic policies of the govts. Only a few days ago, I purchased some food for home use. For the sum of \$1.44, I obtained 2 sweet potatoes, 3 yams and 4 plantains, all small, and 10 very small pieces of shallot for 50c. (there are no onions in Guyana), hardly enough for one meal for an average family, not including meat or fish for the meal. On the same day, I examined the pay slips of some women sugar workers which gave these figures — 5 days work — \$11.50, 5 days work — \$10.51, 3 days work — \$9.40, 5 days work — \$10.50 or an average of \$2.50 per day — and hard work at that! Set these figures against food

costs and one has an idea of how hard it is for working class families to exist. Compare it with the \$8-9 per week waitresses earn or the \$25-30 per month domestics earn. U of G Economist Clive Thomas, in a report, noted that the average consumption of milk is one pint every two weeks. No wonder our children are suffering from malnutrition and related diseases!

The Lima Conference said that women must take part in the people's struggles to bring about the needed radical changes. This is very true. Our women cannot divorce themselves from these fundamental struggles. Women cannot enjoy full rights until the countries they live in are really free and provide equal opportunities to all.

In the post war period in the Caribbean, following massive assaults by the Colonial powers on the economic conditions and human liberties, there was an upward swing in the various territories leading to demands for more rights and finally to end colonial rule. This upsurge achieved some notable results, but then began to wane.

Now again, following independence and an era of complacency, but growing poverty and discontent by the masses that their conditions have not improved, there is again a growing upsurge of the people demanding that their expectations of changes after independence be fulfilled.

There is a growing awareness of the subtle influence of the multi-national corporations in draining away the wealth that belongs to the people, an awareness that the governments must fight against imperialism and cease being puppets of the American colossus. In fact, imperialism is the greatest enemy of the people and this must be eliminated from the strong-

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hold it maintains on most of the economies of the Caribbean.

The women must join in the struggle to bring about political and socio-economic changes so that there will be equal opportunities for all, so that we can end unemployment, poverty and hunger, so that genuine democratic institutions can flourish, so that our women can be free and equal citizens in the countries in which they live.

People's Struggle

In Guyana, the impact of International Women's Year has caused already certain changes. The long struggle for the improvement of maternity benefits under NIS has ended in victory for working women. The government has adopted in principle (yet to be applied) the concept of equal pay for equal work. The Campbell Report on Domestic workers is coming out of hiding and perhaps domestic workers will soon have better wages and conditions of work. Pressure from women is forcing the government to promise improved medical facilities for women, particularly in the pre and post natal period and creches for working women to keep their children.

Even if there is a long way to go before women enjoy full equality, at least women have learned during International Women's Year that radical changes will not take place unless women take part in the people's struggle to bring about such changes.

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