

Red Thread: the politics of hope in Guyana

By Alissa Trotz

Abstract: Reflecting on the work of the Red Thread Women's Development Organisation in Guyana, which has over two decades' worth of experience in grassroots organising, the author explores what autonomy and connection might mean for poor women. Forging a multi-racial unity, while confronting and working through disparities in power among women, is regarded as integral to the struggle for freedom. Initiatives undertaken by Red Thread, such as a time-use survey which allowed women to define and make visible their work, are located within a wider notion of transnational solidarity and mutual support.

Keywords: grassroots organising, multiracialism, wages for housework, WPA

It is precisely in times of crisis that we must re-examine our lives and bring to that re-examination contempt for the trivial, and respect of the riskers who go forward boldly to participate in the building of a free community of valid persons.

Martin Carter, 1974

This commentary offers a reflection on the work of the Red Thread Women's Development Organisation in Guyana.¹ Red Thread is part of a long history of active resistance to authoritarianism but it extends this tradition by making women's resistance visible and making their lives and needs the starting point for confronting unequal power relations in public and private domains. As has been underlined elsewhere in this special issue, the local and regional context for any discussion of the challenges facing radical movements today includes the unmitigated effects of two decades of neoliberalisation, shored up by a bankrupt neocolonial state structure that condemns Caribbean people 'to the dormant and abused status of electoral fodder [where] every five years, they become visible and decisive in a tribal power game which concludes with their absence from any serious consultation about their future'.² In Guyana, social and economic dislocation after over two decades of structural adjustment programmes, and a divided political landscape where elections have come to resemble a 'racial census', have combined to produce a sense of despair and hopelessness, reflected at one level in the country having the highest out-migration rates in the region.

At a time when the buzzword is 'good governance', hollow gestures of inclusion have also complicated and implicated women's struggles for visibility and recognition. Gender equity and 'mainstreaming' of women's issues are offered up as good feminist practice – but a practice that is bureaucratised, neutralised and depoliticised, thus obscuring its conscription as an alibi for the entrenchment of social and economic policies that consign the majority of the region's population to permanent structural marginalisation.³ Faced with these challenges, both external and internal(ised), what does it take to refuse to submit to despair? How might different practices be nurtured and new possibilities nudged to emerge? In the current climate, a politics of hope appears both radical and risky.

Red Thread was founded in 1986 by a small group of middle-class women who were then members of a distinctive political party, the Working People's Alliance (WPA), which was led by Walter Rodney whose connection with working-class men as his point of departure is legendary. Now in its twenty-first year, there are three primary dimensions of Red Thread's work: context; autonomy; and connection. Briefly, context addresses issues of relevance and accountability and, in that sense, could be said to pertain to two questions: for whom? for what? The response is uncompromising in its determination to begin with the everyday lives and struggles of poor women and to make the articulated interests of this constituency the point of departure for setting priorities.

If Red Thread has always included and worked with grassroots women,⁴ the last decade or so has witnessed a shift to a more clearly

defined goal: 'to organise with other women, beginning at the grassroots, in a way which crosses race and other divides and enables us all to transform our conditions'. This reformulation followed members' growing involvement in and active association with the Wages for Housework campaign, which launched the Global Women's Strike (GWS) in 2000.⁵ Thus:

It was Red Thread's middle class founders who brought with/from their own politics the insistence on working with women of all races on both the coast and the interior and of connecting with other women internationally; it was the two remaining founders (not the grassroots members) who later brought the insistence that what we had to do was organize with grassroots women; but it has been the grassroots women in Red Thread who have been making the connections between their lives and the lives of other grassroots women.⁶

Autonomy has two elements. One of the earliest responses from the WPA women to the post-1983 collapse of the women's arm of the People's Revolutionary Government of Grenada was an initial caution and eventual cynicism towards organised party politics and, especially, its domination by men in ways that obscured the significant contributions of women to the anti-dictatorial struggles in Guyana. There was a real sense that a radical women's group would not only have to ensure its critical distance from partisan affiliation but, in the context of Guyana, ought not to fall prey to the racial tribalisms that continue to plague and shape the local landscape. Red Thread members and participants today come from a diverse array of political allegiances and who one votes for has never been an index of belonging or a criterion for participation.

Just as important as autonomy from both men and big 'P' politics is the recognition that women also stand in unequal relationship to each other. In this second variation, and based on the perspective of the GWS, autonomy is seen as a way, organisationally, of addressing unequal power relations among women as they are manifested locally (class, race, sexuality, age, ability, urban-rural, coastal-hinterland). This is especially important because to conceive of the race split as between Guyanese of African and Indian descent on the coast – which is the pervasive view – is itself limiting since it renders invisible the experiences of Indigenous women and men who make their homes mainly in the hinterland. Coming together autonomously as distinct sectors within the movement, in order to identify, confront and work through the disparities of power, is a prerequisite to the unity of all sectors in which everyone's interests are genuinely and openly manifested.

The final principle, connection, is closely related to autonomy. As we shall see below, it is also simultaneously local and global. In the tradition of the anti-dictatorial movement in which Walter Rodney played a leading role, Red Thread has always explicitly identified multiracialism as integral to the struggle for freedom in Guyana, insisting at the same time that it cannot replicate a narrow focus on coastal relations that privileges African and Indian Guyanese while obscuring the lives of hinterland and Indigenous communities. Connection does not, however, imply an automatic equality or solidarity. Seriously considering the question, 'how are we related to each other and what have I not understood about my situation when I didn't understand hers?', demands rigorous attention to asymmetries of power and the uncomfortable ways in which we are variously invested in relationships of difference from each other. Red Thread has had to confront difficult issues (of race, class, sexuality, ability, education), some of which have been easier to address, some of which remain unresolved, some of which have not yet been put on the table.

Working out connection, then, is neither romance nor abstraction but a process of self-discovery fuelled by the power of being autonomous. For Red Thread, the process takes social reproduction as its starting point, the caring work that women perform that is unwaged and invisible, yet central both to working-class survival and the elite having a workforce. As Barbadian novelist George Lamming notes, 'labour and the social relations experienced in the process of labour constitute the foundations of culture . . . the way we see, the way we hear, our nurtured sense of touch and smell, the whole complex of feelings which we call sensibility, is influenced by the particular features of the landscape which has been humanized by our work'.⁷ Red Thread crystallised this point with a time-use survey it conducted in 2001–2002, in which 102 women from eleven communities on the coast and in the interior completed their own diaries detailing their daily workloads. The project was significant on a number of levels: it was Red Thread's first large-scale effort led by and involving grassroots women working with each other, in which they were their own experts and subjects of their survey; it enabled women to define work and make it visible to themselves and each other; and it highlighted

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.⁸

The approach taken by the time-use exercise has marked a number of other initiatives in which grassroots women are central actors. In January 2005, heavy rainfalls combined with infrastructural failure stemming from years of neglect, to flood the country's coast, affecting some 40 per cent of the population. Hundreds of families lived in water for nearly three weeks, with many roads navigable only by boat. In March, Red Thread held a national speak-out in Georgetown, attended by over 250 women from both urban and rural communities. Based on the women's testimonies, an open letter adopted by the speak-out made a number of demands ranging from the cancellation of individual debts for goods and equipment damaged by floodwaters to a full and transparent audit of all relief monies raised locally and internationally and channelled through public and private agencies. It emphasised how women as caregivers and producers were not only affected by the disruption, disease and death caused by the flood but also central in responses to the crisis.⁹ Red Thread's involvement in relief work and the speak-out has increased its visibility in many of the affected villages and has led to a loose network of women who, with the core group, have since become variously involved in other kinds of public actions.

One of these is the challenge to the government's initial proposal to introduce a Value Added Tax in 2007 in which basic food items and household goods were non-exempt (significantly, certain imported and non-essential foods were on the original list of exemptions). Following a letter to the media from Eileen Cox from the Consumer Association raising questions about the impact on poor households, Red Thread members wrote several letters to the press, itemising the likely effects of the proposed VAT on the daily domestic budget of grassroots women (compared with the basket of goods and shopping practices of middle-class and rich households) and raising pointed questions about the lack of consultation and the absence of key constituencies from the table when decisions about the implementation and burden of the tax were made. Although other individuals and a few organisations – unions, one opposition party – added their voices to the disquiet, there was no groundswell of popular opposition, a signal of the challenges ahead in any effort to democratise the relationship between those who are elected into office and the grassroots communities they claim to represent. The government eventually backed down a few weeks before the VAT went into effect on 1 January

2007, zero-rating most of the basic food items and other goods such as schoolbooks and medicine, which are crucial items in the tight budgets of working-class women's shopping. As women continued to complain that businesses were passing the costs to consumers, Red Thread started to track the longitudinal shifts in prices of basic necessities. Like the time-use survey, this involves women from various communities meeting to discuss and agree on the charts that will be filled out over a period of months, based on individual familial requirements. The VAT campaign, then, hopes to blur the boundary between the surveyor and the surveyed, beginning with the capacity and resourcefulness of grassroots women and underscoring what a collective understanding of the process might entail.

More broadly than a single initiative, and following the most recent national elections in September 2006, Red Thread embarked on a political report card, in which women collectively go through party manifestos and identify those initiatives that address the grassroots. In between elections, the extent to which these commitments are acted upon will be a matter for public and critical debate. This is an effort to refuse bureaucratic understandings of good governance, by shifting priorities away from neoliberal fiscal notions and impositions posing as responsibility (which obscure the structural violence such an emphasis necessitates) and by insisting on public accountability, not to the international financial community, but rather to the constituencies which state power claims to represent. In a country held hostage by racial politicking every five years, actively engaging the *substance* of electoral promises offers perhaps the most explicit challenge to the amnesia that seems to feed an uneasy and increasingly fragile peace in five-year intervals. It also suggests the faintest hope that keeping the issues continuously on the public radar will make it harder for them to be dislodged by racialised loyalties during elections, at the very least for the grassroots women actively involved.

Finally, it is important to locate Red Thread in a wider nexus of anti-globalisation efforts. This is not a simplistic or tokenistic notion of sisterly solidarity; rather, as national co-ordinator for the GWS, Red Thread is an active node in a transnational, anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist and anti-war network. The principles of autonomy and internationalism that underpin the GWS enable each site to articulate and prioritise the specific issues it faces. In Guyana, the annual strike action in March (to mark International Women's Day) has taken on a unifying role, foregrounding such issues as the 2005 flood, racial polarisation and urban/rural/hinterland divisions. At the same time, these are not addressed in isolation. The time-use survey, for instance, was developed and carried out in close consultation with grassroots experts in the International Women Count Network (close associates of the GWS) but it has never lost sight of the particular

kinds of questions needed to uncover the realities of grassroots women's lives in Guyana and, especially, how much work women are having to do in each specific sector. As abstract notions of value, time and labour became concrete through the (self-involvement of) measuring work, women came in different ways to see the practical relevance of the strike's mandate, for society to 'invest in caring not killing' and to acknowledge the imperative to act across differences locally as well as transnationally.

Through the network, women also support struggles elsewhere, although – in a climate in which NGO monies are rarely provided for long-term institutional support or 'projects' that cannot demonstrate 'deliverables' that are immediate and generally acceptable to funders – travelling to learn about and from each other, even locally, is impeded by inadequate access to funding:

The biggest obstacles we face . . . are the sense of isolation and defeat pervasive in Guyana and a perennial shortage of money to do the organizing work which we see as desperately needed and which we have made ourselves increasingly skilled in doing . . . while we have a wealth of knowledge from experiences, we have not had the chance to exchange experiences with grassroots women engaged in similar and similarly difficult struggles in other countries. Few women in Red Thread have.¹⁰

In 2006, after an informal fundraising appeal, five Red Thread members attended the World Social Forum in Caracas and remained to meet grassroots Venezuelan women as well as co-ordinating groups of the GWS from eight other countries (including India, Uganda and Indigenous United States). Since returning, they have, with assistance from strike colleagues overseas, prepared an exhibit of the work being done in Venezuela and elsewhere. They also organised a meeting attended by grassroots women to mark the seventh annual global strike, producing a statement that called on all women to come together to refuse violence and drawing inspiration from women's efforts across the Global South. The title of the statement, *One heart, one fist, one voice*, was taken from an anti-free trade movement led by Indigenous people in Ecuador.

The visit to Venezuela has really strengthened us. The fact that grassroots people, especially women, could organize together and achieve so many victories, taking up leadership and committing themselves to working to better their living conditions – this opened our eyes to know that although we don't have a revolution in Guyana, unlike Venezuela, there is a lot that we could do and a lot we can achieve. The visit has given us the courage to commit ourselves to working to bring about change.¹¹

In its non-negotiable commitment to begin with the lives, voices and resistance of grassroots women, Red Thread is struggling, against an external and local climate hostile to its radical promise, to create and nurture a growing space in which 'a free community of valid persons' is both a desirable and ultimately viable option. It is a most expectant vision, in which the realities of Guyana are the point of departure but only in the most generous, expansive and inclusive sense, for there can be no critical apprehension and transformation of where we stand without connection and a determination to dismantle the boundaries that divide us:

We call on other grassroots women in Guyana to refuse to be silent victims any longer. We have a right to make this call because we ourselves refuse to remain silent any longer. We call on women who have more than us and on anti-racist men to support us because there can be no liberation from violence and exploitation for any of us when most of us are down . . . We will gain wide backing for this call on the continent, in the Caribbean and globally . . . We are not alone. We are not powerless. We can make a country where all our children can live and eat and grow.¹²

Alissa Trotz teaches sociology and women and gender studies at the University of Toronto and was a member of the international Walter Rodney 25th Anniversary Commemoration Collective (2004–5). She is a member of the Red Thread Women's Development Organisation, Guyana.

References

- 1 I would like to thank Red Thread and the Global Women's Strike for inspiration and concrete example and, in particular, Andaiye and Selma James for thoughtful and critical comments, especially under pressure of tight deadlines!
- 2 George Lamming, *The Sovereignty of the Imagination* (Kingston, Jamaica, Arawak Publications, 2004), p. 9.
- 3 Andaiye, 'The angle you look from determines what you see: towards a critique of feminist politics in the Caribbean', Lucille Mathurin Mair Lecture (University of the West Indies, Mona, 2002).
- 4 Red Thread has under its belt just over two decades of a variety of income-generating projects, surveys, anti-violence organising and public education. Andaiye, 'The Red Thread story', in Suzanne Francis-Brown (ed.), *Spitting in the Wind: lessons in empowerment from the Caribbean* (Kingston, Jamaica, Ian Randle, 2000).
- 5 'Cooking up change in the global kitchen', *Global Women's Strike* (No. 3, January 2006), <<http://www.globalwomenstrike.net/Strike/English2006/Journal2006.htm>>.
- 6 Andaiye, unpublished notes (13 April 2007).
- 7 Lamming, op. cit., p. 33.
- 8 Red Thread, 'Statement for the Red Thread press conference on a survey to measure women's time-use in Guyana' (2 December 2004).
- 9 'How women ensured Guyana survived the great flood', *Global Women's Strike* (No. 3, January 2006), <<http://www.globalwomenstrike.net/Strike/English2006/Journal2006.htm>>.

- 10 H. Khan, J. Bacchus and N. Marcus, *Report on Our Visit to Venezuela* (April 2006), unpublished report.
 11 Ibid.
 12 Red Thread, *One Heart, One Fist, One Voice: statement by grassroots women organizers of all races* (Georgetown, Guyana, 31 March 2006).

The war on human trafficking in the Caribbean

By Kamala Kempadoo

Abstract: Encouraged by the US, the Caribbean is being drawn into a global panic over human trafficking, leading to greater policing and surveillance of migrant women and the sex trade. Drawing on colonial precedents, the moral outrage about women trafficked into prostitution, embodied in legislation such as the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act, obscures the deeper causes of exploitation and oppression and leads to the demonisation of those in undocumented, hyper-exploited labour forces. Moreover, the false equation of trafficking with prostitution renders sexual labour as coerced labour and, as such, misrepresents sexual agency.

Keywords: border controls, forced labour, irregular migration, moral panic, sex work, slave trade, US hegemony

On the eve of the bicentenary of the abolition of the British transatlantic slave trade, the Vatican likened human trafficking in the twenty-first century to the trade of African slaves in the past, claiming, 'it's worse than the slavery of those . . . who were taken from Africa and brought to other countries'.¹ Concern about this 'modern-day slavery' fixes attention on women in prostitution and child labour and produces lurid accounts about child and sex slaves, while sustaining a multi-million dollar industry to combat human trafficking. To African Caribbean peoples or scholars of slavery, the Vatican's claim may sound preposterous, given the magnitude and extreme violence of the Atlantic slave trade and the injustice such a claim does to the history of Africans. To sex workers' rights activists or transnational feminists, the claim may seem equally absurd and adds to the global panic about sexual labour and irregular migrants, doing an injustice to women's