

Guyana's Women

Women of British Guiana like the women of the other West Indian areas have been a little slow to come forward in public life. Yet, while examples of prominent women leaders are not impressive, it does not mean that they have not played their part.

Historically, Guianese women have been on the side of the people's struggle for freedom; for a better way of life. Although the limited accounts of their activities in the explosions against oppression give us little to go on, it is apparent that they backed the famous slave rebellions of the past and the more recent militant action in the well-known sugar estate revolts and strikes. I can recall as if it was yesterday, the four and a half month strike on the sugar estates of the East Coast, Demerara of 1948 which led to the killing of five sugar workers at Enmore, when the police opened fire on the strikers.

The women were the backbone of the resistance and manned the soup kitchens which fed the strikers, who, with few resources, fought the sugar kings for the long stretch of four and a half months. They were absolutely magnificent in their solidarity and determination not to give in.

12-YEAR STRUGGLE

During the long twelve-year struggle that the People's Progressive Party has maintained for the independence of the country, the women have been a stimulating influence. I recall their stamina and courage during the dark, dim days of 1953 to 1957, when the country was ruled by bayonets and emergency law. When the police, in 1953, attacked the PPP Headquarters and tear-gassed the premises, the women laughed and taunted the police. They were not afraid.

They went from house to house, from village to village, collecting money to maintain the movement, distributing leaflets and publications, always under the threat of intimidation from the police.

SWAMPED WITH FLOWERS

In the hundreds of demonstrations that have taken place during these years, in the many political meetings which have been held, always one sees a great number of anonymous, but interested women in the forefront. Their loyalty to the cause of independence, to freedom from exploitation has been a vital element in our successful struggle.

During the last election campaign, which resulted again in a PPP victory, the behaviour of the women was a beautiful sight to me. When the PPP was constantly attacked at public meetings by hooligans of the opposition, who tried to bust-up the meetings with stones and eggs, the women responded by showering their leaders and candidates with flowers. In no election campaign had we ever seen this acclaim and gracious behaviour of women in this effort to reassure their leaders that they were with them. Before, at election victory time, we had received the flowers, the garlands, after the battle was over. But this year, they came before, as their gesture to the violent abuse by the opposition.

BELIEF IN OUR STRUGGLE

I can always remember a series of meetings I attended about two weeks before the elections. I had with me a visitor to the country, a Spanish-speaking comrade who did not know a word of English. He went with us to five meetings, one after the other. We were actually swamped with flowers in a spontaneous parade of women before each of the meetings, each carrying her gift of flowers. This burly man cried. I can always remember his tears and the expressions on the faces of these women who believed in our struggle and gave what they could to support it and encourage its leaders.

Because of poverty and poor educational opportunities under colonialism, the women of British Guiana have not yet had the opportunities that other women in other lands have had. Their ascent to leadership and full participation has been retarded by their struggle to work and live and keep their children in food and clothing.

Their day is fast approaching to build a new nation based on freedom and the end of exploitation.

(West Indian News, January 1962. Reprinted in Thunder, 10 March 1962)

Copyright © Nadira Jagan-Brancier 2009

Cheddi Jagan Research Centre