

Who Does the Counting? Gender Mainstreaming, Grassroots Initiatives, and Linking Women Across Space and 'Race' in Guyana

D. Alissa Trotz

Trotz, D. Alissa. 2010. "Gender, Racialization and Poverty in Guyana." In *The International Handbook on Gender and Poverty: Concepts, Research, Practice*, edited by Sylvia Chant, 665-660. Hants: Edward Elgar Publishers

Over the last two and a half decades, there has been a virtual explosion of women's visibility in the global public arena, in large part the result of lobbying and mobilisation of transnational feminist networks. Gender mainstreaming is everywhere, from national governments collecting data and creating women's bureaux and gender focal points in ministries, to the various international legislative instruments and protocols that give gender institutional recognition and legitimacy on the world stage.

For many the paradox is the way in which gender mainstreaming is invoked at supranational and national levels by the very same institutions that have been the architects of neoliberal economic policies. This is apparent in the Caribbean, more than a decade after the Beijing Platform for Action (BFFA) named women and poverty and women and the economy as two of its strategic objectives and priority areas for action. Notwithstanding the distance between official commitments to gender equality and mainstreaming and on the ground realities, the uneven incorporation of gender within countries and institutions across various poverty assessments and living standards surveys, and the tendency to incorporate gender regularly only in studies that are specifically or stereotypically about women like domestic violence and reproductive

health, the limited data that does exist points to a deepening of poverty and an entrenchment of gendered inequalities in a region that has adopted market reforms and structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) since the 1980s (Andaiye, 2003).

While gender is on the Caribbean agenda (albeit unevenly), there appears to have been little progress in disaggregating statistics that relate to women. Although there is some recognition of the need to complicate our understanding of gender – the attention paid to distinguishing between women living with men and female household heads in particular, but also some work on rural-urban divisions – what is clearly lacking is a systematic approach to data collection that offers insights into women's differentiated relationships to the economy, and which might help inform policies that address not just gendered inequalities, but other social relations that result in specific and different experiences of disadvantage. Moreover, if differentiation among women is not addressed from the outset, might policies aimed at tackling gendered inequalities not run the risk of themselves being exclusionary of some constituencies of women?

This is not an oversight that is confined to the Caribbean. Indeed, one could say that gender mainstreaming for the most part continues to define gender as relating to women qua women, an emphasis that is unable to account for interlocking social relations that differentiate women not just from men, but also from each other. That this flattened focus is at odds with the move away from a singular understanding of 'woman' among feminists in North America and Europe, the issues raised by women in the Global South at the various meetings convened in the wake of the declaration of the United Nations (UN) Decade for women, and the realities of difference as a foundational feature of women's activism in places like the Caribbean (Reddock, 2007), raises the question of

what happens to more deeply complicated understandings of gender in the process of translation from activism to institutionalisation.

There is now an extensive body of work that explores the difficult relationship between policy institutionalisation at local, state and supra-state levels and transformative feminist agendas. Some researchers posit that gender mainstreaming puts women on the radar of developmentalist protocols seeking to extend the reach of the market to everyone, suggesting that gender gets deployed in ways that enable it to co-exist with neoliberal projects (Bergeron, 2006). Others argue that gender mainstreaming instrumentalises and technologises gender as a target of improvement via specific modes of intervention (Manicom, 2001). In the Caribbean, there have been calls for regional feminists to consider the role they play as gatekeepers for the development industry, and to closely examine how this new dispensation runs the risk of disarming the emancipatory potential of the women's movement and turning poor women into clients (Andaiye, (2002).

To be sure, there have been recent and important efforts to extend the narrow remit of gender as pertaining to a relatively undifferentiated category of woman, such as Kimberle Crenshaw's submission, based on her pathbreaking and earlier work on intersectionality, to the sessions leading up to the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Forms of Intolerance (Crenshaw, 2000). At the same time, and taking the feminist critiques of gender mainstreaming into account, one might well ask, what happens when intersectionality – deployed as a more accurate or sensitive diagnostic tool to help practitioners and policymakers count or measure the

complex ways in which women's lives are shaped by vulnerability – becomes part of the mainstream itself?

INTERSECTIONALITY FROM BELOW? RED THREAD IN GUYANA

A different kind of lesson is offered by Red Thread women's organisation that is based in Guyana, a Caribbean country located on the Northeastern shoulder of South America that since the mid-1980s has been locked into an unending succession of SAPs. It is important to note that these policies (initially called the Economic Recovery Programme, and dubbed the 'Empty Rice Pot' by Guyanese) have continued and deepened with the return to electoral democracy in 1992 after 24 years of dictatorship. Articulating a coherent challenge to the exclusions accompanying these economic reforms is complicated by a deeply racialised political structure, a legacy of colonial policies of divide and rule that manifests itself today in the competition for state power being monopolised by two political parties that are largely seen as representing African and Indian Guyanese interests. Given this highly polarised environment, the difficulties of comprehensively integrating an intersectional approach to analyses of poverty assume another dimension. The paucity of disaggregated data combine with political sensitivities to elide women's racialised experiences of poverty. Attempting to count in this context runs the risk of reproducing rather than shifting the dominant frame through which 'race' as a meaningful category of experience materialises in Guyana, and can easily lead to accusations of racial discrimination and denial and defensiveness. The political stakes are very high indeed.

Keenly aware of the susceptibility of women's organising to the imperatives of the two major political parties, a weakness that has historically acted to further instantiate racialised divisions while completely obscuring key constituencies like indigenous women, Red Thread's commitment to operate outside any political party structure and thus to include women right across the political spectrum has always been non-negotiable. Red Thread, which was formed in 1986, defines its principal mandate as '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 marks a shift away from simply naming difference as a category that can be measured or as a detached way of refining our understanding of differential experiences of disadvantage among women. Recognising the damaging uses to which difference can be put - whether as a form of identification that generates divisions among women, or as a guide to policy interventions from above that produce women as clients or dependents - Red Thread aims instead to deeply engage the processes through which such categories come to be infused with meaning in relation to each other (Trotz, 2007).

Especially in the last decade, and in the context of individual and later collective relationships with the global Wages for Housework Campaign, Red Thread has distilled its approach as one that always begins with the unwaged caring labour that underpins the organisation of human life, and that is disproportionately shouldered by grassroots women. It became the national co-ordinator for the Global Women's Strike which formed in 2000, a transnational anti-racist and anti-imperialist feminist network that is deeply influenced by the efforts of Marxist feminists to foreground unwaged labour as

central to capital and to insist on seeing those who perform 'housework' as a section of the working class.

Counting work becomes an analytical and political entry point to understand and challenge the logic of contemporary developmental strategies and their differentiated impact on women, but it does not stop there. In 2004, Red Thread undertook an extensive anti-racist time-use survey with over 100 grassroots women across four racialised categories recognised in the Guyana Census (Indian, African, Indigenous/Amerindian and Mixed). The survey was unprecedented in that it was conducted by grassroots women across rural, urban and hinterland communities across the country. By participating in the exercise as both subject and researcher, grassroots women were reframed from being simply sources of raw data for outside 'experts', whose lives would be converted into statistics or documents far removed from their experiences, into knowledge producers themselves who determined the process and outcome of the information-gathering exercises and who were able to use the material to make connections with each other and to advocate for meaningful change in their lives. Why is this being done, for whom and to what purposes will this information be put, are three questions that take on particular meaning in this instance in relation to feminist praxis. Knowledge production is eminently political, and here that is not just acknowledged, but embraced in the service of a radical liberatory agenda. The survey thus becomes not just a means of accessing information, but an indispensable element of the process of organising with women. In the first instance, it was a way of making women visible to each other. It established the centrality of grassroots women's labour to the sustenance and organisation of households and communities. Through interviews

and discussions – women were asked to keep their own diaries as well – participants were able to see the extensive hours they worked (between 14-18 hours a day). Interviewers often contributed to sharing and taking on necessary tasks in individual households in order to ‘free up’ some time for the discussion and diaries to be completed.

Communities also took note of the similarities among grassroots women, and the ways in which work differed or intensified for some women (for instance in interior parts of Guyana, indigenous women walked long distances for water and also tried to double up their efforts during the day in areas where there was little or no electricity). We might, then, characterise the survey as process itself, a way of coming to see oneself in relation to others.

In addition to recognising the centrality of grassroots women’s contribution, the act of counting work also revealed to women how little of what they do is recognised as it involves predominantly unwaged forms of social reproduction that subsidise the economy without being acknowledged. The extent to which grassroots women’s needs are never seen as a priority by politicians and policymakers became clear. The knowledge gathered through the time-use survey and several other activities has informed numerous interventions, all led by women, to recalibrate the discussion at various levels to better reflect the challenges they face (Trotz, 2007). Two short examples are offered below.

In January 2005 Guyana experienced the worst floods in the country’s recorded history, affecting more than 40 per cent of the population (over 90 per cent of whom live along a narrow strip of coastal land that lies six feet below sea level). Initially involved

in flood relief, Red Thread soon shifted to organising with women in and across their communities. Meetings with women demonstrated acutely the shared vulnerability of those who lived on the coast, underlined how poverty was key in mediating who was most affected by the floods, and revealed specific kinds of vulnerability among the poor – especially female household heads and the disabled. As with the time-use survey, it was obvious that the kinds of issues that faced women from affected communities were not visible in wider discussions of the disaster. For instance, official definitions of flood-related compensation largely based their calculations on earned income. Grassroots women could not see their experiences reflected in the forms generated for such purposes, insisting instead that unwaged work and household items were also essential elements of the organisation of human life for which they too were entitled to compensation. The organising resulted in a national speakout held in the capital city, Georgetown. While government, trade unions, donor agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society representatives were invited and present, the speakout was organised by grassroots women, and it was they who presented a list of wide-ranging demands, calling among other things for a cancellation of household as well as Guyana's national debt (a recognition of the implications of economic globalisation for the country's predicament), compensation, the cleaning of schools, a complete audit not only of government but of agencies that had received flood relief monies, and inclusion in future discussions on disaster preparedness programs (Red Thread, 2005). Out of the flood organising, as well as in response to other initiatives, a network associated with Red Thread was formed, Guyanese Women Across Race (GWAR).

The second example pertains to the government of Guyana's introduction, in 2007, of a punitive value-added tax (VAT) that initially included exemptions for certain non-essential and imported foods that middle-class households could afford, while penalising some basic food items and other household goods. Red Thread began a letter-writing campaign to the local media, detailing typical daily domestic budgets for grassroots families and how they would be affected by the proposed VAT changes. It was a strategy that asked the general public to imagine who was sitting at the table when VAT came up for discussion. Providing information on the food baskets of most Guyanese made clear that grassroots women were neither involved nor considered in these deliberations, an absence that meant that those who could least afford it were being asked to bear the highest burden of the proposed tax. Significantly, the government backed down and zero-rated most of the basic food items, schoolbooks and medicines when the tax was implemented in January 2008. Worried that shopkeepers would pass on the cost of the VAT in the form of increased prices, some women also began keeping regular diaries of their purchases, to share with each other and to provide a longitudinal assessment of VAT-related effects.

These are two instances of innumerable ongoing initiatives: picketing against the budget outside parliament and appearing on television to discuss the cost of living; presenting household budgets of women to make the case to increase pensions and public assistance; intervening in the unending racialisation of the political process by embarking on a report card project through which grassroots women would keep a continual score of the extent to which political parties kept to their campaign promises; tracking media reports of domestic violence and opening a drop in service at Red Thread's headquarters;

opening a library and afterschool feeding and education program for children in the surrounding low-income community; demonstrating on the streets of Guyana in solidarity with Haitian and Venezuelan women. Through these interventions, grassroots women reposition themselves as agentic knowledge producers, capable of organising and self-activity based on their own assessments of their realities. They work to dismantle enduring divisions between rural and urban, coast and hinterland, Amerindian, African and Indian women, while never losing sight of *who* continues to bear the brunt of neoliberal policies. At the same time, this is no model of self-help that dovetails neatly with the incorporation of gender-mainstreaming into agendas ruled by the language of markets, microenterprise and downsizing of the state. Beginning with caring work to develop a language of entitlement and to demand accountability, enables a critique of the devastating consequences of two decades of structural adjustment policies for Guyanese. Moreover, through their connections with the transnational network of the Global Women's Strike (through regularised communication while in Guyana as well as through Red Thread's participation in various Global Strike activities and meetings in Mexico, Venezuela, the United Kingdom [UK]), Red Thread is able to situate the Guyanese reality in a wider context that includes both global neoliberalism as well as learning from other resistant responses that offer inspiration and example on the local terrain. This is intersectionality and gender-mainstreaming at work from below, where what is counted and what counts are inseparable from the question of who does the counting.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Andaiye (2002) 'The Angle You Look From Determines What You See: Toward a Critique of Feminist Politics in the Caribbean', Lucille Mathurin-Mair Lecture, March (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies)

Andaiye (2003) 'Smoke and Mirrors: The Illusion of CARICOM Women's Growing Economic Empowerment, Post-Beijing', in Gemma Tang Nain and Barbara Bailey (eds) *Gender Equality in the Caribbean*, (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers), 73-105.

Bergeron, Suzanne (2006) *Fragments of Development: Nation, Gender, and the Space of Modernity* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press).

Crenshaw, Kimberle (2000) Background Paper for Expert Meeting on the Gender Related Aspects of Race Discrimination, 21-24 November, Zagreb, Croatia (http://www.wicej.addr.com/wcar_docs/crenshaw.html (accessed 25 May 2009)).

Manicom, Linzi (2001) 'Globalising 'Gender' in – or as – Governance? Questioning the Terms of Local Translations', *Agenda*, 48, 6-21

Red Thread (2005) *Organising for Survival: Grassroots Women of the Flood* (DVD and transcript produced by Red Thread, Georgetown)

Reddock, Rhoda (2007) 'Diversity, Difference and Caribbean Feminism: The Challenge of Anti-Racism', *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, 1, 1-24 (http://sta.uwi.edu/crgs/april2007/journals/Diversity-Feb_2007.pdf, (accessed 20 May 2009)).

Trotz, D. Alissa (2007) 'The Politics of Hope: Engaging the Work of Red Thread Women's Development Organisation', *Race and Class*, 49:2, 71-8