

History: Homegrown Feminism in the Caribbean

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For women who built revolutions with their dreams and sewing machines.

“Feminism cannot be monolithic in its issues, goals and strategies, since it constitutes the political expression of the concerns and interests of women from different regions, classes, nationalities, and ethnic backgrounds.

While gender subordination has universal elements, feminism cannot be based on a rigid concept of universality that negates the wide variation of women’s experience.

There is and must be a diversity of feminisms, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women, and define by them for themselves.”

— DAWN, 1987

Caribbean feminism is not an ideological import. Our feminist theorizing is grounded in analysis of the experiences and conditions of women from the struggles for freedom since the establishment of the tyranny of the plantation economy. Dr. Gabrielle Hosein, head of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies, UWI St. Augustine Unit cautions against the discursive stretching of the word “Indigenous” to make the case for a “Homegrown Caribbean Feminism.” To continually use the word “Indigenous” and not take into account the real lives of Indigenous people and their material conditions is to displace them in thought and practice.

In the early phase of Trans Atlantic Slavery, there was preference for black male labor from Africa. Later, it was seen as more propitious to introduce women into colonies that reproduced the slavery system naturally. From the onset of the plantation enterprise, female reproductive capabilities were central to the profitability of the plantation economy. Black women would face the task of fighting against the racist institutional and ideological order of slavery as well as the patriarchal gender ideologies by both white males and black males.

In the post-emancipation period, immediately after 1838, planters introduced a large-scale labor population of Indians as indentured to the Caribbean. The notion that Indian indentured women operated exclusively in the sphere of the household is false. Even when women’s wages in indentureship were less than men, as was the case with their African female counterparts, women were involved in agricultural labour.

As a result of the disproportionate ratio of women to men on the plantations, there was a drive to have “the right kind woman” in later stages of indentureship. In addition, the early policy of indentureship was against family emigration because the costs associated with maintaining non-worker women and infants were seen as counterproductive. This changed in later phases and set the ground for coinciding interests of the colonial state, church and Indian men. The nuclear family with the non-earning housewife was set up as the most appropriate model of family and economic unit

within a patriarchal logic.

Today, a number of young women and men are not aware of the history of Caribbean women's struggles and movement building. The gains made by the movement are not only taken for granted but are sometimes denied or taken away with little resistance since the long history behind these gains are not well taught. During the anti-colonial and independence movements there were deliberate efforts by Caribbean women writers to re-engage historical arguments that either made women invisible and/or documented them stereotypically. When all is said and done, to understand the complexity of gender in Caribbean political economy and history a deep interrogation of masculinities and femininities is required.

In secondary school text books—history, geography and social studies—while there have emerged “gender modules” and increased references to female-authored scholarship, the topics still peripheralized feminist writing and critique and mainstream androcentric thought as the body of the curriculum. The deeper problem of the issue is that there has been a “historiography of neglect” (Beckles 2011).

From the 1970s, there was an emergence of a more radical movement of women in the region. Picking up on the mood of the times in the hemisphere and wider developing world, self-determination and national liberation were priority areas for the feminist movement. During this period, the Caribbean was seen as a society that was made up of dependent capitalist economies with a colonial condition. This unique experience of the political geography of the Caribbean led to expressed distinctions from Euro-America liberal feminism, Black feminism (based in the U.S.) and Soviet-based conceptions of women's movements.

While the Caribbean feminist movement drew upon the inspiration and strains from extra-regional feminist conceptions, a Caribbean feminist perspective was asserted. This period also witnessed powerful South-South collaboration, perhaps best encapsulated in Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, DAWN, which advocated a Marxist-feminist critique of the state while promoting the developmental state to improve the material conditions and well-being of women in the Third World. Women's arms of political parties felt the radical feminist shock when the Women's Revolutionary Socialist Movement of the PNC was established in Guyana and the Women's Auxiliary of the PNP in Jamaica.

During the 1980s, there were a series of encuentros intra-regionally building transnational feminist networks between Latin America and the Caribbean. Accounting for inclusion and committing to ‘making politics work’ in encuentros, (compared to the deep ideological contestations and dogma that have characterized male-led Left and socialist international conferences), the space offers an example to a younger generation of Left movement builders that non-hierarchical, coalition-based, and inclusive conferences, with all its hard work and hand wringing, sustain in the long-run and build greater solidarity.

The ideological terrorism that ensued in the heightening of the Cold War, CIA-backed military invasion that destabilized revolutionary governments in the Caribbean and Latin America and the widespread economic crisis of the 1980s broke down civil society and social movements in ways that retrospective papers and accounts could hardly describe.

By the 1990s, there was a shift from conferences on women to conferences engaging women's perspectives on globalization, environmental crisis, development, etc. The Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995 was a significant moment in Caribbean feminist movement building where there was both strong country representation and regional collaboration that built a number of commitments that would shape discourses and practices nationally for a decade throughout the

Caribbean.

This decade also marked a shift in feminist organizing around professional NGOs whose impact and policy measurements were valued over smaller, identity-based, social movement organizations which grew very critical of the finance and decision-making structures of international development agencies. This led to some friction among some feminist networks, especially on the Left, who felt that policy advocacy and donor finance replaced social movement building and critiques of the state. While some radicals of a previous decade found their voices legitimized in higher international offices, the popular movement and conscientization that defined the movement a decade before dwindled.

Today, feminism in the Caribbean has organized and built theory around sexual identities, Indigenous, Afro and Indo-Caribbean feminisms, critical masculinities work, women and climate change and more visibly, online blogs that build dialogue within the region and the extra-regional diaspora. Women have always been in the front seats of the Garveyite movement, traveled as widely as any Communist Party organizer or socialist builder, women knocked doors, made sandwiches and deliberated on party platforms for independence parties and women picked up the slack of the debt-ridden state in the face of IMF misery. These women in our history have been ignored, not taken seriously, and erased by deliberate strokes of the pen. This feminism is we own ting! Claim it!

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