

The Struggles of Women Must Continue

(by Janet Jagan in observance of International Women's Day)

“Just a few days ago we celebrated International Women's Day, an important day to all women, everywhere. This celebration, generally in Guyana, was not so several years ago when the only group recognizing that notable day was the Women's Progressive Organization (WPO), women's arm of the People's Progressive Party. The reason for this national neglect to recognize the day had to do with politics – one, that is was the WPO celebrating a day in a country ruled by the People's National Congress and two, that is was celebrated internationally only in the socialist world. It was not until the United Nations recognized International Women's Day that it gained an international status.”

All of this tells its own tale in Guyana of the development and growth of the women's movement for equal rights. Historically, the first grouping of women for political and economic goals was the Women's Political and Economic Organization (WPEO) which was organized in 1946 by three women – Winifred Gaskin, Frances Van Stafford and myself. We soon gathered enough women around us to start the WPEO, which aimed at women's rights – to vote without restrictions, to have equal rights with men regarding property, the right to sit on juries, to become members of the Legislative Council, to enjoy equal opportunities to jobs with equal pay like male employees, to good housing, nutrition, etc.

The WPEO played an important role in bringing awareness of their rights to women, since it was the first of its kind to do so. Other women's group up to that time was mainly religious, social and/or charitable. But in the long run politics entered and finally led to its disintegration. The 1947 elections led to participation by some WPEO members. Ms. Van Stafford contested the South Georgetown seat where Nathaniel Critchlow was the Labour candidate and supported by Winifred Gaskin. I, too, was a candidate, in Central Georgetown, but my activity did not lead to any conflict in the WPEO. The centre of conflict was the matter of Stafford on one side and Gaskin on the side of Critchlow. That campaign got rough with wild allegations being made of a racial kind, and eventually there was an election petition. Sides were taken in the WPEO with those supporting Gaskin and others for Stafford. Unfortunately, it eventually ended up in the break-up of the WPEO, which had been doing so well.

In 1950, the PPP was founded and by 1953, it had formed a women's arm, the WPO (as it did also, to form a youth arm). This apparently set the pattern for future women's rights groups with the PNC having one – WRSM and later the WPA having its own. Even the trade unions followed this pattern, so that, to this day, the main women's rights groups are attached or associated with political parties, and to some lesser extent, to trade unions. I'm not sure where else this pattern exists, but it certainly has influenced the course of the women's movement in Guyana.

Many advances in women's rights have grown out of this situation. The fight for universal adult suffrage, one of the PPP's strong demands in the constitutional battles with the British leading up to the 1953 elections was won with women gaining two important rights – the right to vote unfettered by property or income qualifications and the right to vote irrespective of being literate. This was pushed by the PPP as many Guyanese (higher among women) could not read or write and thus the introduction of symbols to assist illiterates.

Later, when the PPP, having been deposed of office by the British 133 days after winning the elections, again won elections in 1957. Other efforts to improve the status of women were gained. Protection under the Workmen's Compensation Act was made to include domestic workers. At that time, married women were not allowed to continue to work in the public service, and these also included nurses. This restriction was removed.

The WPO focused its grass root activities on bringing girl children into the educational system. This was the first time this was done and slowly but surely, girls were liberated from domestic chores and sent to school. As we know today, the female sex has a higher ratio of attendance at all levels of education, including our University. It has been recognized that education is the key to women's advancement in all spheres of life.

Today, Guyana can boast of having women leading in almost every sphere of activity – from the law courts where the first woman Chief Justice in the whole Caribbean area was a woman, the first President, women in the hierarchy of medicine, culture, business, science, trade unions, administration, cabinet, etc.

Guyanese women have gone a long way upwards as have women all over the world. Today we can see Heads of State in Chile, Argentina, Liberia, the Philippines, New Zealand and Germany with India having a President (though not Head of State). Women hold vital and important positions in world bodies like the United Nations and in their government. The USA may possibly have its first woman President this year and the head of the US House of Representatives is a woman.

No one can deny the great strides women have made in the 20th and 21st centuries. That is not to say that there is not a long road ahead for more changes. Women today bear the heavy burdens of poverty, unemployment, violence against women, wars which lead to heavy migration, misery and worsening living conditions, lack of water and sanitation, housing and all the basic needs of living. So the struggle continues to broaden the gains made on the area of women's rights and this requires the energies and attention of all women, all over the world.