



*Gender*  
*in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

*Caribbean Perspectives,  
Visions and Possibilities*

EDITED BY

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*Feminist Scholarship and Society*

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## Feminist Activism

### The CARICOM Experience

#### Abstract

*The paper defines Caribbean feminism, its goals and objectives, and considers the impact of feminist activism on CARICOM society over the past 30 years. It begins with an account of the context in which feminist activism emerged in CARICOM countries in the 1970s, and tracks how this kind of politics had first to be legitimised within a framework of governance that was at least open to its contestations. The paper focuses on the author's own experience to consider feminism's influence on women in leadership positions and how this changed their politics and practice. From there, it seeks to address the ways in which this leadership sought to influence the politics and programmes of women's organisations and other NGOs, government policy, key institutions and, more broadly, societal attitudes to women, taking account of the resistance encountered and support received along the way.*

*Antrobus argues that feminist activism working from within and outside various institutions – among them political parties, the bureaucracy, the educational system (including the university), the church, legal system, trade unions, media and women's organisations – did indeed achieve some of its objectives, although not always in ways that were favourable to its cause.*

*This paper recognises feminism as an ongoing dialogic process of confrontations, resolution, contradictions, and contestation that nevertheless has the capacity to transform relationships and systems that are oppressive, and attempts to draw out the implications for feminist activism in the changing context of today.*

## 1. Introduction

I want to start by thanking the Centre for Gender and Development Studies at Mona for inviting me to speak on this topic. It is one that is dear to my heart. While the line between feminist activism and scholarship may seem too tenuous for the distinction to be made, I think it is worth trying to appreciate their boundaries if the two spheres of activity are to contribute to a common project of deepening our understanding of Caribbean women and society; and for laying the basis for the social and economic change needed to improve the lives of the majority of people in this region.

Of course, the distinction is not always an easy one, and the word 'feminist' itself carries the burden of being associated with a particular type of feminism that is considered alien and alienating to many Caribbean women. Media representations of the word as 'man-hating', 'anti-family' and more, associated with white, middle-class, North American or European women, have loaded the word with negativity, causing many women to distance themselves from it. Indeed, for many women in the Caribbean, and elsewhere, the word 'feminism' is problematic. I was one of those women. As Advisor on Women's Affairs to the Government of Jamaica, I was at pains to distinguish my work on 'integrating women in development' from the activism of North American feminism. I recall an experience in 1978 when attending a UN meeting on 'Feminist Ideologies and Structures in the First Half of the Decade'<sup>1</sup>. Not wanting to use the word 'feminist', I told people that I would be attending a meeting on 'National Machinery<sup>2</sup> for the Integration of Women in Development'. Ironically, it was at this meeting that I came to understand the meaning, and relevance, of feminism for my work<sup>3</sup>. After that I started using the word as often as I could, always careful to define its meaning for me.

For me, feminism is 'a consciousness of all the sources of women's oppression and a commitment to challenge and change these forces in solidarity of other women'. There are many feminisms. Distinctions have been made between liberal, socialist, Marxist and radical feminism, depending on the definition of the primary source of oppression (Jagger and Rothenberg 1984). However, for the Caribbean, as in the case of

other Third World countries, these sources include the social relations of class, race, ethnicity, colonial and neo-colonial relations in which those of gender are embedded. Patricia Mohammed and Hilary Beckles emphasise this in their chapters in the Special Issue of *Feminist Review* (1998). According to Mohammed,

Caribbean feminism cannot be viewed as a linear narrative about women's struggles for gender equality, but a movement which has continually intersected with the politics of identity in the region (Mohammed 1998, 2).

Hilary Beckles' contribution to this volume (pp. 34-56), 'Historicising Slavery in West Indian Feminisms' reinforces this by describing how the

political fracturing of feminine identity during (slavery) defined the distances in ethnic and class position between women of different groups, thus creating the hurdles to be crossed in the post-slavery rapprochement of the feminist project (Mohammed 1998, 2).

The network of Third World feminists, DAWN, puts it this way:

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 defined by them for themselves. This diversity builds on a common opposition to gender oppression and hierarchy, but this is only the first step in articulating and acting upon a political agenda.

This heterogeneity gives feminism its dynamism and makes it the most potentially powerful challenge to the status quo. It allows the struggle against subordination to be waged in all arenas – from relations in the home to relations between nations – and it necessitates substantial change in cultural, economic, and political formations (Dawn 1987, 18-19).

I define this kind of feminism as 'critical Third World Feminism', and it is with this understanding that I make my presentation.

## 2. Feminism in the Caribbean

While a great deal can be said about differences and diversity within and between women in their organisations and movements, one thing unites all elements and that is a common opposition to women's subordination;

a common vision. This comes from feminism as a historical process manifested in many different and varied agendas depending on circumstances in which women's struggles arise. Feminist politics derives from feminist analysis, which starts with an analysis of patriarchy. Although patriarchy is mediated by race, class and culture,<sup>4</sup> it is nevertheless a system that privileges the practices, attributes and values associated with patriarchal concepts of masculinity while devaluing those associated with women's social role – caring, compassion, cooperation, gentleness. Patriarchy, reflected through all the structures and institutions of our world, is a system that glorifies domination, control, violence, competitiveness and greed. It dehumanises men as much as it denies women's agency. Feminist analysis recognises the role of ideology in the construction of definitions of the male and female, how the ideology of patriarchy is dispersed and reproduced through a gender ideology that lies at the centre of human socialisation, providing the framework for hierarchy, authoritarianism and dichotomies that we name 'sexism'.

In her editorial, 'Rethinking Caribbean Difference', to the Special Issue of *Feminist Review*, Patricia Mohammed sees feminism as 'an expression of sexual equality' (Mohammed 1998, 8). In regard to feminist activism, however, I want to make a distinction between feminism as an expression of sexual equality and feminism as a critical politics that goes beyond sexual equality, using critical Third World feminist theory to question the whole system of production and reproduction: many women question the value of 'equality' within a system that is fundamentally exploitative of social groups on the basis of class, race and nationality. A development process that shrinks and poisons the pie for poor people, and then leaves women scrambling for a larger relative share, is not in women's interests. (Sen and Grown 1987, 20).

Feminist theory is key to this analysis. When activism is grounded in this theory, it announces its political and philosophical origins most clearly as feminist. Feminist analysis grounded in critical third world feminist theory seeks to challenge and change structures of women's subordination, which are grounded in modes of production and reproduction that are both capitalist and patriarchal (Mies 1986).

The distinction between feminism as an expression of sexual equality and feminism as a critical politics relates to the goal of the analysis as well as to the intended action. Is the goal to challenge and change gender inequality in and of itself, or is it to use this as a point of departure, a first step, a necessary requirement – the assertion of women's agency – toward challenging and changing a variety of systems and structures that place women's lives in jeopardy? Is the action directed toward individual redress, or to the 'community' affected? My understanding of activism is that it is action taken on behalf of the community of women – battered women, women likely to be affected by structural adjustment policies, trade liberalisation, HIV/AIDS, etc.

In this chapter I try to show how feminist activism from the 1970s attempted to confront and cross the distances and hurdles described by Beckles. But in addition to these historical factors there are two others that need to be considered as we examine feminist activism in Caribbean society. One is context, the other the internal process of feminist conscientisation<sup>5</sup>. These interact with each other to produce the particular contribution of feminist activism to society in any period of time.

Context plays an important role in our attempts to understand the ways in which feminism is manifested in the Caribbean. The context in which first wave feminism emerged in this region was shaped by nationalism and independence struggles, while that of second wave feminism was undoubtedly influenced by the greater awareness of the international struggles, both those related specifically to women's role and status<sup>6</sup> as well as those related to global crises – economic, social, political and environmental – generated by the crisis in capitalist accumulation. I will address these contexts as I describe the activism manifested in those periods, but first I want to say something about the internal process of feminist *conscientisation*.

### 3. The Internal Process of Feminist *Conscientisation*

Women come to feminism from different paths – personal, professional and political. Many of the women involved in women's organisations or movements were influenced by leftist, nationalist or identity politics<sup>7</sup> and discovered their own marginalisation, *as women*, within the processes

of these larger struggles. Others began the journey to feminism through personal experiences; some through discrimination in their work places. In all these situations, the experience can be the beginning of consciousness of what it is to be female in a society that privileges males (patriarchal society). Feminist theory enables these women to analyse the factors that create the situation, not just in terms of individual behaviour but also in terms of structures and relationships of power. This understanding (consciousness) of patriarchal power transforms feelings of alienation into feminist activism as part of a *political* struggle for gender equity and equality. But for third world women, an analysis of the sources of women's oppression includes an analysis of race, class and nationality (colonialism) as well, and feminist 'consciousness-raising' becomes a process of *conscientisation*. These varied experiences highlight the complexity of women's struggles in places like the Caribbean.

Another characteristic of many of those exposed to feminism is the process of personal transformation they undergo as they become aware of gender subordination. At the same time, this essentially individualistic experience seems to engender a connection to the wider universe of injustice in a way that leads to a better understanding, *experientially*, of the link between different forms of oppression, that can build lifelong commitment to the struggle against injustices of all kinds.

Feminist consciousness can be transformational: it enables women to comprehend the barriers of class, race and ethnicity, and nationality in the search for a gender identity that can be the basis of solidarity, despite these barriers. My own experience attests to this: for me, feminism has been transformational – personally, professionally and politically. The consciousness of sexism and sexist oppression is the essence of feminist activism and it is this that energises women to take action on their own behalf and on that of other women, whether or not the word 'feminist' is used.

## 4. External Processes: The Context of Feminist Activism in the Caribbean

### 4.1. *The First Wave (1940s–60s)*

Nationalist and independence struggles of the first part of the twentieth century provided the context within which first wave feminism emerged

in this region. This feminism was in the tradition of liberal feminism but set in the context of struggles around nationalism and independence – basically struggles for Caribbean identity. Its emphasis was on welfare, family and community: improvements in areas of traditional female roles. While some might argue that this served to reinforce traditional gender relations, I would say that this was the starting point required by the situation of widespread marginalisation and exclusion of the larger community of men and women occasioned by slavery and colonialism. However, in the exercise of leadership, women had to claim equality.

In representations of identity, the focus was on the experiences of the 'creoles', the black/white/coloured populations without any reference to that of the Indo-Caribbean people who constituted a significant proportion of the populations of Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana (Baksh-Soodeen 1989, 78). Indeed, it would be more accurate to say that issues of identity were claimed for the Afro-Caribbean experience and the need to rebuild families and communities that had been shattered by the brutality of slavery. Nevertheless, this focus, along with the relative separation of Indo-Caribbean women within their families and communities in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, and the prejudices that kept the groups apart, suggests that the forms of involvement by women from this social group in the organising that took place in the first wave of feminist activism was neither visible nor appreciated within CARICOM.<sup>8</sup>

Although they did not name themselves 'feminist', the women who worked to promote these changes as part of nationalistic struggles, acted out of a consciousness of themselves as women within societies that sought to circumscribe their lives, and they acted in solidarity with other women to challenge male privilege and power where this was present. In other words, in their politics and behaviour, it is clear that many of these women can be defined as 'feminist'. Building on the legacies of the rebel women described by Lucille Mathurin Mair, women who used a variety of means for securing their freedom and that of their children, women like Amy Garvey within the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and Elma Francois with the Negro Welfare Association (NWA), worked to organise women to play a more active role in organisations intended for the benefit of the disenfranchised.

Honor Ford-Smith notes the close connection between the anti-colonial and feminist movement in countries with a shared history of colonisation and that 'the Jamaican feminist movement in the 1930s and 1940s was nurtured within the Garvey movement', although 'the ideal image of womanhood upheld within the movement differed very little from the ideal image upheld by dominant colonial ideology in terms of the way it perceived women's position within the family, women's labour and sexuality' (Ford-Smith 1988, quoted by Mohammed *ibid.*, 15).

The contribution of women to charitable and social welfare is part of the legacy of women's organising and activism in this region. Many crossed the barriers of class and race to build solidarity with women of a different class and/or race and ethnic group. All played important leadership, pioneering roles in social welfare and public service, family planning, education, administration, fund-raising and activities within the labour movement, as well as in the formation of political parties.

The priority given by labour unions and political parties to education, health and family welfare, issues associated with women's practical gender interests and feminist agendas, signified the importance attached to these as parts of the agendas of community or nation building by men occupying positions of leadership in these struggles. Joycelin Massiah notes one of the characteristics of the Caribbean women's movement as its inclusiveness allowing for 'a wide variety of views, styles, concepts, and approaches'. (Massiah 1998, 9). This included openness to working with men and an absence of the confrontational style that may be associated with feminist activism in other countries.

#### *4.2. The Second Wave (1970s–90s)*

With the efforts toward independence and regional integration in the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of Caribbean women took leadership to ensure that women's contribution to regionalism and nation building was recognised. Early efforts to launch a Caribbean Women's Association (CARIWA), comprising members from national umbrella organisations, were undertaken by women like Audrey Jeffers, Gemma Ramkesoon and Nesta Patrick of Trinidad and Tobago, Dorothy Lightbourne of Jamaica, Phyllis Allfrey of Dominica, Rita Guy of Saint Lucia and Lady

Grace Adams of Barbados. It floundered with the demise of the Federation but was revived by Viola Burnham and Olga Byrne of Guyana, and formally inaugurated in April 1970 under the presidency of Anne Liburd of St Kitts. Again, these women may not have claimed to be feminists but their initiative to organise women and amplify their voices around the region speaks to a vision of feminist activism as an essential part of nation building, and the thrust for regionalism. Their engagement with policy-making processes also set a pattern for feminist activism in the future. It was CARIWA that ensured the inclusion of the item 'women's rights' in the clause of functional cooperation in the Treaty of Chaguaramas (Massiah *ibid.*, 10).

The early 1970s also witnessed efforts on the part of women within socialist-oriented political parties in Guyana and Jamaica to raise issues about policies and programmes for the advancement of women. In Guyana the Women's Revolutionary Socialist Movement (WRSM) of the People's National Congress (PNC) and in Jamaica the Women's Auxiliary of the People's National Party both worked within their parties to influence the male leadership. In the run-up to the 1972 elections in Jamaica, feminists like Lucille Mathurin-Mair and Mavis Gilmore presented a paper on 'Women and Social Change' arguing for the establishment of a coordinating agency 'empowered to promote and review through the relevant ministries those urgent needs of girls and women' (Reddock 1998, 60 quoting from Henry 1986, 12). The result of these efforts was the establishment of special mechanisms (national machinery) for the 'integration' of women's concerns into national development policies. In Guyana, a Council on the Affairs and Status of Women in Guyana (CASWIG) was formed in 1973, while in Jamaica, Lucille Mathurin Mair was appointed Advisor on Women's Affairs early in 1974. In Barbados, a National Commission on the Status of Women was appointed the following year, 1975.

All of this could be seen as representing a link between local feminist activism and an international environment that was favourable to policies and programmes for the advancement of women, since it was during this period that the United Nations had announced 1975 as an International Year for Women (IWY). Indeed, Caribbean women were

involved, through the UN Commission on the Status of Women, in promoting the idea of a special year, and Gloria Scott of Jamaica is credited with having proposed the inclusion of the theme of 'Development' along with 'Equality' and 'Peace' (Antrobus 2000). The processes and events of IWY and the ensuing Decade for Women provided an international environment that supported and legitimised women's activism and Caribbean women took full advantage of this.

Building on the activism of Caribbean women of the first half of the century, the UN Decade for Women took the activism of Caribbean women to another level by putting them in touch with women from other countries and backgrounds, many of them feminists. The exchange of ideas, the opportunities to engage in joint advocacy and projects built the theoretical knowledge, understanding, confidence and skills of a wide cross-section of women in the region. In a sense, exposure through UN processes and conferences drew Caribbean women into an international and global movement that was to have far-reaching consequences for human society in the region and worldwide.

The Decade for Women served as a major training and consciousness-raising exercise for Caribbean feminists – for activists and scholars alike. The activism of the decade (1975-85) was remarkable in its scope and reaches and demonstrates what is possible when women organise to change the attitudes of society toward women and to challenge the state to review its policies and programmes to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women.

The achievements of this period in CARICOM countries included:

- establishment of 'national machinery for the integration of women' in almost every CARICOM country, as well as the establishment of special programmes within regional institutions such as the University of the West Indies and the CARICOM Secretariat;
- changes in laws throughout many countries to include to equal pay legislation; the Status of Children law that removed discrimination against children born out of wedlock; legislation on rape; maternity leave legislation; and the establishment of a family court in Jamaica;
- the inclusion of domestic workers in minimum wage legislation in Jamaica;

- programmes to increase the leadership of women in the trade unions;
- the increasing activism of traditional women's organisations such as the YWCA, the Business and Professional Women's Clubs and the Soroptimists;
- the beginnings of feminist consciousness-raising among women in religious organisations.

The Centres for Gender and Development Studies within UWI have their origins in initiatives taken by the Women and Development Unit (WAND) and women involved in research and teaching on the three campuses and the University of Guyana. I leave Joycelin Massiah to provide more information about the establishment of these programmes and the scholarship that has emerged from them. However, I want to make the point that it was feminist activism that led the way and energised the development and institutionalisation of the programmes.

Regarding the work of WAND, the establishment of the unit within the then Extra-Mural Department, a space within the university with a tradition of being responsive to the needs of the communities it served, was intended to give it the autonomy and freedom to allow women across the region to define its programme. WAND used this space to:

- raise awareness of issues of concern to women through the media and educational system;
- build the capacity of key programmes<sup>9</sup> within the bureaucracy to be responsive to women's concerns in their design and implementation;
- design and implement pilot projects that suggested alternative approaches in programmes of community development, agricultural extension, curriculum development, (participatory) research and skills training;
- serve as a regional focal point and catalyst for women's organising;
- implement training programmes in feminist theory for its own staff and for activists;
- publish newsletters, occasional papers, training manuals, books and research, and produce video and radio programmes that shared its

vision of equality between men and women with the widest audience of men and women within CARICOM, and beyond;

- encourage the establishment of national machinery for the integration of women in Caribbean development and to strengthen the capacity of this machinery to be effective;
- support the work of individual women who were committed to gender equality; and generally to
- serve as a catalyst for change in gender relations toward gender equality.

Starting out as a fairly technical programme, WAND's activism grew with the growth in feminism in its leadership.

During this period, feminist activism resulted in more conscious attempts to bridge the gaps between middle-class and working-class women, and across racial lines, although this was not always successful (Baksh-Soodeen 1998, 81).<sup>10</sup> In Jamaica the black, working-class SISTREN Theatre Collective was formed by Honor Ford-Smith and Joan Ffrench, women from a different class and racial group, while middle-class women in leadership positions within the PNP and the Communist Party focused on the concerns of working class women and built strong alliances with them. Indeed, conscious efforts to build solidarity across class and race expressed itself in the collaboration between the Committee of Women for Progress (CWP), an affiliate of Jamaica's Communist Party and the PNP Women's Movement in the struggle to include domestic workers in the minimum wage legislation, and in the advocacy around maternity leave. In Trinidad and Tobago, issues of race and identity in relation to the Indo-Caribbean women began to surface. In Trinidad and Tobago the Hindu Women's Organisation was formed in the mid-1980s (Baksh-Soodeen 1998, 79).

I want to highlight the role of feminist politics and leadership in this process by emphasising its role in the transformation of programmes and organisations. While the resources and legitimacy generated by the Decade for Women gave second wave Caribbean women an opportunity to work for changes of policies and programmes for enhancing women's role in Caribbean development, it was feminist politics and leadership

within political parties, the bureaucracy, the educational system (including the university), the church, legal system, trade unions, media and women's organisations, that transformed these programmes from mere tokenism to initiatives that made a real difference to women and to Caribbean society.

Transformation is a process that starts with the transformation of individuals, who then work to transform institutions. A good example of how this happened in one organisation is the way in which the feminist politics of women within the leadership of the PNP of the early 1970s led to the transformation of the PNP Women's Auxiliary into a women's movement<sup>11</sup> that was the moving force in the changes that took place in Jamaica in between 1972-77. As I stated in my Lucille Mathurin Mair lecture in 2000

The success of Jamaica's national machinery for the integration of women in development in its first years was more than anything else due to the commitment, vigilance and support it received from the leadership of the women in the PNP Women's Auxiliary/Movement. These women were feminist, meaning that they had an analysis of women's subordinate position in society, and a commitment to challenge and change it, in solidarity with other women. They saw this as an essential part of the meaning of Democratic Socialism, and they understood that the women within the party would have to organise themselves to work for gender equality within this agenda. They transformed their own organisation from a Women's Auxiliary into a Women's Movement, a change that was more than semantics. They claimed autonomy within the Party, building strategic alliances with women in the other parties to fight for the inclusion of domestic workers in minimum wage legislation and for maternity leave. They insisted on supporting women as candidates over the objections of men within the Party. They held ministers accountable by calling them to report on their performance at their conferences. They were an example of feminist leadership within the national political arena – examples of transformational leadership. (Antrobus 2000).

Another example of the way in which feminist activism served to make the link between the work of traditional women's organisations, researchers, and the bureaucracy can be drawn from Jamaica's experience in addressing the issue of girls who drop out of school because of pregnancy.

Signalled as a 'problem' by women's organisations, the

[Jamaica Women's] Bureau arranged for a situational analysis [to be carried out] by the academics at UWI, [and] facilitated their access to the Ministry of Education.

The recommendations were then channelled both [formally] to the Ministry and [informally] to the women in the Party. Using their political clout they worked from within the Party to have the recommendations taken seriously while I worked within the bureaucracy ... to define the pilot project and find the funds to implement what became the Women's Centre ... the birth of the idea and the support which made it possible came from that strategic combination of NGO sensitivity and concern, academic research, bureaucratic skill, and political will. (Antrobus, 2000).

#### 4.3. *Feminist Activism and the Socioeconomic Crisis of the 'Lost Decade'*

The limitations of a focus on women's equality became apparent as the Caribbean confronted the global economic crisis of the 1980s. In the same way that the limitations of independence within the structure of global capitalism could only become apparent after political independence was achieved, so too the limitations of sexual equality could only be clearly discerned when this was established. In the 1980s, the structural linkages between systemic crises of debt and deteriorating services, food security and environmental degradation, militarism, political conservatism and religious fundamentalism enabled Third World feminists, the activists and scholars that make up the DAWN network, to frame an analysis that showed more clearly the links between these and their relationship to women's subordination (Sen & Grown 1987).

Not surprisingly, feminist scholars and activists were at the forefront of the critique of structural adjustment policies<sup>12</sup> or, as Sen & Grown (1997) put it the 'crisis of reproduction', since

women stand at the crossroads between production and reproduction, economic activity and the care of human beings, and therefore between economic growth and human development. They are the workers in both spheres – those most responsible, and therefore with most at stake, those who suffer the most when the two work at cross-purposes, and those most sensitive to the need for better integration between the two (DAWN 1995, 21).

Feminist analysis of these policies, and the links between the policy framework and the other crises referred to above, along with the origin of this framework in political conservatism, has been a major contribution to activism in the 1990s and beyond. In fact, feminist scholarship is essential to effective feminist activism. Feminist theory can strengthen

women's activism.<sup>13</sup> Feminist theory/scholarship reveals how the exploitation of women's time, labour and sexuality is fundamental to the continuation of the dominant political economic system. For example,

- Because women are socialised to do domestic work and take care of people, the state can transfer responsibility for family health and nutrition to the household, where the labour does not have to be paid for.
- Similarly, the market capitalises on poor women's desperate need for income, and the notion of the 'male bread-winner' to pay them the lowest wages, and treat them as a reserve labour force.
- Finally, state, market and civil society combined manipulate women's sexuality – their relations with men, children and other women, their image of themselves – in the service of the dominant ideology.

In the past few years feminist scholarship has begun to explore and reveal these links between women's subordination and the forces that perpetuate the exclusion and subordination of whole sectors of society (even whole countries and continents). Feminist analysis suggests that there can be no social transformation toward a better world for all unless patriarchy is challenged. If this analysis is to impact society, it must be carried by feminist activism, including the activism of those men whose work is also informed by feminist theory, and who see this and are willing to embark on the difficult task of challenging the ideology that dehumanises them as much as it robs women of their agency.<sup>14</sup>

The combination of feminist scholarship and feminist activism, of which DAWN is an example, has in fact provided the analysis that underpinned the transformation of the international women's movement of the Decade for Women into the global women's movement of the 1990s (Antrobus, forthcoming from Zed Books, 2004). In the context of the global conferences of the 1990s, global feminism emerged as a political force with an agenda for social transformation that goes beyond the focus on women's well-being to women's perspectives on every aspect of life. This shift from the 'integration of women in development' to the call for the 'empowerment of women for social change' expressed in the statement (the Bridgetown Statement)<sup>15</sup> formulated at WAND's tenth

anniversary celebration, symbolises the transformation of women's organising by feminism that took place in second wave feminism.

## 5. Feminist Activism in CARICOM in the Decade for Women

Participation in the global conferences of the 1990s marked a new phase in feminist activism in the Caribbean. Armed with the holistic conceptual and analytical framework formulated by DAWN and other Third World feminist groups, Caribbean women in partnership with feminist activists from around the world were able to see and articulate the systemic links between global conferences on environment, human rights, population, social development, habitats and food security.<sup>16</sup> With this, global feminism made the shift from conferences 'on' women to 'women's perspectives' on global issues. It was a shift that Third World feminism has made from early in the Decade for Women, but it could be more clearly articulated outside the confines of the UN's women's conferences. Caribbean feminist activists like Joan Ffrench of Jamaica, Audrey Roberts of the Bahamas, Nelcia Robinson of St Vincent & the Grenadines, Jocelyn Dow of Guyana, Elaine Hewitt of Barbados, and myself were among those who took leading roles in these conferences.

## 6. The Future of Feminist Activism

If feminist leadership is crucial for changing the conditions of women's lives, then it is important to consider how this kind of leadership can be encouraged. In my own case, the experiences that have helped deepen my feminist analysis and commitment have included (a) interaction with feminist scholars and activists (b) financial support for feminist projects (c) opportunities for study and reflection. Of these, the interaction with feminist scholars and opportunities for study and reflection related to opportunities that might be provided by feminism within the academy. Here I am not speaking only of the role of feminist scholars who are also activists. I am drawing attention to the contribution that non-activist feminist scholars within the academy can make to activists outside the academy.

My own experience speaks to the ways in which feminist theory and research can strengthen activism and advocacy. What makes DAWN one of the most effective resource networks is the theoretical consistency and clarity of its analysis. This comes from its close links to scholars and researchers, including those who eschew activism. DAWN also demonstrates how the access of scholars to activists enriches scholarship, first by enabling researchers to frame the questions that can be most pertinent to processes of social and economic change; and secondly, by enabling researchers to draw on the insights of activists to provide a reality check for their conclusions. The link serves to strengthen activism as well as scholarship.

But this mutually beneficial link is not automatic. It has to be nurtured and explicitly sought by activists and scholars alike. There are structural gaps between the world of the activist and that of the scholar that must be addressed.

I can give an example of the difficulties by referring to a failed attempt to make the link. From 1992 to 1993, the new head of the Ford Foundation's population programme, wanting to shift the traditional demographic focus of their programme to draw on a broader array of social sciences and to make links between teaching, research and advocacy, reached out to a number of universities, including UWI, to formulate projects that would reflect this orientation. The selection of UWI itself was related to the fact that this institution, with its well established programmes of teaching, research and outreach located in the Centres of Women and Development Studies, the ISER and the Woman and Development Unit (WAND) appeared ideally suited as a model of the kind of work that might be produced. However, without an explicit feminist (political) commitment on the part of WADS and ISER to this project, what emerged was a traditional social science research project without any links to the feminist activism of WAND. As a result of this, the opportunity was missed by the WADS project (undertaken in collaboration with Social and Preventive Medicine) to feed into the process leading up to the International Conference on Population and Development. Feminist scholars would have had more interest in a project that had the possibility of influencing a major

policy-making process than those who saw it simply as an opportunity for funding research.

If this link is to be strengthened, both activists and scholars need to be interested in working together, and to recognise the constraints inherent in their different spheres. For example, the activist must recognise the scholar's time constraints and her need, sometimes, to be more protective of her data. The scholar, on the other hand, needs to recognise that the questions of interest to the activists may not be the same as those that interest the scholar, and that the activist is working within a time frame of greater immediacy than that of the scholar. There is also the question of methodology: the activist is likely to be more interested in participatory methodologies that reduce the gap between research and action and empower participants. Finally, there are issues of the imbalance of power between the university and the community, the scholar and the activist. All of these issues need to be addressed if the links are to be beneficial to both scholarship and activism.<sup>17</sup> Feminist politics provides a framework within which scholars and activists might negotiate the basis for collaborative work.

At UWI, the number of scholars and activists who are interested in forging such a link limits the link between feminist activism and scholarship. If activists recognise the importance of good scholarship to their advocacy and activism the onus will be on them to make the links, but feminist scholars might also make it less intimidating to activists who might be interested in approaching the university for assistance. During my period at WAND, one of my greatest disappointments with UWI was its failure to understand that one of WAND's goals was to define a different relationship between the university and the community it was established to serve: a relationship less loaded with overtones of privilege and less encumbered by academic requirements. Feminism would have provided a basis for this understanding.

But above all the tangible impacts of feminist activism on society, there are the intangibles – women's acknowledgement of their capacities for achievement, their sense of entitlement to respect, society's greater awareness of and sensitivity to the human rights of women. Men are more involved in the care of their children and in sharing domestic work;

women have a greater self-confidence in their role in the wider society. Even 'backlash' symbolised by the spread of the 'male marginalisation' thesis can be taken as testimony to women's achievements, and an opportunity to explore the factors that serve to marginalise men that are in no way related to the perceived advancement of women.

In the small village of Rosehall in St Vincent, where WAND had implemented a Pilot Project for the Integration of Women in Rural Development (1981-83),<sup>18</sup> it was reported by one of the men, several years after WAND's role in the project had ended, that men had become more involved in role-sharing in the household and that violence against women was no longer acceptable.<sup>19</sup> While the project had focused on women's leadership by building their skills, self-confidence and capacity for decision-making and leadership, it had never directly addressed the issue of the sexual division of labour nor the problem of violence against women. Nevertheless, the noticeable increase in self-esteem and self-respect among the women of this community was clear to all. Apart from an impressive list of material improvements in the lives of the people of Rosehall,<sup>20</sup> I judge one of the most significant achievements of this project to be the transformation of gender relations in this community and the rise in women's leadership, along with the transformation between the community and state actors. The project also demonstrates how the whole community benefits from women's leadership and empowerment. Although the word 'feminism' was never used, and although most of the WAND staff directly involved in the project did not identify themselves as feminist activists, the conception and guiding philosophy of the project was an example of feminist activism. This was no ordinary community development project; its political objectives of 'empowering women for social change' were clear; though (for political reasons) seldom made explicit.

In the process of translating feminist consciousness into activism, activists have learned to distinguish between the material and the ideological relations of gender (Barriteau 2002). Eudine Barriteau makes this distinction to show that, while advances in women's material needs (what Molyneux terms 'practical gender interests') might be met within a policy framework of social equity based on race and class, the ideological

relations of gender could cause men to resent and resist advances in terms of women's strategic gender interests. The Rosehall experience shows one way to avoid resistance. It shows how, in the process of meeting practical gender needs, women can be empowered to challenge the ideological relations of gender and so achieve strategic gender interests as well. This takes patience, but above all clarity about the fact that women's leadership is essential for the well-being of families and communities, that is if the requirements of social reproduction are to be addressed.

## 7. The New Context and Implications for the Future

With all its limitations, contradictions and contestations, feminism as an ongoing dialogic process of confrontation and resolution nevertheless has the capacity to transform relationships and systems that are oppressive, no more so than today. The present conjuncture of relentless neo-liberalism, virulent religious and ideological fundamentalisms, aggressive militarism and resurgent racism at the international level, with echoes within our region, has particular implications for feminist activism. The focus of this activism must be on two areas: (a) issues of trade liberalisation and its threats to the health and livelihoods of the majority of the people in this region and (b) the impacts of religious fundamentalisms and the male backlash in the context of the HIV-AIDS pandemic as well as to the threats these pose to advances in women's rights, and the continuing struggles against violence against women.

Feminist activism has a special role to play in all of these areas, not least because it is grounded in an analysis that reveals the links between these issues and women's marginalisation, subordination and exploitation. However, the analysis itself needs to be strengthened, and this can only be done by a strengthening of the link between feminist activism and scholarship. The University of the West Indies ought to consider how it might contribute to building feminist leadership in our societies.

The Summer Institute,<sup>21</sup> organised by the Centre for Gender and Development Studies at the Cave Hill campus for women involved in women's programmes in the region, is an example of how this might be done. It provides an opportunity for exposing these women to feminist

theory and to feminist activists. This can serve to strengthen feminist activism in the wider society. While a similar distance education programme organised by the centre at Mona is valuable, especially for those who cannot leave home, a residential course provides a better opportunity for the deepening of the feminist consciousness and commitment that is essential for the strengthening of activism.

This academic conference, on the theme of Gender in the Twenty-first Century: Perspectives, Visions and Possibilities, including this Plenary on the related themes of 'Feminist Activism' and 'Feminist Scholarship' would be a fitting time to explore how the links might be strengthened.

## Notes

1. The meeting was sponsored by the Asia & Pacific Centre for Women and Development (APCWD) and held in Bangkok. It owed the inclusion of 'feminism' in the title to Elizabeth Reid, Australian feminist who had been adviser to the Prime Minister of Australia during International Women's Year, and who subsequently worked on the staff of various UN programmes. I know of no other UN meeting that includes 'feminist' in the title.
2. The name of the mechanisms (structures) established within government bureaucracies to promote programmes for the advancement of women. The Jamaican Women's Bureau was one of these.
3. In her presentation, US feminist, Charlotte Bunch, spoke of her coming to feminist consciousness through her involvement in the US Civil Rights movement. It was there, as she worked for black liberation, that she discovered her own subordination as a woman. Racism and sexism have much in common.
4. Vandana Shiva makes a useful distinction between capitalist and cultural patriarchy. Cultural patriarchy is 'mediated through cultural oppression' while capitalist patriarchy 'mediates first and foremost through material exploitation and dispensability...one (capitalist patriarchy) hits right at your chances of survival; the other (cultural patriarchy) narrows the options of how much you can travel, how much of your body you can expose, etc. etc. but it doesn't get to the very basis of survival and deny it to large numbers of people, particularly large numbers of women and children all over the world'. In Cindy Duffy, and Craig Benjamin. 'Creative Principles: Fighting Capitalism and Patriarchy on a World Scale: an interview with Vandana Shiva'. In *The World Transformation: Gender, Work and Solidarity in the Era of Free Trade and Structural Adjustment*. (Shareright rhiZone, 1995), 123-133.

5. Conscientisation is a term associated with Paulo Freire and the process of social analysis that enables the poor and oppressed to link their experience to the larger structures of their oppression, especially class. It resonates with feminist consciousness-raising, but has a wider connotation in that it does not focus on a single 'source' of oppression, as feminist consciousness-raising does.
6. Within the context of the UN Decade for Women.
7. For example within the US civil rights movement, or South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle.
8. New research is revealing the presence of Indo-Caribbean women in the labour movement (Reddock and Mohammed) and that some Indian women came to the Caribbean independently of men during Indenture.
9. These included programmes in community development, education and agriculture. At that time, not much attention was given to health, or the police. Issues of reproductive health and rights and violence against women were not high on the agenda until the 1980s and 1990s.
10. According to Baksh-Soodeen, while there was general agreement on issues of violence against women, 'whenever national issues in relation to class inequalities arose, there was a decided withdrawal on the part of the new "middle-class" feminists, who could perhaps be characterized as having a radical feminist approach'. (1998: 81).
11. See my Lucille Mathurin Mair lecture (2000) for more details of this and other examples.
12. Latin American feminist scholars were the first to draw attention to the 'super exploitation' of women's time and labour that underlay this policy framework. My own paper on 'The Impact of the Debt Crisis on Jamaican Women' presented at the first meeting of the Association of Caribbean Economists in 1987 was the first feminist critique of SAPS in the region, although it was largely ignored by subsequent research on SAPS, perhaps because I am not considered a 'scholar'.
13. WAND's regional workshops on feminist theory for activists in the 1980s speaks to recognition of the importance of this, as well as its exposure of its own staff to feminist theory within the framework of internal staff workshops in the early 1990s - 'Andaiye's school', as one staff member named these efforts (they were, of course, conducted by Andaiye).
14. John Foran, who has studied and written extensively on revolutions, recognises that one of the factors that prevents revolutions from realising their dream of a more humane world is the enmeshment of leaders in 'structures of patriarchy and racism'. (Foran 2003, 269).
15. This statement is included in Rhoda Reddock's paper in the special issue of *Feminist Review* frequently cited in this presentation (pp. 70-71).
16. Interestingly, the only global conference for which the international women's movement was not mobilised was the first of these, the 1990 World Conference on Children. Whether by accident or design, the absence of a global feminist presence from this conference ensured that there was no feminist analysis or critique of the ways in which

women's ability to nurture and protect children is determined by their own ability to resist patriarchal control and domination.

17. A few years ago I was involved in a project on university-community partnerships formulated by Atlantic Canada universities with UWI, UG and universities in Indonesia. When I retired from WAND, and I had to withdraw from the project and so was unable to contribute my experience to this venture.
18. The 'project' was time-bound but the process engendered by it has continued to the present, albeit with a new generation of leaders.
19. This is captured on a videotape of the project.
20. In the period 1981-83, tangible results based on initiatives taken by women leaders included the creation of a farmers organisation in which 40 per cent of the members were women, an ongoing adult education programme defined by the community, a sewing project designed to provide school uniforms to the children of the community, a day care centre, a preschool, a library, a community centre and a bakery. As a result of the expansion of opportunities for secondary and tertiary education in the country and region, which took place around the same time, the first five young people from Rosehall went on to university. All of them had been involved in the project and credit it with their increased self-confidence and commitment to contributing to the development of their community and country. Of the five, four were women. Three went on to take Master's degrees. All returned to work in Rosehall or the surrounding villages.
21. This year's Institute is the third of this type of programme. However, it has been difficult to secure financing and its future is uncertain. Only the determination, reflecting the commitment to activism, of Eudine Barriteau ensures its continuation.

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## *Pushing the Boundaries: Redefining Masculinities & Femininities*