

A Bit of History About Women and the Vote

by Janet Jagan

There was a letter in the January 20, 2007 edition of Stabroek News (SN) which drew my attention. The writer was commenting on the right to vote by women, making this remark: "There had been no struggle for women's franchise by Guyanese women qua women, absolutely none. And when universal adult suffrage was granted by the British, the men had to pressure women to register."

My guess is that the author of this letter is male and probably relatively young. He is also ignorant of his country's history.

Long ago, in 1946, a group of women including Winifred Gaskin, Mrs Van Stafford and myself formed the Women's Political and Economic Organization (WPEO), mainly to fight for women's rights. Our first venture, after getting orga-

nized and bringing in a fair number of women, was to tackle a municipal problem which concerned us greatly; i.e. the poorly built Wortmanville Housing,

In fact, at that period, a lot of women, particularly rural women were illiterate, never having had the opportunity to go to school. I remember being active in a campaign against illiteracy called "each one teach one" and I used to go out several evenings a week to help teach women how to read and write.

Scheme's flats. We held a protest meeting, at the City Hall, and, as we were the first organization of women to seek equal rights for women (all the other women's groups were based on charity with some affiliated to churches), we had an unusual amount of attention in the media (there was no TV then).

Our other activities included the aim of achieving

universal adult suffrage which would then enfranchise all women. At the time, women could vote, but only if they owned property or had a job earning (I can't

now remember the exact figure) well above the payment women who worked at that time earned.

We didn't go to jail for our demands, as the earlier suffragettes did; we weren't bashed on the head or ostracized by society – if that is what the Stabroek News writer meant by no struggle, but we used every means within our circumstances to put over our demands that

women have the unconditional right to vote, irrespective of literacy or any other restrictions.

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The WPEO also examined other areas of discrimination against women including employment, infant and maternity care and, as well, the fact that women could not serve on juries – part of her "inferiority."

With much persuasion I was able to convince the members of the WPEO to take the women's rights issue to a broader platform, that of the TUC, which held its annual city march. Most of the members of the



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WPEO were what we would term "middle class" and the thought of marching in public with working men was a bit difficult, but they joined and also raised their placards for the vote for women. I remember that march well, because it was also in protest of milk dumping that took place in the city when there was over-production at the Milk Pasteurization Plant in Kingston. We all protested and demanded that the milk be delivered to the needy at hospitals, clinics and schools. (this was the era of

infamous food dumping worldwide to keep prices "stable")

Later, after the People's Progressive Party was formed in 1950, more and strident demands were made for universal adult suffrage and this was introduced into the Waddington Constitution which was put in place for the 1953 elections.

It was also during this period that the Women's Progressive Organization (WPO) was formed and was part and parcel of the struggle for universal adult suffrage.

The nasty remark by the S/N writer that "men had to pressure women to register" is so far from the truth as to be a joke. Guyanese women registered and went to the polls in large numbers as the 1953 elections show. It might be said that women voters have been the most stable and vigorous in casting their votes at subsequent elections.