

Becoming Red Thread Women: Alternative Visions of Gendered Politics in Post-independence Guyana

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ABSTRACT *This essay argues that the rise of Guyana's Red Thread Women's Development Organisation in the mid-1980s was precipitated by the establishment of a hegemonic political culture through the regime of President Forbes Burnham. Utilizing both Aldon Morris's (1992, 2001) notion of 'oppositional consciousness' and Raka Ray's (1999) typology of 'political fields' the author finds that the founding members of Red Thread were engaged in a struggle to redefine the political culture in Guyana. Through its mobilization of women across the divides of race/ethnicity, class, religion, and geography, Red Thread was a key site for rethinking the nature of the political structure for women's politics and women's empowerment. The essay places the emergence of Red Thread within a critical review of Guyanese women's mobilization and organization in trade union movements and women's auxiliaries to established political parties through the Colonial and post-Colonial eras.*

KEY WORDS: Women's activism/movements, grassroots women – Caribbean, middle-class women – Caribbean, East Indian women – Caribbean, Afro-Caribbean women, Guyana politics

The socio-political history of Guyana has been the subject of much analysis, both by researchers and political theorists outside of Guyana and by those involved in the struggle towards democracy on the ground. While a fair amount of attention has been paid to the illegitimacy of the Forbes Burnham regime in the post-colonial era (roughly 1966–86) and the seemingly entrenched racial/ethnic antagonisms between the country's two most populous groups, namely Africans and East Indian¹ Guyanese, there have been fewer studies that identify and systematically examine the impact of the era on women's political and economic lives or attempts by women to develop gendered visions of political and social change.²

In this essay, I explore the circumstances surrounding the formation of Red Thread Women's Development Organisation in the 1980s. I do so from the vantage point of two groups of women: the 'resource' women who founded the group, and the 'community' women organized within it. The use of the terms 'resource' and 'community' arose out of

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the relationships between these two groups of women. The founding women were providers of resources (primarily money, knowledge, and information) for the poor and working-class women in the communities of Guyana. I argue that by forming Red Thread the resource and community women were central actors in the shifting political culture of Guyana. That is, Red Thread was active in redefining the acceptable and legitimate ways of doing politics (Ray, 1999). Articulating Red Thread as an autonomous women's organization allowed for a reconceptualization of women's political agency within a male-dominated and racially polarized political culture. Being actors within Red Thread also served to increase the women's sense of political and social power and efficacy within their communities and families.

Red Thread was founded in 1986 by a group of Guyanese political activists who were interested in creating a way in which community or 'grassroots' women could learn a skill or tap into a skill that they already had, make and market a product, and generate income for the participants. The name Red Thread originates in their making and marketing of embroidered fabrics for use on pillowcases, wall hangings and specialty greeting cards. During the more than fifteen years of the group's existence, it has at various times included several components: a research team, a printing press, an education team, and community groups involved in several small-scale enterprises.

In addition to Red Thread organizing women within the 'women-and-development' model – that is to encourage and facilitate poor women's economic empowerment—it should also be understood as an alternative to the political culture and the mobilization of women seen in Guyana and throughout the Caribbean. Women's organizations in the region had been linked primarily to political parties, often serving as arms of those parties rather than autonomous entities. Women in the region had been more likely to organize on the basis of economic need and in relation to their roles as workers (Bolles, 1996) or primary caretakers (Chaney & Garcia Castro, 1991; Mohammed & Perkins, 2000), engaging less in challenges based on what Molyneux (1986) refers to as strategic gender interests. Such interests serve to reconfigure the social and political position of women within both the public and private spheres. Red Thread, however, articulated a multi-leveled agenda. Within this agenda attempts were made to raise women's consciousness; make links across difference (race/ethnicity,³ class/status); increase women's access to earnings and education; improve community access to running water and food; to (re)value women's daily labor and their roles as caretakers and providers; and to challenge the prevailing male-centered political culture; all within a critique of global capitalism.

The founders of Red Thread – Andaiye, Karen de Souza, Jocelyn Dow, Bonita Harris, Diana Matthews, Danuta Radzik, and Vanda Radzik – were seven, largely middle-class, political activists of African, European, and mixed descent.⁴ With the exception of businesswoman Jocelyn Dow, the founding members of the organization were activists within the Working People's Alliance (WPA) and had been involved in various protests against the hegemonic regime of President Forbes Burnham. They were active in struggles to establish viable trade unions, in the calls for free and fair elections, against the violent repression of members/activists in oppositional political parties, and for the freedom of the press and speech. Several of them, particularly Andaiye, Bonita Harris, and Diana Matthews, were engaged in the women's movement – nationally, regionally, and internationally and linked their struggles to those of black and brown peoples throughout the world. At the same time, however, they were cognizant of the need to act locally to engender appropriate social and political change.

The resource women began to mobilize community women in protests against the food shortages resulting, in part, from the government's attempt to comply with the structural adjustment mandates of the International Monetary Fund. Their decision to start Red Thread was a response to the narrowing of women's choices (politically, socially, and economically) within Burnham's increasingly authoritarian regime. They also articulated a desire to mobilize women across the divides of race/ethnicity, class/status, and geography (urban/rural) which plagued Guyana's national political culture (Red Thread, 1994).

The UN Decade for Women's (1975–85) emphasis on 'Third World' women's economic development opened up space and provided resources for the resource and community women to come together (Pietilä & Vickers, 1994). African, East Indian, and Amerindian women of Guyana's rural and semi-rural communities pushed the resource women to develop an organization that paid attention to their needs as poor and working-class women. Hundreds of community women were mobilized in the early years of the organization (Peacocke, 1995). Drawing on funding from international aid agencies, the resource women established Red Thread groups throughout the country.

Methods and Theoretical Frameworks

This article is based on semi-structured, in-depth life history interviews I conducted with the women of Red Thread in 1994 and 1996. I interviewed six of the resource women⁵ still residing in Guyana and seventeen of the community women⁶ who were still active in the organization at that time. The interviews, which ranged from one to three hours, were undertaken either in the women's homes or in the flat of resource woman Karen de Souza, which served as the primary Red Thread meeting space. In the life histories I focused on gathering their recollections of pivotal moments which led either directly or indirectly to their becoming Red Thread women. In addition to the life histories, I examined documents archived by Red Thread and the WPA—internal memos and communications and articles that appeared in the alternative and underground press—as well as published and unpublished critical historical texts. (See the References for a list of the primary and secondary materials consulted.)

As such, I collected several types of information. By asking the women to reflect on the periods before they became active Red Thread members, I was interested in how their ideas about self, women, and politics shifted over time. This allows for some exploration of the internal processes of becoming Red Thread women. In addition, in close readings of the histories of the era – documented in the written accounts and in the women's memories – I am able to explore how the women interacted with and ultimately came to shape the macro socio-political field.

In thinking through their narratives and other documents, I draw from two theoretical frameworks to help us understand the dynamics of Red Thread. First, as a student of social movement scholarship, I am particularly interested in how Red Thread incubated an oppositional political consciousness amongst its members (Sandoval, 1991; Morris, 1992; Mansbridge, 2001a, b; Morris & Braine, 2001). Morris specifies two types of political consciousness, namely hegemonic and oppositional. In a system of human domination it is possible, he argues, to conceptualize the 'political consciousness of dominant groups who maintain systems of domination from which they extract group privilege as hegemonic consciousness' (Morris, 1992, p. 363). On the other end, he continues, 'oppositional

consciousness is that set of insurgent ideas and beliefs constructed and developed by an oppressed group for the purpose of guiding its struggle to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination' (Morris, 1992, p. 363). In this work, I specify the development of this oppositional consciousness amongst the women of Red Thread as originating from their mobilization within the organization, the prevailing political culture, and their location within the socio-political terrain of Guyana. Significantly, the differences in their life histories (particularly along the lines of class/status) also shaped the form of each woman's shifting political consciousness.

In addition to identifying the women's shift in political consciousness, this essay also explores the way in which contestation of the hegemonic political culture prevailing in Guyana in the post-colonial era precipitated the formation of Red Thread. Here, I draw on Raka Ray's (1999) typology of political fields in her analysis of women's movements in India. A political field, she states, 'can be thought of as a structured, unequal, and socially constructed environment *within* which organizations are embedded and *to* which organizations and activists constantly respond' (Ray, 1999, p. 6, emphasis in original). She argues that there are four types: fragmented, segmented, pluralist, and hegemonic. Each type is marked by variations in the nature of the political culture (heterogeneous or homogeneous) and the degree of political power (dispersed or concentrated).⁷ She states:

A field that has both a homogeneous political culture and a concentration of power can be thought of as hegemonic. That is, its reach is more powerful, is more monolithic and less tolerant of diversity and the dominant groups within it are more dominating. [...] A field that has a more heterogeneous culture and dispersion of power can be thought of as fragmented. [...] This means that the nature of dominance in the field is tenuous and always partial, and a multiplicity of organizations and ideologies can exist. [...] A field with multiple cultures, on the one hand, and a concentration of power, on the other, can be thought of as segmented. [...] A field with no dominant group but a homogeneous political culture can be thought of as pluralist. That is, within it, organizations of more or less equal power coexist, although all share the same political culture, the same understanding of how politics is done. (Ray, 1999, pp. 10–11)

Ray's typology is useful in contextualizing the political culture in Guyana and the political field within which Red Thread was organized. Though political power resided in the hands of one political party and its leader – the People's National Congress (PNC) and Forbes Burnham – there were many examples of oppositional political parties and political cultures operating within the country (most notably the WPA and the People's Progressive Party (PPP)). As a system, then, the political field of 1980s Guyana was segmented: that is the political culture was heterogeneous but political power was concentrated at the level of the state and in the hands of one party. Given this, I am arguing that Red Thread and the other oppositional organizations with which it has a shared history were working to impact and significantly alter the prevailing political culture. These oppositional groups were pushing, I contend, for a more fragmented political culture where a multiplicity of organizations and ideologies might coexist. Red Thread was engaged specifically in forcing a shift in how the political culture was gendered.

The way that gender operated within the political culture paralleled dynamics within the national political culture. Historically, the majority of women's organizations were linked

to the political parties operating within the country. Their roles within the political culture were to serve as women's welfare-type organizations and, in times of elections and other national political activities, in support of their party's platform. In the post-colonial era, political parties have been racially divided. That is, African Guyanese and East Indian Guyanese are affiliated with and control separate parties. Since women's groups were identified as arms of the established political parties, they too were divided by race/ethnicity. Further, with the rise of Burnham as an authoritarian figure in the 1980s, very little bipartisan, state-sponsored or independent mobilization of women survived. However, the formation of Red Thread as a women's *development* organization not linked to a political party was crucial in making possible an arena, outside mass party politics, in which women might engage the full range of women's interests (Collins, 1990; Kuumba, 2001; Mohanty, 1991; Molyneux, 1986; Waylen, 1992, 1993). Consequently, Red Thread was engaged in a direct challenge to the prevailing political culture by its positing a different political field for gendered politics – that of an autonomous women's organization devoted to women's economic, social, and political empowerment.

Because understanding the context within which Red Thread was established is imperative, the next three sections of this article describe the evolution of political parties in the country, the organization of racialized and gendered identities, and the resultant political culture. Although the post-independence period (post-1966) is the focus of the analysis, I also spend some time exploring pre-independence (*c.*1946) politics as it leads up to and shapes the contemporary era. I draw upon primary and secondary historical documents as well as the narratives of the Red Thread women to chart this history. Then, in the next two sections, we turn our attention more fully to the organization of Red Thread. And, in the final analysis, I think through the implications of Red Thread in the lives of the women mobilized within it and their efforts to reshape the macro-political culture of Guyana.

Gender and the Politics of Race/Ethnicity, Class, and Party in Pre-independence Guiana

Women have been active in voluntary, religious, and political associations in Guiana⁸ since its early days as a colonial outpost of the English plantocracy. In the colonial period prior to 1946 women of European descent, who were often only temporary residents, were active in charitable and service organizations providing welfare-type aid to women and girls (see Kilkenny, 1988, 1992). Their work, while providing assistance, was not geared towards restructuring the social system, the class structure, or women's place within it.

However, by 1946 two dozen women came together to discuss launching a new women's organization 'to promote [women's] economic welfare and their political and social emancipation and betterment' (Kilkenny, 1992, p. 62).⁹ (See Figure 1, which outlines Guyana's political organizations from 1946–1987.) Janet Jagan and Winifred Gaskin¹⁰ have been credited with founding the Women's Political and Economic Organisation (WPEO) in 1946 (Peake, 1993).¹¹ Although the WPEO had some successes, the organization was soon thrown into crisis over the differing political agendas of its leadership and the racial politics of an increasingly vocal African and East Indian population. The tensions within the WPEO, which eventually led to its demise in 1948, were representative of the larger political struggle in Guiana.

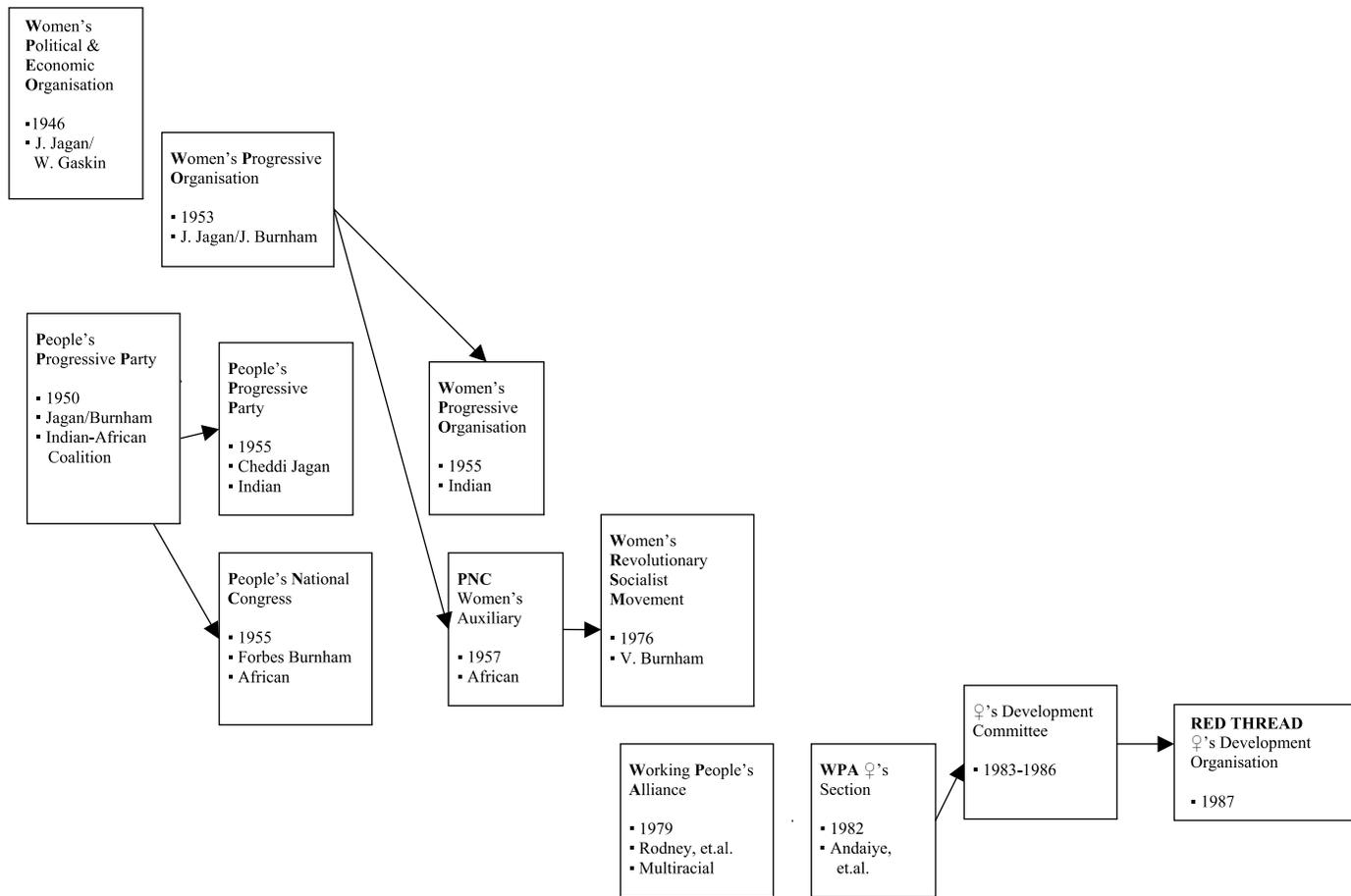


Figure 1. Political organizations, 1946–87

By 1950 African Guianese Forbes Burnham and East Indian Cheddi Jagan formed the PPP. They began immediately campaigning for the 1953 elections, the first under universal adult suffrage (Latin American Bureau, 1984). When the PPP was elected to office in 1953, three of its assembly members were women. While women were well integrated into the party, they decided to form a women's section – the Women's Progressive Organization (WPO) – which was concerned with specific conditions facing Guianese women, organizing women for and within the party, and linking up to international women's issues (Kilkenny, 1992; Peake, 1993; Reddock, 1998; Women's Progressive Organisation, 1993).

The coalition PPP was poised to lead Guiana's independence movement. It drew from a cross-section of Guiana's racial/ethnic population and actively integrated women and gender issues into its platform. However, after winning the election, the British government identified the members and leaders of the PPP as communist and began a 'campaign of repression and harassment' against Jagan, Burnham, and others (Latin American Bureau, 1984, p. 35). The PPP's Constitution was suspended just 135 days after the election. Unfortunately, this 'campaign of repression and harassment' hastened the party's split along racial/ethnic and ideological lines. There is some debate over who initiated the racial/ethnic rivalry between Jagan and Burnham. Nascimento and Burrowes (1970) argue that Burnham was a nationalist in his political ideology, but not exclusive of the East Indian population. Jagan, they report, played the 'racial card' by campaigning under the slogan *Apan Fhaat* – a Hindi phrase meaning 'vote for your own'. Most others, however, have argued that Burnham spearheaded the racial/ethnic factionalism not out of a sense of love for his people but as a way to amass power (see, in particular, the US Embassy's *Background Notes: Guyana*; and Latin American Bureau, 1984).

In any case, Burnham's new party, the PNC, won the support of the largely urban African Guianese population (which was about 39 percent of the total population). Jagan's PPP won the support of the rural East Indian Guianese majority (roughly 51 percent of the total population).¹² Similarly, gender politics split along racial/ethnic lines. Jessie Burnham and Jane Phillips-Gay left the WPO to become members of the newly formed PNC, taking most of the African Guianese section of the WPO's leadership with them (Peake, 1993). By 1957, the PNC Women's Auxiliary was formed (Woolford, 1991). The Women's Auxiliary was the backbone of the party and became especially active at election times, helping to mobilize women voters. In between elections 'it organized rallies, lectures, numerous kinds of fund raising activities and campaigned from house to house' (Jeffrey & Baber, 1986, p. 75). In addition, it served as a domestic unit, catering (literally) for the needs of the male PNC members (Peake, 1993, p. 116).

The Burnham Era: Guyana 1966–80

Guyana became a sovereign nation on 26 May 1966. Independence from Britain was granted with the proviso that a non-communist government under the leadership of Forbes Burnham would be in place. The spirit of nationalism was high in Guyana during the early years of Burnham's rule. Vanda Radzik, one of the founding members of Red Thread, had been in boarding school in Europe. She reflects on that time period:

During the early 70s in Guyana, well, Burnham was in power. And this is when he was new and in power. And there was like a surge of nationalism that I think was true. It certainly affected me and others. And a lot of us were kind of fired up with,

you know, you wanted to come and serve your country. With all those things that might sound a bit starry eyed now. But it was true. That one was inspired and motivated to come back and build the country. Build nation and that kind of thing. And that was really a flame. I mean I felt that strongly. So I came back and patriotically went to the University of Guyana.

In this context, Burnham had implemented the policy of *consultative democracy*, which involved meeting with oppositional parties, independent interest groups, religious bodies, and representatives from the trade union movement (Brotherson, 1989, 1992). But the mood of cooperation and consultation began to decline early in the first decade of his regime as Burnham nationalized all major foreign-controlled industries – primarily bauxite, sugar, and rice. By 1973, the government began to take control of the national media. By 1975, the military, the civil sector, and all government and state institutions were declared arms of the ruling party within the doctrine of *paramountcy of the party* articulated in the Declaration of Sophia. Again, Vanda Radzik remembers:

I was at the university for two years and then things began to get repressive in Guyana. They put in this National Service condition and a lot of that entailed military service. Kind of like given down in the Declaration of Sophia – which was really the Paramountcy of the Party policy. It was all this kind of rhetoric from God knows which arc it emerged. So a few of us took a stand against this. What we proposed, instead, was that you could do a National Service or development project of your choice. What we said is that what you have here are students, educated in English. And what we should do is spend a year working in the schools in the interior or on the coast. And dedicate a year working with young teachers and with students and building schools. And that would be our contribution. University is free and we understood that there was a need, you had to serve your country. We were all passionate nationalists. It was a very wonderful proposal. But it was rejected out of hand.

The PNC had its own ideas about how and in what ways the Guyanese people would be integrated into its nationalist agenda. Women did not go unnoticed. The Women's Auxiliary of the PNC had been relatively inactive, outside election times, between 1964 and 1976 (Peake, 1993). But in 1976 the Women's Auxiliary was transformed into the Women's Revolutionary Socialist Movement (WRSM) and was led by Viola Burnham, the wife of Forbes Burnham. Within the ethos of *paramountcy of the party* the WRSM, an armed unit of the Co-operative Republic, was to assist the party in its nationalist/socialist agenda (Latin American Bureau, 1984; Peake, 1993; Women's Revolutionary Socialist Movement, 1970, 1979, 1980). The WRSM Constitution (c.1976) identified three objectives of the organization, two of which are significant to list here:

- (1) The objects of the Movement [WRSM] are the same as those of the Party [PNC] contained in Rule 2 of the Constitution of the Party.
- (2) In particular, the Movement seeks to secure the achievement of its objects by mobilising, motivating and educating the women members of the Party and all Guyanese women for political and other action in support of the policies and programmes of the Party.

In fact, the primary requirement of applicants for membership in the WRSM was to be a member of the party (WRSM Constitution, pp. 2–3).

Economic Decline of Guyana and the Formation of the Working People's Alliance

Despite many seemingly progressive reforms under Burnham's nationalist government, it is also well documented that the PNC manipulated elections to keep itself in power (Manley, 1982; Latin American Bureau, 1984; Americas Watch Reports, 1985, 1990; Brotherson, 1989, 1992).¹³ Though Burnham had managed to gerrymander control of key state and civil sectors, there continued to be opposition from Jagan's PPP and the newly formed WPA. The discontent was rooted not only in dissatisfaction with the lack of personal and political liberty under the PNC regime but also by the increasingly desperate economic situation in Guyana. A plummet in the prices of Guyana's key export commodities (sugar, rice, alumina, and bauxite) in the world market illuminated the flaws in the PNC's economic policies and facilitated the country's sharp downward spiral (Latin American Bureau, 1984). Massive out-migration of educated Guyanese, which had been occurring for much of the two previous decades, had begun to take its toll on the country's ability to become economically competitive (Daniels, 1995). By 1978, Guyana's national debt totaled G\$1.8 billion (Daniels, 1995). Guyana turned to the IMF and began a program of debt reduction via the elimination of government subsidies, among other things. At the same time, the PNC began to organize a referendum to allow for a new Constitution.

The WPA emerged first as a pressure group and strong force in opposition to the social, political, and economic policies of the Burnham regime. By 1979, the WPA had declared itself a multi-racial independent Marxist party (Latin American Bureau, 1984). In organizing the WPA into a formal political party, Walter Rodney, Moses Bagwhan, Eusi Kwayana, Omawale and others envisioned a democracy in which there was greater autonomy of community, higher degrees of self-government and increased economic opportunities for the working class, regardless of racial/ethnic identity. The party was built on an ideology which sought to unite the popular classes across the divides of race/ethnicity and class. Walter Rodney, an Afro-Guyanese historian, became a key figure in the ensuing struggle against the Burnham regime. His teachings and writings,¹⁴ which embodied a critical assessment of the black-bourgeoisie in Africa and the Caribbean, had thrust him into the center of intellectual and political controversy.¹⁵ Again, Red Thread resource woman Vanda Radzik reflects on the time:

And I remember once I came to town and there was this amazing meeting in Georgetown and this Walter Rodney was speaking. And that was a high point because I had never seen so many people on the street. And this man challenging all that we knew to be and just saying exactly what was needed to be said. It was fantastic. Really like an epiphany.

Rodney became a central figure in the WPA's struggle against the social, economic, and political debacle of the Burnham regime. The PNC responded to this new party with open violence that reached its peak with the assassination of Rodney on 13 June 1980.

However, in the midst of this extreme repression, Burnham's referendum was successful and a new Constitution was promulgated in 1980. This new Constitution ironically granted women equal rights and endowed the Executive Presidency with imperial powers,

establishing Burnham as ‘leader for life’ (Latin American Bureau, 1984; V. Radzik, 1996). As Burnham cemented his political power, the economy continued its downward spiral. In 1981 Guyana again negotiated with the IMF. The objective was to increase production for export and thereby reduce the balance of payment deficit (Latin American Bureau, 1984). Cuts in government spending, required by the IMF program, caused widespread food shortages and a breakdown of the public and social services sector. Blackouts occurred daily, water service was minimal, and the staples of life – sugar, rice, kerosene, and cooking oil – were increasingly difficult to find (Daniels, 1995). Like many of the women who came to the WPA during this time, Vanda Radzik was disturbed by the social and political situation in the country and vowed to do something about it:

At the time, remember, there were no social organizations. I mean it was a complete breakdown of civil society. So that if there were, for instance NGOs or social justice groups that were existing, I would have probably more gravitated to that. But there was nothing. What you had very focused was there was need for change in Guyana and Walter’s assassination was such an appalling blot on Guyana. This was the one person who publicly stood up and challenged Burnham on his own turf. You couldn’t say it was a racial-card being played. This was a young, brilliant, Black Guyanese who was saying: ‘This has to stop.’ You know? He was an inspiration to everybody. And so I decided that if I had to put my energy anywhere, it would be on behalf of what Walter Rodney attempted to do for Guyana.

‘Down with Race, Up with Food’: The Rise of Red Thread

As part of Burnham’s edict to ‘feed, clothe and house the nation’, Guyana had already adopted a national policy of import substitution in the early 1970s. Imported food items, such as wheat flour, cow’s milk, split peas, cooking oil and cheese, were severely limited and attempts to produce substitutes for these products within Guyana failed. And when the economic crisis deepened, Guyana for the third time turned to the IMF for assistance (Latin American Bureau, 1984). But the structural adjustment policies instituted in the late 1970s and early 1980s only served to increase the widespread shortages of basic foods. By mid-1982, Guyana was in the midst of a serious food crisis. Efforts by the Burnham regime to define bread as ‘imperialist food’ in order to mask the shortage of wheat flour was met with cynicism by many Guyanese (Latin American Bureau, 1984, p. 85).

In 1983, ten years after the institution of the food policy and three years after the assassination of Walter Rodney, the WPA began a multi-fronted assault against the legitimacy of the Burnham government (see Figures 2 and 3, handbills circulated by the WPA to garner support for the food struggle). The symbol of this new struggle was the failure of the food policy and the folly of nationalization that left women and children hungry, workers without jobs, and made criminals of those attempting to bring in banned food items (Daines & Seddon, 1994). Berta Roscoe, a forty-two-year-old Red Thread community woman of African and East Indian descent, remembers helping a woman who was selling black market flour:

At one time a lady was sellin’ the flour – the police they were in the district trying to take away persons with the banned foodstuff. So I took upon myself to take the flour

from the woman and help her hide the flour by puttin' it in huge plastic bags and puttin' it in our pond. And, bein' that we use to make plenty oil at the time, we had these big four gallon cans. So what we use to do, when the woman come with the flour, we just place it in the tin and leave the tin outside, like the children are playin' with them out in the yard. So we were not afraid.

The government's attempt to control the very food that people were allowed to buy and eat seemed to strike a note of discord that resonated across the Guyanese population. The banning of foodstuffs and the subsequent criminalization of the importation of certain food items were material manifestations of the contradictions inherent in a so-called co-operative socialist state run by a one-party, one-man dictatorship (Waylen, 1996; WPA, 1973–1983).

Significantly for this study, much of the discourse and praxis surrounding the food crisis centered on women – most often in their roles as housewives and caretakers of families, but also as workers and activists. The negative impact of the food crisis on families, and particularly on the health of children, was a central rallying point used to gain widespread support for the struggle. For instance, in a letter written to President Burnham by the WPA and published in *Open Word*¹⁶ on 9 May 1983, the following entreaty was made on behalf of women and children:

As the person occupying the office of the President of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, you must be aware that your government's food policy has failed. You must

appendices

**GIVE US THIS DAY
OUR DAILY BREAD**

**Join the
Signature Campaign**

HANDS OFF OUR STAPLE FOODS! RETURN OUR JOBS! GIVE US OUR RIGHTS!

We, the women of Guyana, have had enough. After four long years of lining up, often for nothing, after years of class and political discrimination, after years of racial discrimination from state shops and private shops, we are in a state of rebellion against these abuses. The non-importation of split peas, the non-importation of milk, all hit us with cruel force. But most unkind and cruel was the non-importation of flour which has upset at least 85 percent of Guyanese households. THE EATING OF BREAD MADE FROM WHEAT FLOUR IS NOW ALL BUT CRIMINAL ACTIVITY.

This brutal invasion of our homes, this brutal ordering of our lives by those who hold governmental power, is more than we can bear. WE WILL NOT PUT UP WITH IT A MOMENT LONGER.

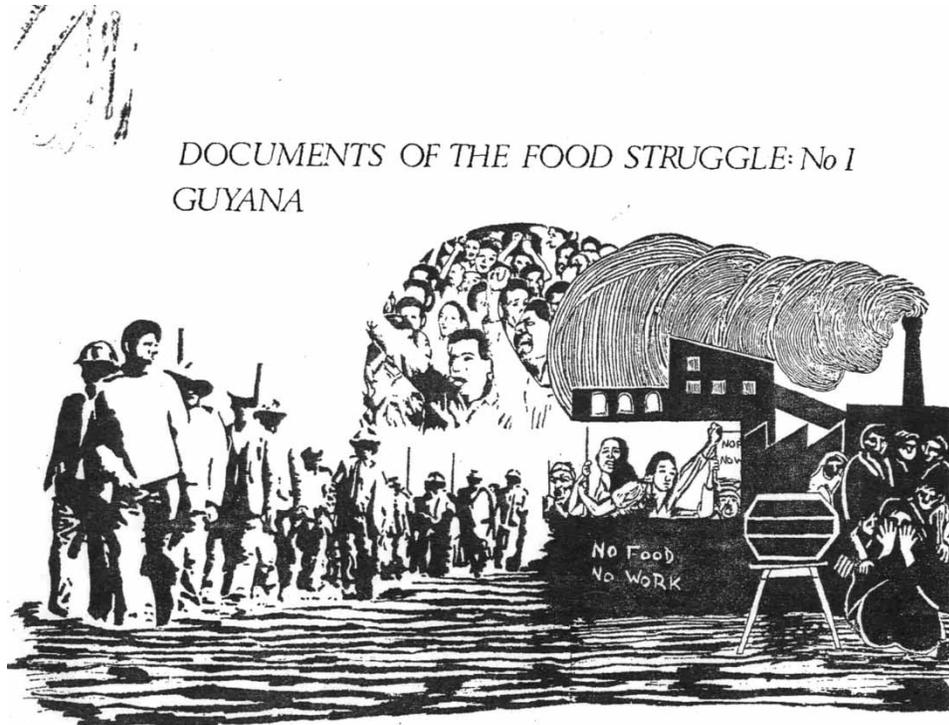
WE APPEAL TO ALL WOMEN, MEN AND CHILDREN – TO ANYONE WITH A STOMACH – TO SIGN THESE DEMANDS:

1. Start at once children's feeding centres and a programme of school meals to fight widespread hunger.
2. Guarantee the supply of flour, split peas, wholesome milk and other essential foodstuffs.
3. Retrenchment must be stopped right away. It is senseless and cruel in a country in Guyana that does not pay unemployment benefits.
4. Let the police direct their force against violent crime and not against trading and political organisations.
5. Allow peaceful marches and processions, so that we can express our feelings.

I SIGN THIS AS A PLEDGE THAT I AM PREPARED TO STRUGGLE PEACEFULLY FOR THESE DEMANDS AGAINST ANY GOVERNMENT IN OFFICE.

Number of Signatures at Aug 1, 1983 - **45,408**

Figure 2. Food struggle. Source: Working People's Alliance.



DOCUMENTS OF THE FOOD STRUGGLE: No 1
GUYANA

Figure 3. Food struggle II. Source: Working People's Alliance.

know that it is the source of extreme distress in the majority of this country's households and that the greatest burden falls on women. You know that it is the cause of rising malnutrition and the sharp rise in child deaths. Between December 1981 and November 1982, there was a 49 percent rise in child deaths in the Georgetown Public Hospital.

The WPA hoped that by focusing on the fact that 'innocent' women and children were suffering Burnham would be shamed into changing the national ban on imported food items. As 'father of the nation', they argued, one of his duties was to protect the most vulnerable segments of society. And in most cases up until this point, women (defined as housewives) who staged impromptu and planned protests while waiting in line to purchase food were treated rather gently by authorities – in other words they were not arrested and were often told to go home to their husbands.

The hands-off approach to women protesters did not apply, however, to those women who were known or rumored to be WPA activists. For instance, on 3 June 1983 the WPA's women's section organized a demonstration for International Children's Day. Out of seventy-five protesters – largely women and children, as reported by the WPA – only known activists were arrested. Andaiye, who was the WPS External Secretary, Karen de Souza, and Joan Anne Gravesande were arrested and charged with disorderly behavior and holding a procession without a permit (*Open Word*, 8 January 1983). The participation of these explicitly political women within the struggle quickly became publicized and

eventually served to transform the police response to all women involved. As the number and intensity of protests increased, even women not publicly aligned with an oppositional political party reported instances of rough handling by the police. On 1 August 1983 *Open Word* ran an editorial detailing abuse of women protesters:

Many of the arrests of women involved assaults by male police. Three women reported to Magistrate Rurchsmith in the Georgetown court of having been assaulted by police Superintendent Prince. Other women reported disrespectful and abusive behaviour by policeman at the Brickdam station. Still others on the July 21 East Coast hunger march told of being chucked and hit with rifles about the chest. One sergeant, when challenged in the presence of others about the assault, said to the victim, 'Yes, so what!'

In many ways, the food crisis galvanized the WPA women. As left-oriented activists they believed public demonstration of discontent was an effective strategy to facilitate social change. They also believed that coalitions across political parties (specifically between the WPA and the PPP) would further illuminate the illegitimacy of the Burnham regime. And so in addition to organizing working-class and poor women in public protests, they also attempted to join other middle-class political women to form a national women's movement. But the ethnic and political polarization in the society precluded their organizing as women of the WPA *and* reaching a broad-base of Guyanese women. The WPA women often discussed this issue in their meetings. Danuta Radzik, Vanda Radzik's sister who also later became a founding member of Red Thread, recalls:

There was a lot of, you know, kinda debatin' about these things. We had a women's arm in the party. And we had a few meetings. What's the point in being the arm of the political party? Because the differences and the ugliness in the society was so large that there was no common ground really. There was a lot of polarization in this society. We'd organize some activities like the pickets against the food lines. But, you know most people one way or the other, were either scared or in a lot [of] cases they were affiliated to other political parties. So, you couldn't really bring women together, right, because the nature of politics kept you apart. That really was the reality. And so we thought that if you really wanted to work on issues that were important [to] women, that you could not do it in the party.

And, indeed, in their work with women in the community, the need to organize women outside of the parameters of party politics was even more evident. Again, Danuta Radzik remembers:

[B]ecause women did not want to join the political party. What they wanted is to get food and good education and good health care and whatever basic things that they were not getting in the society. So we decided that we'd form a women's group. Come out of the party, form a women's group.

The kind of work that the WPA women believed should be done with women could not be accommodated within the existing political structures, so they had to create a 'new' type of organization.

Both the PNC and the PPP had women's auxiliary organizations headed by the wives of Jagan and Burnham. And, in one instance, the women of the PPP women's auxiliary, the WPO, joined with the WPA women in organizing poor and working-class women to protest the PNC's food policies. Red Thread resource woman Karen de Souza reflects on her impression of the WPO women in these joint demonstrations:

There were some joint demonstrations of the PPP and the WPA and I've spoken to some of the women from the WPO who were on these demonstrations. And they absolutely did not know why they were there. Except that they were called. So that was one of the big things that I had a problem with. It didn't matter whether they [the WPO women] agreed with it [the demonstration] or they understood what it's about. They just came, because Party said they must come.

Karen de Souza and the other WPA women saw this lack of an education component a serious shortcoming in the PPP and the PNC's mobilization of women from the community. In addition, they viewed the mobilization of women by the dominant political parties as being less about securing women's rights and being more about strengthening the party's position in the country.

Christine Henry, a long-term community member of Red Thread, describes her experience with the WRSM:

I was a staunch PNC member, WRSM member. Work hard in that organisation. It was a waste of time. It was a organisation that use people. At the time I use to struggle. I work self-help on buildings ... like this plaza. And they said it would bring work and when the place open they find they own people. At the cinema, work self-help everyday, when they finish they say I could get a job. When they finish, no job. And I just shrug. The organisation is for the rich. Grassroot people didn't use to benefit anything. I didn't learn anything, didn't learn anything.

Like the PNC's WRSM, the PPP's WPO included in its aims and objectives that they were 'to prepare its members through ideological and organisational training for admission to the PPP' (WPO 10th Congress 1987, included in WPO, 1993). So that while they also engaged in many grassroots development-oriented projects with Guyanese women, the bottom line remained mobilization for the political party. Red Thread resource woman Bonita Harris was critical of this two-pronged approach used by both these groups:

[T]heir projects did not do anything. The purpose of the Women's Revolutionary Socialist Movement [the PNC's women's auxiliary] was to act as a vehicle to bring women into the party. Their votes and their bodies belonged to the party. The WRSM were neither revolutionary nor socialist. They were used by the party to bring women into the party and to access funding through the development machinery.

She acknowledges, however, that there were some people in the WPA leadership who hoped that Red Thread would operate in ways similar to the women's auxiliaries of other parties – that is, to swell the membership rolls of the WPA. But Red Thread community woman Berta Roscoe reiterates the resource women's stance:

They never one day yet say this is a WPA or you must [be] for WPA or you got to do things for WPA. No. Never. They are WPA and we are not WPA. They don't mind which party you belongs to. It leave to you.

Becoming Red Thread Women

We were professionally trained and you know we could have had amazing careers. But having decided to stay [in Guyana], it was your business to make this a place where you *could* stay and have some kind of well being and future and so on. And it needs everybody to do it. This is not one person's business or one race's business, or one class' business. (V. Radzik, Red Thread resource woman)

It's helpin' other people. And if we should just sit down and say: 'Look we ain't going anywhere,' the women in this country would still live in ignorance. 'Cause the workshop that we normally present to woman really help a lot of women to know themself. So if we stay home we wouldn't be able to make this country a better place. Because we tryin' to make it a better country. (C. Henry, Red Thread community woman)

Red Thread is built on at least three arenas of interaction: between the resource women and the macro-political culture; between the community women, the macro-political culture, and their community; and between the resource and community women (Taylor, 1999). In the previous sections, I detailed the first arena of interaction and something of the second. In this section, I continue that exploration and expand into the additional arenas. What is of particular significance here are the ways in which becoming a Red Thread woman is cemented in these interactions inside and outside of the organization.

The WPA women set out to define a woman-centered praxis that would transcend not only the political boundaries of race/ethnicity but also those of class and status. Almost across the board, the WPA women tell a similar narrative of the impetus behind starting Red Thread, with an emphasis on income-generating projects. Their retelling/remembering of the story often revolves around the arrest of several poor/working-class women who were involved in a WPA organized protest against the food shortages. Andaiye tells the story best:

By 1985 I think I was WPA's Women's Secretary. And I think at that stage our notion was still on building a women's arm. But that didn't last long because we organized women from, I think East Coast communities, I can't remember, in a picket somewhere and they were jailed overnight. And we ourselves had been stupid. We had not expected them to be locked up. And certainly they had not been prepared to be locked up. So the scene in the jail was quite the drama with husbands and men and mothers and fathers and children and so on . . . and oh boy. And some took it well, but a lot didn't and so on. And basically when we went to see them a day or two after they had come out, basically what they said was 'Look, if ya'll want to march and carry picket and get lock up and beat up and so on [that's OK] [But] . . . we want money.' And that's the genesis of Red Thread.

Disillusionment with the larger political process fertilized the growth of Red Thread. The seeds were planted in 1982 when Andaiye, acting as International Secretary for the

WPA, raised money for a women's project – a project to make and market corn flour to replace the imported wheat flour banned by Burnham. The WPA women's experience with the corn flour project, coupled with the changing nature of the political scene in Guyana and the demands of the local, poor and working-class women for a more relevant approach to social change and development, led to the formation of the Women's Development Committee. They described themselves as

[A]n independent committee of Guyanese women, most of whom began their political activity in Guyana in the 1970s as members of the Working People's Alliance. Increasing focus on rural and semi-rural women led to [our] growing involvement in the issues that form part of the debate on women and development, and to the view that these issues cannot be addressed adequately by the women's arms of political parties and other organisations whose task is usually to organise women on a sectarian basis to carry out agendas that they did not set for themselves. (Red Thread application to the Arkleton Trust for the Bernard Conyers Fellowship in 1987, as quoted in Peacocke, 1995, p. 9)

The Committee served as the organizing body for the Women's Development Project. They envisioned an organization that would build upon the strengths and talents of the founding members – who were largely trained as educators, artists and writers – as well as address the expressed needs of the rural and semi-rural women they organized.

By 1986, acting as the Women's Development Committee, Andaiye, Jocelyn Dow, Bonita Harris, Diana Matthews, Karen de Souza, and Vanda and Danuta Radzik began traveling to several villages outside of Georgetown to recruit women for participation in the Women's Development Project. By the fall of that year more than 100 women from four communities (Cotton Tree, Meten-Meer-Zorg, Victoria, and Wismar) were organized in the production of embroidered pillowcases, wall-hangings, and greeting cards. Bonita Harris describes why they chose embroidery:

We had discussions around the ideas of traditional versus non-traditional skills and had decided that though doing embroidery was in one sense traditional, by using it amongst women who would not have been engaged in embroidery making – working class women – it was not actually traditional work. Although the working class women would have had exposure to sewing in school as part of the general gender bias in education practices, they would not have engaged in embroidery as a leisure time activity. Also, instead of using English patterns which were the norm – pictures of daisies, women with petticoats and parasols, cats/kittens and so on – that were taken from the British home magazines, we decided to develop patterns that were based on Guyanese reality. We developed images that were rooted in African, East Indian and Amerindian Guyanese experiences. So we took a formerly traditional skill that was practiced by middle and upper-middle class women and used it in a revolutionary manner.

The embroidery itself, formerly a craft of middle-class ladies, was redefined in this context as a revolutionary art form. It was used as a vehicle to teach the community women about the economics of production – specifically in terms of assessing the value of their labor. And though not articulated as such early on, but which later became one of the central

organizing principles, gathering women together to learn and practice embroidery created a space where women could talk and learn about each other's lives.¹⁷

In 1987, as they were planning an exhibition and sale of the women's needlework in Georgetown, the name of the organization was changed from Women's Development Project to Red Thread Women's Development Organisation. Renaming the organization Red Thread was symbolic (Cadena-Roa, 2002). Again, Bonita Harris recalls:

During the time when we were doing embroidery, threads in pretty, vibrant colors were difficult to get and most embroiders wanted red thread, not the browns or tans or light pastel colors that were more readily available. This often took us on a big search for threads. We would purchase threads from traders bringing them in from Surinam and so on. But we often ran into a big problem because the threads were often hand-dyed with non color-fast dye. And so while it started off vibrant, if the embroidered piece was washed the colors would fade. So when we were searching for a name when doing our first publication we thought about our search for something that we desired, but society doesn't offer – reminded us of where we came from. And so red had immense symbolic connotations for us.

And, as the founding women increased their involvement with the international women's and development movement, they saw their own organization as a critique of traditional development strategies. Again, Bonita Harris:

We wanted to make the point that even though we were accepting money from the poverty alleviation projects that came through after structural adjustment and the IMF we recognized that these were only band-aid solutions to impoverishment and that the projects were pacification measures. Potential funders were very uncomfortable with our chosen nomenclature because of the implications of communism. And at that time WPA was seen as a threat (that they were coming out of the tradition of the Sandinistas) – and the women of Red Thread were seen as WPA. We wanted to make it clear that we knew these agencies were the arms of the very governments that were impoverishing us; that these so-called liberalization efforts are really designed to shore-up the work of the national machinery, not really adjustment. But Red Thread took the money offered by the agencies to really do development – human development. We wanted women to understand the economy and their roles in it. We wanted them to see that much of the work that they did was unpaid and uncounted.

By 1990, their work had expanded and they were involved in several small-scale enterprises: embroidery/handicraft and textile production; a printing press specializing in the production of low-cost exercise books and textbooks for school children; production and sale of hand-made furniture woven from locally grown Nibbi straw; and a community laundry (Peacocke, 1995).

The founding women insist that they always understood the income-generating projects as the connection which served to bring the community women out of their homes. Andaiye states:

The income generation became what connected them [the community women] to come out. The East Indian women were usually allowed [by their husbands and

families] to come out [of the house] because they were getting money. [T]he African women, particularly those with a lot of children and [who were] single parents and so on, have an extra burden of work and need. So [the need for] time and space and energy and so on is what we encountered with them [the African women].

This reality is reflected in several of the community women's narratives. For instance, Christine Henry, a forty-four-year-old woman of African descent from the Wismar area, joined the organization during its formative period in 1986. She recalls:

I was sittin' at home one evenin' and a friend of mine living about two houses from me, she came and told me about this organization. She said that some people were coming up [from Georgetown] and doing training. [They] were bringing up materials and giving you to do embroidery. And they pay you and so.

Christine, who had been struggling to raise five children on her own, was eager to participate in the embroidery project because she saw it as a way to make money doing something she already enjoyed. On the other hand, Chandra Ramphal, a thirty-five-year-old East Indian woman who joined Red Thread three years later, says:

After I was at home for e-l-e-v-e-n l-o-n-g y-e-a-r-s, just lookin' after the family and being at home, one day some women from Red Thread came to invite me out to attend a workshop. We started to do embroidery. We did skills trainin'. Everybody had a piece of cloth and they would go to learn to sew who didn't know how to sew.

Chandra goes on to describe how she had to convince her husband to allow her to participate in the group, especially when they started traveling to do workshops in other communities. She remembers how the resource women encouraged her to get her husband's approval. She says:

They say: 'You have to be careful because you have a husband and you have to decide if that [traveling outside of her village with Red Thread] is what you want.' And I said to myself: I would like to be an independent woman. I've been in the house too long. So I persuaded myself to answer in that by myself. Well, they said: 'O.k., you have to discuss this with your husband.' Because they're not tellin' me to decide without my husband. And I came home and I couldn't really put it over to him. I just like givin' him a little piece and a little piece. So I groomed him into allowing me.

The founders/resource women used the funding they received through the international development agencies to develop income-generating projects to facilitate the participation of community women. But at the outset they understood the needs of the community women as both practical – the need for access to earnings – and strategic – the need for empowerment (Molyneux, 1986). The practical goals centered on increasing the economic options for the poor and working-class women: e.g. increasing the earnings and earning capacity of the participants, and developing a body of women with the organizational, managerial, technical and other skills necessary for sustaining an economic venture capable of providing a living income (Red Thread, 1994; Peacocke, 1995, p. 10). The strategic goals were linked to the practical, but were decidedly less measurable:

e.g. increasing the participants' self-knowledge and heightening their consciousness of shared conditions amongst all Guyanese women; facilitating women's involvement with paid employment that is not rooted in subservience; and acting against the pessimism among low-income women (Peacocke, 1995, pp. 10–11, Red Thread, 1994).

In addition to the income-generating projects, Red Thread organized three collective units of community women charged with 'implementing, managing, and evaluating awareness program[s] to facilitate both internal and outreach conscientisation processes' (Peacocke, 1995, p. 56). Organizing the women into these units was a response to some community women's desire for more structure, leadership opportunities, and enhanced communication amongst the local women. Community woman Christine Henry recalls a conversation she had early on with some of the resource women:

I could remember it was Jocelyn, Andaiye, Vanda and one other person that came [to Wismar]. And one day I sit down and I told them when they came, I said: 'Man, I don't like how this thing really goin'. I think we need to get organise.' So when they left for Georgetown, we sat down and we discussed the whole issue.

Christine and the other women in her community decided to formalize their work with Red Thread. 'We just started not only lookin' at the material that they bring and train', Christine describes, 'but we start discussin' how we could develop ourself as women in this group.'

Eventually the three units were developed with representatives from each community. There was a workshop team focused on strengthening internal communication amongst the women and developing leadership skills; a health team which organized and facilitated community health projects, particularly related to women's health; and a team of women trained to do social science research (questionnaire preparation, distribution and evaluation of surveys) and grant-writing. Indeed, it is this work that continues and thrives even as each of the income-generating projects has fallen short of becoming economically viable.

In 1990 three community women from the workshop team traveled to Jamaica to engage in a six-week training session with Sistren Theatre Collective.¹⁸ With Sistren they learned how to use popular theater as an educational tool to open up dialogue amongst women and men in the communities around issues affecting their lives. The Red Thread community women wrote two plays, *Everybody's Business* and *A Woman's Place*, to shed light on topics like domestic violence and women's roles in society. Thirty-five-year-old East Indian Lisa Sadeek reflects on how her own sense of self was altered both by her travels as a Red Thread woman and her involvement in performing:

In Red Thread I got to see a lot of places and learn a lot of things, a lot of things. Because, just imagine [without my] comin' out of shyness, I could never have got up on the stage and act in no kinda play. And in *Everybody's Business*, I acted a role where the girl like to dress in them short clothes and she like jewels. And the other part [of this role] is like . . . I have this problem and I kinda alcoholic. That was my part. Before Red Thread, you couldn't tell me to go up on stage and do that, not me.

Lisa Sadeek, who traveled to Jamaica to train with Sistren and to Canada to volunteer with a domestic abuse center, has been a member of Red Thread since 1988. Another long-term member, forty-four-year-old Joan Ball adapted the play *A Woman's Place* for her church:

We also have Women's Ministry in the church – where women meet and discuss issues that is affectin' us as women in the church. So we take the workshop let's say, for instance, *A Woman's Place*. Right? And I looked at that workshop and turned it into, *A Woman's Place in the Church*. Right? Because you know most times to be an elder it would be a man. And so were discussing the thing whether a woman should be an elder. We look at the workshop in terms of a woman's place in the church and the response was very good.

And, in 1996, as I collected the life histories of the Red Thread women, they were preparing to perform the play on the radio.

The community women, while diverse in terms of ethnic identity, geographic location, age, and marital status, share a belief that Red Thread afforded them the opportunity to expand their worlds beyond the confines of home and village and in some cases beyond the boundaries of Guyana's borders. While it is certainly true that these women have come into a greater sense of themselves as a result of being involved with Red Thread, it is also important to understand them as active participants in their own processes of development/identity formation – both before Red Thread and during their years of involvement. For instance, when I asked twenty-six-year-old community woman Donna Carter about how Red Thread had changed her life, she answered:

But, before I join it [Red Thread] and now – the same person I be, you know. Yeah, because I still got a strong inner part, tell myself that I want this thing [and] it's what I want.

Donna left secondary school early to begin commercial training but she never completed it and ended up staying home to help her mother in the house. She recalls never being satisfied with this:

I did help [my mother] like clean the house. But then I didn't really looking for 'da. So I come out on the road me'self. I used to get away from them. They used to beat. I go away to parties, go here, go there. And I develop this own wanting in me, you know.

Conclusions

Forming Red Thread was a response to both the resource and community women's disillusionment with the racialized politics, the lack of economic and social opportunities for women, and the narrow political culture of Guyana. These women developed an oppositional consciousness (Morris, 1992; Mansbridge, 2001a, b; Morris & Braine, 2001) as a result of their interactions within the macro-political culture, with each other, and within their families and communities. As a result, they saw becoming Red Thread women as a strategy to improve their individual lives and women's lives more broadly. However, as the women came together across the divides of race/ethnicity and class/status, their resultant oppositional consciousness varied along these axes.

The WPA women, those who became resource women within Red Thread, wanted to move beyond rhetoric to action. They wanted to find ways to circumvent the political

culture of Guyana to improve the material conditions of women's lives. At the same time, they wanted to engage in revolutionary education with women at the community level in order to engender an understanding amongst them of the links between local, national, and international politics and their everyday lives. And, most importantly, they needed to do this education with women across the lines of race/ethnicity, geography, and class/status to facilitate a breakdown of the divides that had served to stall the formation of a national women's organization. The founding members of Red Thread were organizing women within the political field of Guyana (Ray, 1999). They were responding to what they viewed as the limiting nature of the political party structure for women's politics and women's empowerment. They were attempting to move outside of that structure, to organize women autonomously; but their desire was still to influence, impact, and even subvert the larger political field, in addition to positively impacting the lived experiences of community women.

The community women, on the other hand, were not interested in becoming 'political' activists. They did not want to join or publicly support the WPA or engage in public protests, marches, and pickets. These women needed to find practical ways to combat the result of party politics and national/global economic restructuring gone awry in their communities (Daines & Seddon, 1994). They needed to find practical ways to subsidize their family's income while remaining primary caregivers. In their life histories we get a sense of how their lived experiences prepared them to recognize Red Thread as a way to grab hold of something for which they had been searching. At the most fundamental level, the search was and continues to be for economic stability. But it is not and has never been as simple as that. The search is also for a widening of choices – of life options; for a greater sense of entitlement; for a redefinition of themselves as more than housewives while at the same time seeking recognition of the myriad ways in which 'housewife' does not begin to capture what they actually do in their homes; for more arenas to express their creativity; and to come together as women.

The founding women of Red Thread utilized the opening made for them by the UN Decade for Women to gather external resources to organize women within Guyana outside of the limits of the racially bifurcated and hegemonic political structure/culture. Although they were clear about not organizing the community women in support of their political organization (WPA), they themselves remained connected to the WPA at least ideologically. As they worked with community women, they continued to be critical of the nature of two-party politics and of the racial/ethnic divide. The conversations that they had with each other and in the company of the community women served to contextualize and deepen their critique of the society. They actively sustained a counter-hegemonic critique of Guyanese politics and fostered the development of an interactional oppositional consciousness (Morris, 1992) amongst themselves and the community women. By organizing women to seek a sustainable income without resorting to graft and favors from party connections, they exposed the illegitimacy of the Burnham regime and politics as usual. It is no surprise, then, that the resource women found maintaining steady employment for themselves within Guyana difficult. Their activism within the WPA served to close doors of economic opportunities within the country.¹⁹ Even in this context, the resource women remained open, honest, and candid with the community women about their own struggles for survival – thereby illuminating their shared identities as women across race/ethnicity, class and status. Both groups of women were proactive in establishing and encouraging a non-hierarchical democratic organization, both

ideologically and in practice. The community women were involved in every aspect of Red Thread – traveling outside of the country to represent Red Thread in various contexts, assisting in writing grant proposals to solicit funding, organizing workshops for other community members, etc.²⁰

The Red Thread resource and community women joined together to create an organization that would attempt to meet their practical gender interests while also troubling the ideology surrounding women's place in society and in the political culture. In these ways, Red Thread served as a force to reconfigure women's relationship to mainstream and oppositional political organizations and to carve out a space for a redefined political field in the larger political culture – one that is more heterogeneous with a greater dispersion of power. Though the numbers of women engaged in Red Thread activities has dwindled considerably in the post-1980s period, Red Thread remains a significant voice nationally, regionally, and internationally on women's issues.²¹

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Notes

1. 'East Indian' is a racial/ethnic category used to describe the descendants of indentured servants brought to Guyana from various parts of the Asian sub-continent known loosely as India to work in agriculture after the abolition of slavery in 1834. The term 'East Indian' refers to peoples with roots in north or south India and was historically used by Europeans to differentiate from 'West Indian' (Allsopp, 1996). I use East Indian and Indian interchangeably.
2. Exceptions to this are the studies done by Peake & Trotz (1999), Peake (1993), Kilkenny (1988, 1992) and Woolford (1991).
3. The use of racial/ethnic is borrowed from Williams' work on Guyanese cultural politics – *Stains on My Name, War in My Veins: Guyana and the Politics of Cultural Struggle* (1991). She argues that by using a slash, we avoid conflating race and ethnicity into one system. The two have separate and distinct meanings, but are interrelated in the dominant discourse in such a way that talking about one without the other is misleading, but conflating one onto the other is a failure to destabilize the hegemonic system (see Williams, 1991, pp. 152–154).
4. Guyana, sometimes referred to as 'the land of six peoples', is populated by people of East Indian (Indian), African, Portuguese, Amerindian (Indigenous), Chinese, and Anglo-European descent. In addition to these racial/ethnic categories, Williams (1991) identifies at least seven additional named and recognized racial mixtures. Politics in Guyana has revolved largely, however, around the two dominant populations: Africans and East Indians.
5. Resource women: Andaiye (African), Karen de Souza ('mixed' of African descent), Jocelyn Dow ('mixed' of African descent), Bonita Harris (African), Danuta Radzik ('mixed' of Portuguese descent), and Vanda Radzik ('mixed' of Portuguese descent).
6. Community women: Faye Abrahams ('mixed' of African and East Indian descent), Marcy Ball (African), Joan Ball (African), Laraine Benjamin ('mixed' of Indian and African descent), Maxine Cadogan (African), Donna Carter ('dougla' – 'mixed' of African and East Indian descent), Doreen Charles ('mixed'), Carolyn Croal (African), Sharon Cummins ('mixed' of African and East Indian descent), Christine Henry (African),

Jennifer Major (African), Chandra Ramphal (East Indian), Berta Roscoe ('dougla' – 'mixed' of African and East Indian descent), Lisa Sadeek (East Indian), Dorothy Slater (African), Wendy Wellington ('mixed' of African and East Indian descent), and Michelle Williams (African). (Some of the 'community' women's names have been changed at their request.)

7. Ray develops the following table (Ray, 1999, p. 11):

Table 1

POWER	CULTURE		
	Dispersed Concentrated	Heterogeneous Fragmented Segmented	Homogenous Pluralist Hegemonic

8. As is standard practice, I will refer to the Co-Operative Republic of Guyana as Guyana when referring to events in the post-independence era (1966–present). I will use British Guiana, or simply Guiana, when referring to the colonial period prior to 1966.
9. Woolford (1991, p. 13) states that it 'has been suggested that the stimulus for its formation came from the announcement that Audrey Jeffers, a social worker in Trinidad, had run for a seat in the Trinidadian Legislative Council'.
10. Winifred Gaskin was a Guianese secondary school teacher who later worked with the Bureau of Publicity and Information (see Kilkenny, 1988). It is unclear what Mrs Gaskin's racial/ethnic identity was, but I would assume that she was of African descent.
11. See Peake (1993, pp. 113–114) for a discussion of the formation of the WPEO.
12. Within the PPP there remained a black radical element represented most notably by Sydney King (later known as Eusi Kwayana), Eric Huntley, Rory Westmaas, and Martin Carter. By the 1957 elections, however, they were expelled from the party and branded as ultra-left by Jagan (Latin American Bureau, 1984, p. 39). Upon leaving the PPP, they were nominally affiliated with the PNC but later formed a separate party – the Working People's Alliance (WPA).
13. One of the ways in which this was done was through the use of the 'overseas vote'. In 1968 a law was enacted which allowed Guyanese people living abroad the right to vote in the general election. However, many of the names on the electoral list were invalid; it is estimated that only 15 percent of those on the list were actual people (see Latin American Bureau, 1984, p. 49).
14. A History of the Guyanese Working People: 1871–1905 (London: Heinemann, 1981); The Groundings with My Brothers (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1975).
15. Kwayana (1988, p. 3) states: 'The ideas popularised by Rodney had become enough of a force in Jamaica to lead the Jamaican government to apply a special technique in suppressing what they saw as the mischief. They waited until he had left the country to attend a Black Writer's Conference in Canada and then banned him from re-entry.'
16. *Open Word* was an alternative newspaper whose editors sympathized with the Working People's Alliance.
17. Parallels can be drawn to African American women's quilting in the Southern United States (Patricia A. Turner, public talk at UC Davis, 28 February 2002).
18. The Sistren Theatre Collective was founded in 1977. Honor Ford Smith, the group's artistic director, describes the origins of the group in their volume entitled *Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women* (1987).
19. Because they had been activists within the Working People's Alliance, the resource women of Red Thread have been blocked from getting jobs within Guyana (Karen de Souza, interview). Many of the women have managed to eek out a living doing consultancy work for international aid agencies, but these jobs are usually short term.
20. A gap remained, however, between the community and resource women that proved insurmountable. The re-inscription of a hierarchical relationship between the women is partly a function of the politics of development – a degree to which dependency is built into the programs instituted (Cagan, 1999). But the class/status divides imbedded in the political culture of Guyana also shaped the relationships between the women of Red Thread (Peacocke, 1995). I explore this issue at some length in other work (Nettles, 2003).
21. In the post-1980s era, Red Thread has continued to work on women's issues in the country and internationally. Red Thread participated in the discussions surrounding a bill introduced to the Guyanese legislature in 1993 to decriminalize abortion (Haniff, n.d.; Red Thread, 1993). Individuals associated with Red Thread (primarily the resource women) have maintained a presence in the regional and international women's organizations (e.g. CARIPEDA, Third World Congress of Women, WEDO, etc.). Western and other non-Guyanese researchers interested in exploring the status and situation of women in Guyana often

turn to the Red Thread Research Team to conduct ground-level surveys (Peake & Trotz, 1999). The Red Thread Research Team has conducted activist research on various issues including: sex workers/trafficking in women, AIDs, counting women's work, and domestic violence against women. See <http://www.unitedcaribbean.com/redthread.html>; http://www.sdn.org.gy/hands/wom_surv.htm; <http://womenstrike8m.server101.com/English/GuyanaPics2002.htm> (accessed January 2006).

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