

WPO's Contribution to Women's Rights

by Janet Jagan

Just a few days ago, on April 27th 2008 the Women's Progressive Organization (WPO) celebrated its 55th anniversary. It is the longest serving women's rights organization in Guyana, and is still as active and vibrant as it was in 1953, when it was born.

From day one of its long life, the WPO fought for and won many rights for women. Its focus was the betterment of women's status in society and the protection of women from the many abuses that history and people have leveled on women.

The WPO recognized very early that one of its tasks to ensure that women take their rightful place in society was to give full support to the freedom struggle of the People's Progressive Party (PPP). From the time of its birth, the PPP had declared its goal as seeking the end of colonial rule. The independence struggle was supported strongly by the WPO, whose members fully joined in the numerous activities, protests, marches, picketing, leafleting, house-to-house contacts, etc. to strengthen this struggle.

The WPO took up the cudgels of the rights of women to work and at work, demanding equal pay for equal work, a new step in the struggle of women's rights. Demands were made through the trade unions for protection of women working in the fields, in the shirt factories, as domestics and as vendors and trade persons. Their Party, when it was in office, even with limited powers in the colonial days, brought workmen's compensation to domestics, established minimum pay rates for many categories of women workers and also removed the barriers against married women in the public service and nursing.

The PPP focused on such areas as education, health, housing, pure water supplies, old age pension, etc., to assist women. For, it has always been the women who have had to care for the sick and the elderly and fetch heavy loads of water on a daily basis. The extension of pure water supplies really became an issue of the rights of women not to be eternally carrying water, most being exhausted before the daily duties began.

The WPO recognized very early that education was the gateway for the advancement of women and to be able to fulfill their ambitions and talents. That is why the WPO went street by street and village by village, urging parents to send both their boy and girl children to school, not just the boys as it used to be. Today, the female population dominates our educational system, both as students and as teachers. We can thank the WPO for being so far sighted in this aspect of life.

Like the PPP, the WPO joined the international peace struggle, understanding fully that in wars, the women and children are the greatest victims. The WPO recognized early that women cannot concern themselves only in their local lives, but must reach across to women all over the world in solidarity, to exchange ideas and experiences and to be aware of what are the problems and achievements of women in other countries.

Older members of the WPO can remember, for example, the WPO's solidarity with the Black American militant Angela Davis who was incarcerated. WPO members picketed the US Embassy calling for her freedom.

Even before the WPO was founded in 1953, PPP women were active in the struggle to achieve full voting rights which, hitherto had been restricted to women who owned property or had lucrative jobs (very few). The right to vote was fully embraced by the WPO whose members actively and willingly gave their wholehearted support to the Party at every election.

The celebration of 55 years of the WPO is a huge historical event and one in which all women can rejoice.

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