

Achievement & Purposeful Activity

(HALLMARK OF WPO'S 35 YEARS IN STRUGGLE)

— Janet Jagan

In Guyana, the struggle of women has been intrinsically linked with the struggles, first against slavery, then, against the indenture system of exploitation and then with the struggle against colonialism. Today, our women are struggling for economic emancipation, for the restoration of democracy and for genuine independence.

This year, the Women's Progressive Organisation (WPO), Women's arm of our Party, celebrates its 35th Anniversary. The 35 years would be meaningless if there had not been achievement, creativity and purposeful action.

The durability of this unique women's organisation in a region where the non-religious/charity women's bodies have not endured for such a long period is in itself an achievement, but that, too, would be meaningless if the WPO had merely rested on its laurels of having contributed so positively to the independence struggle.

This, of course, has not been the case. The WPO has broadened its approach to women's problems and to the task of bringing women into the struggle against injustices, particularly the denial of the right of Guyanese to elect the government of their choice.

High among the tasks of the WPO, too, has been the need to change the attitudes of women about themselves, to help them realise their potentials, the rights they must battle for and to see themselves not only as wives and mothers, but as human beings in a society that gives and also requires more from them. Also, there is the need to change the attitudes of men about women, to understand their needs, their new horizons, their qualities which need encouragement and help to be realised.

In its work, the WPO has delved into such problems as the manner in which the law deals with victims of rape and in individual cases, such victims have had support, legal guidance and help from the WPO. Many social problems like housing, poor water supplies, medical care, malnutrition, education, meals for school children, family planning and old age pensions are matters which the

WPO deals with at the level of representation as well as documentation, analysis and seeking ways of bringing about changes.

Structurally and organisationally, the WPO has grown from a committee to a full organisation, with groups, regional bodies and regular meetings of the Executive and Central Committees as well as functioning secretaries and weekly or monthly Secretariat meetings. Arising out of its sturdy organisational structure, it is more durable than most of the women's organisations that have arisen from time to time in the English speaking Caribbean.

This has allowed the WPO to take on such tasks as international solidarity with struggles of women in other parts of the world, to make positive contributions to the peace movement and to give closer attention to the problems of women and children in Guyana and to the economic situation which plagues the working people.

The battle against inflation and shortages of essential goods is ongoing and the WPO has led this struggle on the streets, in the villages, in deputations, in local authorities and in the National Assembly. It was the first to agitate against the ban on flour and eventually won this battle. Who will forget the WPO women wearing flour bags and picketing Parliament Buildings?

The WPO was the first, too, to study the growth of malnutrition, to issue statistics and documentation on its effects on the child population and to fight for the availability of cheap milk and other nutritious foods for Guyana's children. These are, but a few of the positive activities of the WPO in recent years.

In the struggle for women's equality, jobs and education take high importance and during its 35 years of existence, these matters have pre-occupied the leadership of the WPO. Without a sound education and training, women can never reach equality, particularly in the field of Winning better job opportunities. . .

The WPO initiated, in the early period of its foundation, a campaign urging parents to give their girl children education -- first to complete primary school then to urge them to send girls to high school and- then to campaign for higher education university, teachers training institutions and technical schools.

It was the WPO which pioneered this push for women's education, which the organisation rightly saw as the path to intellectual growth and to higher level jobs.

Nor has political education been ignored. Hundreds of women have passed through the Party school — Accabre College.

And always at the grass root level, the WPO has hatched for full employment for women, better pay and acceptable conditions of work. It has been involved in numerous struggles of working women — women workers in the sugar industry, in the garment factories, in laundries and restaurants and has advocated better pay and conditions of work for teachers and nurses.

Since the last Congress of the WPO, there have been greater efforts at strengthening and expanding its organisational structure. extending work in the community, finding more time in sports competitions and, as well, teaching our women physical education and self defence.

Also arising out of the recent Congress, has been the concept of "Operation Reach Out", contacting and working with women in trade Unions, in churches, in the professions, in the university and at other levels of our society. "Operation Reach Out" has already begun and, so far, is off to a good start.

A champion of oppressed women in Guyana, the Caribbean and the whole world, the WPO has taken up the cudgels against injustices and there are plenty to fight both at home and abroad. The WPO has seriously shouldered its commitment to internationalism and has never shirked in its diverse fields solidarity to the many causes that arise from time to time, wherever they may occur. The WPO has been a member since 1971 of the International Women's Day and International Children's Day, with the objective of focusing more attention on the problems of women and children.

In the P.P.'s Political Programme "For Socialism in Guyana" it is stated in the section dealing with equality between man and woman that "the active participation of women is essential for the building of a new Guyana. And the emancipation of women is dependent upon a fundamental change in their economic and social role in the community ... the liberation of women is inseparable from the liberation of men. Both women and men as workers farmers, employees generally must together struggle to bring about the new socialist society".

Ann this is what the WPO has been laying the basis for in its 35 fruitful years of existence.