

# RED THREAD

72 Princess & Adelaide Sts., Charlestown, Georgetown.  
Tel: 592 227 7010 Fax: 592-223 6254 Email: [thread@sdpn.org.gy](mailto:thread@sdpn.org.gy)

---



## Press Statement for the Red Thread Press Conference on a Survey to Measure Women's Time use In Guyana

From: Halima Khan, Nicola Marcus and Jocelyn Bacchus, Red Thread  
Dated: Thursday December 2, 2004

The survey is the first measurement of women's time use in Guyana. It was done by and with grassroots women across race.

We are members of Red Thread who recently completed a survey of women's time use among women in several communities. A fourth woman, Chandra Persaud, worked with us on the survey. Together, we went to women living in Charlestown in the capital Georgetown; Central Mahdia, Coop Farm and Campbelltown, in Mahdia; Rising Sun, Bath Settlement, Number 40 Village and Number 41 Village in West Coast Berbice; Kara Kara and Constabulary Compound in Linden; Uitvlugt and Den Amstel on the West Coast Demerara; and Buxton, Better Hope and Annandale on the East Coast, Demerara. In some cases, for example, in Buxton and Annandale where violence was at a height, only a very few diaries could be completed. We achieved a good race/ethnic balance, with diaries completed by 37 Indo-Guyanese women; 31 Afro-Guyanese women; 14 Amerindian women; 18 Mixed women; and one Portuguese woman.

The majority of women who completed diaries said they were mainly housewives. Other occupations included self-employment in the informal sector; domestic work; teaching, security guard work; and small farming including growing food and/or raising livestock. In addition there was one each of the following: a salesperson, a bartender, a cashier, a counter clerk, a revenue collector, a hairdresser, a sex worker, and a nurse. About half the women are single mothers and/or grandmothers; the other half are women with husbands. The age range was from 17 to 70.

We were not attempting what people call a scientific study. We were pioneering a way for grassroots women to work with other grassroots women to record the details of the unwaged and low-waged work we do, which has been left out of official statistics and is not considered by those with power when they make policies. We went to women we knew or knew of from the work we've been doing as Red Thread on the coast and in the interior. Since we were not setting ourselves up to look at other women's lives and not our own, we started by recording our own time use. Each woman we contacted did between one and three days' diaries. We ended with a total of 151 days' diaries from 101 women. This task took us thirteen months, a long time not only because none of us had ever done this kind of survey before, but because no one in Guyana or as far as we know, the Caribbean, had ever done it before, and therefore there were many problems that had no previously worked-out solutions. We invented solutions for people doing time use surveys in future.

We want to thank the CIDA Gender Equality Fund and its Coordinator, Vanda Radzik, for understanding the importance of what we were trying to do and for being willing to go beyond funding what is tried and tested and safe.

The International Women Count Network (IWCN) has been involved at every stage of the time-use project – from its conception, its methodology, the design of the basic tool (the diary), right through to the collection of data. They have been supportive and trusting, expecting wonderful things from us, and assuring us that that's what they got.

In the process of doing the survey we overcame many problems. For example:

1. With some women, we had to work to build confidence in the usefulness of the exercise and/or trust in how the information would be used.
2. Sometimes we had to overcome hostility from male partners.

3. Work was sometimes increased when the women couldn't read and write.
4. Once a woman had agreed to do it, a lot of our work was waiting, for example, for a woman to finish what she was doing so she could talk to us.
5. Sometimes we had to do some of the housework so the women could do the diaries.
6. Part of the survey work was overcoming our own embarrassment about invading people's privacy.
7. Sometimes the work was overcoming racial fears, including our own.
8. Recording one woman's time use could take from two days to two weeks. (Our written report will detail why this is.)
9. To record the time use of women in the interior we had to travel long distances in dangerous conditions.

We had many good moments as well, for example, one 70-year-old woman in Charlestown initially said she wouldn't do a diary because she wouldn't live to see any benefit from it, then decided to do it to benefit her grandchildren; these grandchildren attend Red Thread computer and literacy classes and use the library, and she herself is a member of the library and would come and sit in the reading class sometimes. She introduced us to two of her neighbours who also completed diaries. In other words, she understood that doing them was going to be useful to all of us, though she may not have known precisely how.

Once women started the diaries we began to realise how much work we do and how essential our work is. In this way the survey fulfilled its first aim: it empowered all of us doing the diaries by enabling us to participate fully in defining work as we know it and in producing information about that work which is usually hidden and even treated with contempt.

We realized that the fact that we are grassroots women living in poverty makes our caring work harder. We also saw that because women in the interior, who are mainly Amerindian, often have no access to running water or electricity, their work is hardest. We met women who have to fetch water from as far as seven miles away to do their housework. In one Amerindian community we met a single mother – a widow with five children, the oldest 8 years old and the youngest 4 months old – living in an open bottom house with what seemed to be a makeshift stage as their sleeping area and sand all around them. Caring for those children under those conditions is much harder; for one thing, since they are in the open she has to be careful that they don't wander off. They are exposed to a lot of danger since there are a lot of wild animals around.

Now that we've done the survey, we will work with the IWCN to write up and publish a detailed report and the results, then immediately use them to seek recognition for the work of all women in the statistics and policy first of all of CARICOM governments, and to urge officials to look at the implications of their policies and plans for women's time use. In the case of Guyana we will begin with the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

We are looking for funding for this publication and to organize a women's anti-racist conference where grassroots women of all races, including the women who did the time use diaries, will be our own "experts" on the connections between the over-burden of work we carry; our no access or low access to money and to affordable and reliable supplies of electricity, clean water, housing, health and education services, and transportation; the level of abuse and violence we face in the home, from people in positions of authority, and sometimes during racial conflict; and the racial conflict itself, which is at bottom a competition among groups of us who do not have anything like enough resources. We intend to continue to use time use as a basis for developing understanding and communication among women of different race/ethnic groups of what we have in common as providers of unwaged and/or low-waged caring labour, and what we are entitled to, can demand and can together win as providers of this labour, on which the survival of the whole society and economy depend.