

Janet Jagan, Guyana's First Lady, was born in the United States of America. As a political activist, Mrs. Jagan has worked in various capacities. In 1950 she became the first woman to be elected into Georgetown City Council and also the first of three women to enter Parliament in 1953. She was the Senior Minister of Labour, Health and Housing from 1957-61 and then Senior Minister of Home Affairs in 1963-64. In 1993, she was appointed Ambassador-at-large and served as Ambassador to the United Nations for Guyana. She is a Member of Parliament, a capacity in which she has served for over 28 years.

Having a wide range of international experience, Mrs. Jagan has written several books on issues affecting women. She is the President of the Union of Guyanese Journalists and manages "The Mirror", a local weekly newspaper which strongly advocates child rights and other issues affecting children in Guyana. A strong supporter of UNICEF programmes in Guyana, she is the mother of two and has several grandchildren.

**Q:** Mrs. Jagan, as a working woman, MP, an activist, a mother and a wife, you are a successful woman and a role model for many women who are aspiring to rise to the top. Can you tell us what is the secret behind your success?

**A:** For every working woman/mother, the secret of overcoming all the difficulties lies in a careful and planned use of one's time. This must be done on a consistent basis. It also requires a certain amount of determination, discipline and the ability to steer clear of or find a way, to overcome obstacles. In my case, I had an overwhelming desire to fight for women's and children's rights and to alleviate suffering and make human rights a reality.

**Q:** Can you share with us the major outstanding achievements in the women's struggle in Guyana since independence?

**A:** I would go much further back and bring in the independence struggle in which women played an important role.

# Interview



*Janet Jagan, Guyana's First Lady*

They took part in the freedom marches, vigils, signature campaigns as well as the harassment, police searches, imprisonment and all the hardships that went with the struggle. That, to me, was part of the training ground in the women's rights movement.

We succeeded in establishing the fact that the struggle for women's rights was real and not a joke, as many tried to make it appear in its early stages. We established the dignity of women and respect for the struggle for human rights, equal pay for equal work and participation in governance.

We also achieved a recognition that girl children have the same right to education as boys, and focused for many years on equality in education. Women, then and sometimes even now, took their girl children out to school to take care of younger members of the family, when both parents had to work. Women have moved up the ladder of achievement, but, there is still a long way to go.

**Q:** What are your views on the situation of women in the next ten to fifty years in Guyana and the Caribbean?

**A:** I believe that women will make greater strides in their goals of equality.

With more education available, women will rise in the many areas of achievement which are theirs to win - the arts, research, sports, professions, better paying jobs and so on. We will see more women in the early part of the new century at the top posts of government, political parties, trade unions, institutions and universities.

I think women in Guyana and the Caribbean are well ahead of their counterparts in many countries, including North America. When I served as Ambassador to the United Nations, the largest number of women in one geographical grouping who held this post came from Guyana and the Caribbean, (Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica), notwithstanding that the US and Canada had women representatives. In the whole world only three other women were UN Ambassadors. That is just a small example.

**Q:** There is increased interest on the role of fathers in the family. Taking into consideration the sexual division of labour and gender stereotyping, do you see fathers changing?

**A:** Yes, I see the roles of fathers changing. The changes are part of the changes going on all over the world in the perception of the role of fathers. No longer is it *infra dig* for a father to push a baby carriage or carry his child in public; nor is it thought degrading for a man to go shopping in the markets. I can remember when a man wouldn't be seen 'dead', doing it, although poverty and sickness may have forced some men to the markets years ago.

Fathers and husbands are becoming more interested and responsible for their children's upbringing and are now more willing to take on domestic tasks of cleaning, cooking, washing dishes, etc., to relieve the burden on women. Because of deeply entrenched 'machismo' positions in the Caribbean, this may be a slow process, but it is growing considerably now.

**Q:** UNICEF uses the life cycle approach in ensuring that the concerns

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and issues affecting both the girl and boy child are addressed. Are there specific gender problems affecting the girl and or the boy child that need to be addressed?

**A:** I think that we have to look at the way girls and boys are treated in both the family and the schools. There tends to be a greater consideration for the boy child; more attention to the passing of exams and the allocation of bed space, food, toys, etc. In some homes, the gender relationship focuses on the traditional role of women as mothers and housewives, the “weaker” sex myth. Of course, in this respect, Guyana is far better off than some parts of the world where the gender differences are really strong.

**Q:** As the First Lady, what are some of

the things you would like to see organisations dealing with women do to improve the situation of and services to women?

**A:** There is a need for more attention to be paid for assistance with legal issues affecting women, with counselling women involved in domestic violence, and, as well, family, marital and other problems. More attention needs to be paid to a broadening of the understanding of family planning and avoidance of contracting AIDS. But aside from these and other related matters, such as issues like housing, pure water supplies, education of women, a more upward movement in the arena of jobs and governance, there is always the basic problem of combating poverty. Women’s

organisations have to understand that until we reduce poverty, many women will continue to lead lives that provide them with no access to what we regard as women’s rights.

**Q:** Finally, what are your anticipations in relation to the platform of action for the Fourth World Conference on Women?

**A:** I am hopeful that the Fourth World Conference on Women will energise and stimulate greater awareness of the necessity for women to champion their rights and will set new goals for the attainment of equality. It is my view that such conferences are useful in giving a focus and a goal to women and their organisations, as well as motivating them forward.