

Address by Janet Jagan

I take great pleasure in welcoming all of you, guests and delegates, to the opening of the 14th Triennial Congress of the Women's Progressive Organisation and the celebration of its 50th year as the major women's organisation in Guyana.

We have had a long history. Our role has been many faceted. We are the official women's arm of the People's Progressive Party and as such, we have given valuable, steady and strong support to our Party in all its endeavours. We have been an active wing of the independence movement and it is to our credit, that this movement had large support from women.

We have stood by our Party in the most difficult periods of struggle for justice and freedom. During the dark years of one Party rule, our women never gave up our goal of restoring democracy and kept the struggle alive, through thick and thin.

On our day of victory in 1992, we were proud to have achieved the goal of restoring democracy and providing our late Leader Cheddi Jagan with his rightful place as President – the first democratically elected President of Guyana.

We could not celebrate, because if we had, we knew we would exacerbate the fragile situation wherein we were challenged by a party that could not accept defeat. In fact, at no election since, have we been permitted to celebrate our victories, a result of our hard work, due to the behaviour of the losers. And yet they have accused us of "triumphant" behaviour.

As the predominate women's organisation from the first days of our founding we have established that our aim is to achieve the equality of women, so that all women can live on equal terms and enjoy all the rights and privileges accorded by law and custom to men. To achieve this, we realised that we had to make women aware of their rights and also to prepare them for the future. That meant concentration on education as the vehicle for women to move forward and take their rightful place in society.

In the early days of our existence, we urged families to send their girl children to school, as a great many did not even obtain primary education due to the practice of keeping girl children out of school to take care of their younger siblings. We also urged parents to send their girl children to high school and through the years, the message was heard.

Today, there is no gender problem in relation to attendance in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Guyanese women have discovered the road to advancement and that is through education.

The concept of women's rights and women's equality has pervaded our society. Of course, there remain many problems, but these are being faced with resolution and intelligence.

The WPO has given vibrant leadership in these struggles and what exists now in women's awareness of their rights can be attributed to the fifty years of relentless struggle and education. It is about time for the whole of our society to recognise these achievements.

As we move further into this 21st century, women in Guyana and throughout the world will continue to march forward to full equality and the recognition of the need for their well being, their right to be in the meaningful decision making bodies which include Parliament and the higher echelons of government.

In many countries, women have not made this progress that others have achieved and this is largely due to poverty, war, displacement, poor education and the spread of devastating diseases like HIV/AIDS. It was for this reason that our late President Cheddi Jagan brought forward his concept of a New Global Human Order – to reduce poverty and suffering all over the world.

In Guyana, we have to set our sights on poverty reduction and the completion of our housing and water programmes, the control of diseases, mainly HIV/AIDS, the continuing improvement of our education and health services and the security we need from crime.

This means that women must rally behind the PPP/Civic, ensure its support and help fulfil its aims and manifesto. It means that the WPO must grow stronger, our groups meet and function and that we continue our educational work and our struggles to end inequality and injustice in our society. We must continue to make women aware of their rights and their potentials and help our younger women move up the ladder to attain their rightful place in society.

To all those, past and present, who have made their contribution to Guyana's women I say – thanks for a job well done!