

Some Thoughts on the Status of the Women's Movement in the Caribbean

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I take as my starting point the notion that the women's movement in the Caribbean has been said to have been destabilised. This argument also proposes that the movement has been thereby weakened, but whether this has been the only result is a matter for debate. I suggest that also up for debate is the question of destabilisation itself. I believe that to think that there was ever a moment when the women's movement was stable, meaning well and indisputably positioned to achieve the goals it set itself, is a mistaken hope. Recall, we proposed to identify oppressions against women and the mechanisms of their maintenance, and engage in work to eradicate them. Given that these objectives violently challenge entrenched values and practices of the status quo, and in the context that these oppressions, pillars of the status quo, privileged others, we would have always been on shaky ground. Nevertheless, because I too feel that the ground has become even more shaky than usual, I take the notion of destabilisation as true for the moment.

But by what are we being destabilised? To my mind there are four factors: 1) the notion of difference; 2) unexamined beliefs about the total or absolute power of patriarchy, colonialism/neo-colonialism, capitalism and statism (in other words, belief in the near impossibility of penetrating these amalgams of power); 3) the male backlash; and 4) late 20th century instabilities in the concept of the nation state. I will not address the issue of lost funding here, evidently important as it has been.

Difference

The idea under debate around the late 1980s in the region that "women" is a category riven by difference has contested what was thought to be an unproblematic space for solidarity. In other words, these differences- of class,

race, location, ability, to name but a small few, mean that universal sisterhood, is no longer defensible as an automatic assumption. It has been demonstrated that oppressions, and solutions to these, rightly have something to do with/are mediated by different cultures or "sub"-cultures. To give an example, women wearing the veil could be a choice for one culture while for another it could be an oppression. The selection of this as a problem, and by extension, the solution to this "problem" as the removal of the veil, is all bound up in where you are located. Not that there could be now no shared basic principles or rights, but what these would be is now not as settled as once thought.

The appeal to the very category "women" as the ground for action was felt to take for granted the constituency that had first to be proved. As academics would put it, "Women" was not a category stabilised by nature, but was historically, culturally and politically produced. And this does not even speak to the critical issue for the movement of the question of lesbianism. Since not nature but culture or history determined one's experiences and problems as a woman, no group of women could speak for all women. No experience of one could stand in for that of all.

The recognition of difference was a good thing in many respects. Among other things it asked women of the "North" to examine the degree of their own complicity, how they were implicated in imperialist projects of domination and control, which projects express themselves in the consequent oppression of us women of the "South". Difference enlightened us to the fact that a project involving mainly black women (but not seen by them as a black women's project but as a women's project- the Women in the Caribbean Project comes to mind) could be exclusionary. In fact, women of Indian descent in the Caribbean have argued this. The new political consideration of difference exposed that one of the mechanisms of oppression was a universalising, homogenising reductionism. But these differences mean that the solidarity necessary for social action for change could not be now automatically depended on, it had to be negotiated. However, I return to my position of destabilisation not being necessarily bad to ask, does that finding not also express an enablement of the movement? I believe it validates the vitality and correctness of negotiating difference, and implies consequent improvements in understanding and respect that presumably arise in negotiating.

Absolute Power

I do not want to be accused of putting up a straw man argument just to knock it down. We always felt that we could intervene in enclaves of power such as patriarchy, neo/colonialism, excessive state control of our lives, capitalism, else why would we have set about trying to change things? And we were successful in achieving changes:

-We got sexist pieces of legislation revoked and enabling legislations put in place;

- we naturalised and hence opened up to women certain jobs and expectations considered exclusive to men;
- we opened up possibilities in state decision-making and in a broader sense possibilities in opportunities for women;
- we challenged disabling stereotypes and representations of women (so that for example, young women could automatically feel they could opt to do anything, go anywhere, without thinking too strenuously about whether they should. We had largely removed limiting prescriptions and images about what they should or should not do.
- we dragged domestic violence into the open as a public harm defying those who would privatise it;
- we have promoted greater self-confidence in ourselves as women.

However, we remain stuck on how difficult it is to change important things. We acknowledge how difficult it is to change ideologies; to break into the power of legislatures; to really refashion institutions of power such as our university and our commercial and financial sector boardrooms; in order to take and get the economic power necessary to change lives of those disadvantaged by distorted distributions of wealth. We regret and complain about how hard it is to naturalise the things which erroneously continue to be intransigently exclusive to women such as child care, housework and the provision of food for other people. There are more.

We see power as basically absent from women's lives and even when we have "it", we are ambivalent about recognising it. Too many of us in fact see power as something unitary and divorced from the bottom of community welfare where too many of us are still located. And I am not talking here about the "power" to devise survival mechanisms, although given how many women have to resort to that "power" it cannot be discounted. Our conceptions of power are of a sort of essence that is near if not fully impervious to penetration by those traditionally disadvantaged. These conceptions blind us to the different expressions and sites of power over which women have control, or to the power that still resides in collective action by persons normally disenfranchised for whatever reason. To give two examples of what I mean here: women constitute large numbers of organised labour yet have used that power to minimal effect as far as the need for sexual harassment policies in the region is concerned. Secondly, the traditional NGO women's movement has not created any strategies for long-term collaboration with the women's units within trade unions to advance common interests, neither have they done this with the women's arms of political parties.

Male Backlash

We know how many men in our Caribbean are successfully trying to roll back gains of the movement by arguing that they have been disadvantaged and harmed by women's success in gaining the rights described earlier. This has silenced many in the movement as traditional tapes have started to play in some women's heads. These are tapes about the biblical (when we don't look to the Bible for much else) rightness of male headship; tapes of 'look how the young men and boys are failing far true and therefore it must be our fault for wanting good for ourselves'; and tapes of 'yes, it is true that there are more and more female teachers and that must be a problem and our fault'; and tapes of 'there is a problem and it must be our fault that children have no mothers at home to return to after school'- by the way, not a feature in the lives of too many Caribbean children in our history, but the myth holds. These men who are back lashing, many of whom are the same legislators, are trying to dictate not only the nature, but the terms of women's struggles for self-definition, participation and fulfilment.

Fortunately, these strategies of re-containment have become recently contested by some women in the movement and by several men in the academy in

particular, in their explorations of problematic constructions of masculinity. The backlash has also been challenged in the application of the difference concept to masculinity also. Men, it is being said, are as differentiated as women are. But in this later, for me, lies an enabling factor for the women's movement. Since not all or even the majority of men are women-beaters, rapists, failures as fathers or partners, we are enabled through knowing men are themselves not some undifferentiated lump by the possibilities for alliance with individuals and groups of men and with the state which they largely still control. This is a possibility that was not present when some parts of the movement (or popular imagination) positioned (or held us as positioning) men in a blanket category that also held them as unequivocally the enemy.

Of course this immediately raises questions about forming allies with a state that has a vested interest in destabilizing groups which threaten and challenge the status quo, such as a women's movement. It also questions establishing alliances with these groups of human beings, who, even if they do not practise the basest forms of exploitation of women, still gain tremendous privilege from their ability to tap into women's time and material expressions of care. And it raises the question of whether such alliances would not interfere with our continued relevance to women at the base? For, note, the women's movement is not a world of women on the march but the agitations of certain groups of women. CAFRA's collaboration with the region's Association of Police Commissioners to insert training on matters of domestic violence intervention in the training of police officers makes for an interesting answer to some of these questions. Not least so because the force is both representative of the state and still very much male as well as masculinist.

Instabilities of the Nation State

The nation state has come under severe criticism in the latter part of the 20th century and this has posed challenges for the Caribbean women's movement. By definition, nation refuses specificities of difference, and exercises disciplinary power over subordinated groups such as gays and lesbians. In its dealings with citizens it is a clear expression of hegemonic/dominant masculinity in action. Furthermore, despite its rhetoric or even its moves to ameliorate some inequities women face, the nation state continues in large measure to marginalise and exclude women.

The nation state has become identified as the locus of problematic relationships among people. Dominant groups control its distributive force to their advantage, and in failing to release people from a client relationship to itself, it dis-empowers them. Added to these, many nation states in the Caribbean are becoming destabilised by dealings of international agencies like the World Trade Organisation and dominant nations like the OECD countries which have sought to discipline our states for their own enrichment. As well, philosophies about there being too much big government and the need to drastically reduce or privatise functions of the state pose harm to populations that have been disadvantaged by the history of our region and can only get certain kinds of reparations or fair chances through state actions..

As it has become more difficult to defend this system of the nation state, so too have women's claims within it become more unstable. It seems less and less sensible for women to depend on such a state to change their lives. However, again I see enabling moments in this flux. This instability of the nation state may help women to the degree that it lends legitimacy to women's demand for an alternative political and representational world economy. Our problem is in spelling out and in articulating, and having the confidence in what those alternatives should be. Most of all our challenge is in identifying and securing the power or influence to install them

Responsibility, Leadership, Focus, Methodologies

The last point brings me to some questions about our process of development in the women's movement. I asked questions about the efficacy of allying ourselves with the state even with its problems. But are these not the same questions that faced the move by the region's women's movement some 10-15 years ago when we sought and got institutionalisation in the university in the creation of the centres for gender and development studies? How have we negotiated that alliance? Have we managed to exercise any control or power there and used it to transform the politics and distribution economy of that

institution? How have we used it in the service of the movement generally? Have we opened up the university to greater participation and involvement in it by our communities?

I ask these questions because I draw a direct link between the fortunes of the larger movement and what is happening to arguably our best efforts of institutionalisation: the creation of the centers for gender and development studies in the UWI and CAFRA (the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action). In terms of maintenance, the former to all intents and purposes seems healthy. The centres are able to access resources of the university and of external international and national sources, to which being in the university gives them privileged access. CAFRA, as its traditional sources of financing dry up may well be in jeopardy.

But in terms of strategic programming, CAFRA can also be asked hard questions about its stewardship as it approaches its 20th year next year. If our networking in the region was to better equip the movement to influence our states distribution of resources towards meeting women's needs, can we point to good examples where that has happened? If it was to strengthen the individual member organisations and women, has that happened? If it was to put us in a sustainable position to continue the work that never stops, has that happened? Have we penetrated states decision-making processes? I know that CAFRA has penetrated CARICOM and even UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). This is commendable, but now we are in what is our long-term plan for influencing the outcomes of these institutions? Have we opened up the national and regional political systems to greater participation by our communities? More significantly, have we opened up the decision-processes of the women's movement itself to participation by community level actors? Have not our definitions of leadership remained remarkably traditional if we see that the direction we must look to for leadership, as some now propose, is to the intellectuals of the university?

Other questions I put to the movement are these: what connections are there between our two best institutions, CAFRA and CGDS? If there had not been initially any plan by the movement for a long-term strategy that connected institutionalisation with the activist goals of the movement, should there not be moves to formulate such plans now? I know there is the Certificate in Gender

and Development Studies of CGDS which, since its inception in 1992, has sought to bring activists to the university for an opportunity to reflect and theorise about their work and experiences, and explore how theory and work articulate. This is a commendable strategy. What is the CGDS research agenda for the women's movement? Can, for example, CAFRA be the next research project for the Caribbean Women Catalysts for Change Project at Cave Hill or the similar project at St Augustine? I recognise that this is outside the way that leadership has been defined so far as leaders who have been studied by CGDS have been individuals. But if we define leadership as a collective action (which I think it is) could CAFRA not qualify for a study? Of course one recognises that the research agenda's of institutions are their own and certainly CAFRA can itself undertake its own leadership studies, but must this be the way in a common movement? What are the links between our two institutions and that other women's institution within Government sector themselves in the region: the bureaux, departments, ministries of (lately) gender affairs?

I look to an example of a movement institutionalising itself, the pan-African movement in Barbados in the agency of the Pan-African Commission located in the Prime Minister's Office. Despite problems, and attacks from entrenched white interests, that agency seems to be bending traditional notions of how civil servants have been constrained to operate, how government funds are traditionally used, and how a state agency relates to an activist movement. (Maybe it is no happy accident that it is a division staffed only by men except for a few female secretaries and clerks.) While in Barbados there have been (successful) challenges brought by men inside and outside of government about the legitimacy of spending tax dollars on women as a group, there has been no such call from anyone about spending tax dollars on issues related to pan-Africanism. We probably can learn some lessons from that experience.

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(This paper was prepared for a meeting of CAFRA 2004. Although it has subsequently been edited for grammar, to clarify some points and to respond to one critique regarding the conception of power I perceived to be held by someone whose name has been removed from the document, it is dated in some respects. Some changes in the world have occurred, like the fact that CAFRA is in a significant crisis of survival and the nation state even more so since the financial crisis that has emphasised how deeply the world economy is figured by

cross-border institutional activities but less so regulatory structures. Femininity has also been problematised. However, my arguments and conclusions remain the same. I kept the analysis intact as it represented my perspective at a moment in history when I was the Chairwoman of CAFRA.)