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An Ongoing Journey in the Pursuit of Agency: The Hindu Women's Organisation of Trinidad & Tobago

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Abstract

“Where women are honoured,
There the Gods are pleased:
But where they are not honoured,
No sacred rite yields rewards”

So declares the *Manu Smriti* (111.56) —a text on social conduct.

In reviewing the attempts of the Hindu Women's Organisation (HWO) of Trinidad and Tobago to address the issue of domestic violence, this paper will briefly consider the power relations within the Indian household. It will define what is meant by “regendering the state”—a term introduced by Mindie Lazarus Black in her research paper “The (Heterosexual) Regendering of a Modern State: Criminalizing and Implementing Domestic Violence Law in Trinidad” (2003, 980-1008). It will also reflect on the role of the local women's movement in advocating for the introduction of the Domestic Violence Bill of 1991 in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago.

Introduction

In this paper, I examine some of the reactions of prominent Indian men when, for the first time in the English-speaking Caribbean, the state sought to address an issue which perpetuated inequalities against women. As I recount some of the interventions made by the HWO, I will cite examples of how two of our leading members were subjected to victimisation, as well as two examples of our organisation's vigorous bid for inclusion in the national/international arena. In addition, I will focus on the rejection of our major publication by the male Hindu leadership and highlight the introduction of a new strategy in reaching out to our target audience.

The silence of Hindu and Muslim women's organisations during the 2011 debate of the Marriage Act will be explored as I look at the interventions of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies and the Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development. I will focus briefly on a public discussion initiated by the HWO which was planned to bring about "more widespread attention to this contentious issue as we lobby for change".

The foregoing will be presented against the backdrop of our women's transition from their isolation in the rural areas to their entry into the workplace and urban life in the search for ways to create a more equitable arrangement in our community institutions and organisations.

As a founding member of the HWO, I am well positioned to utilize the methodology of participant observation in the articulation of our interaction with a cross-section of Hindu women and to describe what level of acceptance our work received as a women's activist group within our own community and the benefits derived from networking with other women's groups.

Background

Early indentured immigrants to Trinidad recreated the joint family system within their homes as it existed in India. Women and men were expected to follow the moral codes of Brahmin tradition as they negotiated Indian femininity and masculinity. As occurred in the home country, men remained the religious leaders while women perpetuated "their traditional role as transmitters of their gender imagery which travelled from India". Patricia Mohammed notes that by the late twentieth century other influences inserted themselves "between the symbolic understanding of what was male and female, and the day to day practices of individual men and women" (1999, 62-95). Sometimes, as many as three generations would live in one household where the mother-in-law would maintain control while the daughter-in law undertook the domestic chores. Understandably, such an arrangement would restrict women's activities in the public sphere which would have provided them with more visibility and possibly more voice. Traditional family values dictated a deep respect for authority so that there was a general acceptance of a status quo where male members were held in high esteem. The father was the authority in the family and when he became handicapped by old age or illness, the eldest son took charge (Khodabaks-Hasnoe and Habieb 1999, 32-38). These practices reinforced the patriarchal system and set the stage for the oppression of women.

Women's role in the "regendering of the state"

According to Lazarus-Black, the passage of the Domestic Violence Act of 1991 became a reality because of a coalition of political, social and economic forces. The emergence of professional women as a result of their success in higher education, a temporary oil boom and the networking of international organisations with the local women's movement all contributed towards this development. Intense lobbying took place between 1988 and 1991 through letters to the newspapers, media articles, public gatherings, petitions to lawmakers and a dramatic "silent" protest in Parliament when all the women wore black (Lazarus-Black 2003, 980-1008). Interestingly, however, religious organisations were not part of this groundbreaking approach. It has been documented that leading members of our organisation, as they addressed gatherings in their own communities, highlighted the wretchedness of women's existence in that Indian women were faced with wife-beating and alcoholism (Mahabir 1992).

Lazarus-Black defines the term "regendering the state" "as the process of bringing to the public and legal attention categories and activities that were formerly (and formally) without name but that constituted harm to women, denied them their rights, silenced them, or limited their capacity to engage in actions available to men" (2003, 980). She goes on to explain that she uses the term "regendering" because "historically, many of the processes and policies of the state actively promoted inequality of men and women". In her view, a regendered state recognises the fact that some citizens are male and others are female and as citizens, they should be treated equally. "For the first time, the Domestic Violence Act provided a person who was physically or emotionally abused by a family member or an intimate or formerly intimate partner, the legal right to apply to a court for a restraining order" (Lazarus-Black 2003). Previously, incidents of domestic violence were treated as criminal assault and battery, but generally, the policing authority tended to retreat from what was considered "husband-and-wife business". With the passage of this Act, domestic violence was criminalised.

Responses by Indian Men—Hindu and Christian

When the Domestic Violence Act was passed, there was a sudden spate of wife murders with many of the victims being Indian women. The Act allowed women to claim 50% of the assets owned by the couple if the woman wanted to end the marriage or to obtain a restraining order if the marital home was given as settlement. Neisha Haniff notes with interest that "Indo-Trinidadian male leaders were defensive of the killings that took place" (Haniff 1999, 18-31). Basdeo Panday, who was Opposition Leader at the time, commented that "the psyche of the Trinidad male was such that he would 'lose his cool' when forbidden to enter a house which he may have built, in which his wife and children live and in which other men may be welcomed" (Chouti 1994). Dr Hari Maharaj, prominent psychiatrist working out of the St Ann's Hospital, now Professor, commented that "women were not behaving in the best interest of their families in seeking restraining orders and were therefore provoking violent responses from men" (Yawching 1994). Haniff asked, "Where are those Indian men whose mothers and sisters were being murdered?" She suggested that if high-profile men like Cheddi Jagan, Basdeo Panday and Shridath Ramphal as well as other well-placed men in regional organisations such as the University of the West Indies were to advocate for this cause, then attitudes might have been different (Haniff 1999). However, since no such advocates were forthcoming, it

became increasingly clear that our women would have to undertake this advocacy on their own. In a recent conversation I had with Pandita Indrani Rampersad, she pointed out that our women should have lobbied for their intervention if we thought it was important as politicians do not get involved in these issues unless they are asked. While this statement has some validity, it should be observed that ours was a fledgling organisation, a mere three years old and we were less knowledgeable about this process than we are today.

HWO's earliest attempts at addressing violence

It is important to note that our organisation was not as vibrant as it could have been because our work was entirely voluntary and the double shift to which our women are subjected had to take priority over community affairs. It was not until 1994, the year the UN declared as “The International Year of the Family”, that the HWO made its first collective effort to address the issue of domestic violence. This took the form of sponsoring a young woman to pursue a course in Basic Counselling so that she would be equipped to lend some assistance to the women who attended the temple where she worshipped when they were faced with problematic relationships. Difficult cases would have been referred to social services. The idea had the approval of the Executive of the temple in which she was the Secretary. However, on completion of the course, the same Executive did not permit the presence of a Counselling Arm within its premises. Such a contradiction can be interpreted as perpetuating a policy to suppress women and to maintain the traditional norms of women as followers, not leaders.

By this time, too, the organisation became a member of the local Network of Non-Governmental Organisations for the Advancement of Women and began participating on a regular basis in its activities on days like 8 March, International Women’s Day, and 25 November, the day the UN set aside for the observance of the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Our sustained links with other women’s organisations such as the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) and Women Working for Social Progress enabled us to work together on matters of common interest at a national level.

As the Fourth World Conference on Women was due to begin in Beijing, China, in September 1995, the preparatory work being done in the Caribbean brought the issue of domestic violence sharply into focus. I was the organisation’s lone representative at the Beijing Conference and I was also the President of the HWO at the time. The Beijing Platform of Action motivated the government of the day, through the intervention of the Ministry of Culture and Gender Affairs, to initiate a Public Awareness Campaign throughout the island. This took place in 1996 and as part of that programme, the HWO made a thrust to raise awareness within its community. From then on, all our exhibitions on the occasions of Indian Arrival Day and Divali included a module which dealt with domestic violence.

The organisation was so concerned about Violence Against Women that our members found it imperative to address the august gathering of the World Hindu Conference, which was held at the University of the West Indies in St. Augustine in 2000. In reflecting on our organisation’s progress, I observed that our “carefully drafted objectives

would be inoffensive to the acceptable norms of our highly traditional culture.” I continued, “Little did we realize that both the spoken and unspoken directives of our religious community would dictate the issues we were likely to pursue.” As Public Relations Officer of the HWO, I outlined a few proposals for addressing violence in an appeal to our elders to collaborate with us. Under the heading “Prioritizing The Issue of Domestic Violence on the Hindu Agenda”, the elders were told that “the failure which pervades the male-female relationship within the Hindu community, apart from alienating its following, would lead to more gruesome deaths.” I stated that “our women excel at all levels of our society—in government, in banking institutions, in the legal system, etc. It is time for the Hindu authorities to draw on their (the women’s) unlimited resources in developing a multi- dimensional approach to violence.” I also suggested that “the time had come to borrow strategies from the Roman Catholic church with whom Hindus share space at the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) of Trinidad and Tobago in reference to the Church’s general counselling services and in particular to the pre-marital counselling which takes place prior to marriage ceremonies being conducted”(Gopeesingh and Nagpal 2007, 26-28). Because the issue was a crucial one, I expected the Maha Sabha, which was the main organiser of the conference, to heed my calls. Again, in conversation with Pandita Indrani, she observed that conference organisers hardly make responses on presentations and that the membership should have presented a resolution. Interestingly, the HWO presented two papers to the conference but these sessions were presented simultaneously. It is my opinion that our women had not sufficiently grasped the severity of the issue of Violence Against Women as to warrant their presence at my presentation. It therefore became impossible for a resolution to be tabled, especially since none had been prepared.

Publishing pamphlets and booklets

The HWO had begun publishing pamphlets since its first Divali Programme at the Mid-Centre Mall in Chaguanas in 1990. Every time we held an exhibition, there was an accompanying pamphlet aimed at raising awareness and building consciousness on matters pertaining to women. In the year 2000, we published a booklet entitled “Understanding Gender” which was distributed at our exhibition on the occasion of Indian Arrival Day. In 2001, the inaugural issue of the HWO magazine with the title *Confronting Our Own Reality* reached the public. In July 2002, we launched *Pathways to Self-Discovery*. One thousand copies were published for each issue and widely distributed to Hindu women across the country free of charge. There were many encouraging remarks about the magazine; however, upon my entry to The University of the West Indies in 2003 to pursue a degree, our membership did not assume responsibility for the publications’ continuity.

Encouraging expression through writing

In 2001, the Hindu Women’s Organisation introduced a short story competition for the observance of Indian Arrival Day. Its main objective was “to sharpen the social and cultural consciousness by widening the space for creative expression of Indo-Caribbean women”. Although it was not intended to address domestic violence, the majority of the stories expressed the distress of women in oppressive, violent situations. By this time too, the organisation was able to attract the support of Professor Kenneth Ramchand as the Chief Adjudicator of the competition. When the results of the competition were

announced at the Learning Resource Centre of the University of the West Indies in St. Augustine, he spoke out publicly on Violence Against Women. One of his comments was “so men, your numbers are being called. These stories are not just about women, they are about men and they force us to see ourselves as women see us” (HWO 2010). In reality, the stories submitted had raised a hornet’s nest for the men were portrayed in a negative light. The HWO was faced with a barrage of criticism when two of our high-profile male invitees expressed their outrage since they regarded the exercise as one for “bashing Hindu men” (Gopeesingh and Nagpal 2007, 35). Our intention to publish these stories never materialised as our request for funding from the Ministry of Culture and Gender Affairs which had funded the competition was rejected.

HWO obtains international funding

In 2002, after several months of discussion and fine-tuning, the HWO won the approval of the Canadian International Funding Agency (CIDA) to implement a 5-Day Workshop aimed at addressing the prevalence of domestic violence within Hindu communities. Women from various Hindu organisations benefited from popular education techniques which infused them with enthusiasm and group solidarity. Rosemarie Dipnarine, a former President of the HWO, discussed her use of “pichakaree songs as a medium for warning women against violent relationships”. The second phase of this programme took us into the communities where we gathered information that became part of a publication which discussed family violence.

When the book, *The dynamics of family violence and working with our women: How to make workshops a success* (Gopeesingh and Nagpal), was launched in 2007, it was well received by the representatives of several prominent groups such as the National Council of Indian Culture, the Hindu Prachar Kendra, Swaha, the El Socorro Mandir, the Bharat Vidyas Mandali, the Maha Vishnu Temple and the Raja Yoga Centre. There was also representation from CAFRA, WINAD and the Institute for Gender and Development Studies.

Male rejection of our publication

It took a while before any review of the book appeared in the press and when it did, the sensational headline “Rice, Dhal, Bhagi and Licks” generated such dissatisfaction within one leading organisation that a male teacher from a Hindu Secondary School responded. This took the form of a letter to the Editor of the *Daily Express* of 20 February 2008. The author appeared to be overly concerned with what the non-Hindu public reading the article would conclude rather than with the urgency to address the reality that every so often, marital violence erupts into murder and the entire population is outraged. Consequently, since we did not have the wholehearted support of the school and temple authorities, promoting the use of this book through schools and temples—the target group for which it was intended—was significantly reduced.

We were then forced to admit that in continuing our struggle for a violence-free society, we must develop a more direct approach. We could not depend on the middleman—in this case, the temples and the school authorities. We continued to work with other women’s organisations and in 2008 participated in a march in Chaguanas that was led by CAFRA in which several women’s organisations took part. The UN theme for that year

was “Women and men unite to end violence against women”. We recognise that women are receptive to welcoming the transformation of society where their choices are opening up and freedoms increasing. Many of our religious leaders are not so willing to accept the possibilities of change as it would diminish their control over women. The HWO continues to experience the reluctance of male leaders to engage in a collaborative effort to ensure the gradual decline of Violence Against Women as our major objective.

A new strategy

On behalf of the HWO, I developed a series of slides which were aired on *Gayelle The Channel* in 2009 during the “16 Days of Activism”, where viewers were exposed to relevant information that have an impact on family life and encouraged to perform actions which would promote harmony in the home. In 2010, we delivered eight messages to the public during the 16 days between 25 November and 10 December, Human Rights Day. These were aired on WINTV.

Our messages were aired 5 times per day, for a total of 80 times. The slides included shots from the march which was organised by CAFRA in 2008. A similar programme was effected in 2010 for that year’s “16 Days of Activism”. These announcements were funded by members of the organisation. This method of funding ourselves with a minimum of fund-raising events has its limitations. In contributing their personal funds, members are more likely to support charitable work instead of activist causes.

Working with a cross-section of women

Much of our literature states that membership in the Hindu Women’s Organisation is open to all Hindu women irrespective of class. In fact, it has been publicly stated that “we recognize the necessity for our membership to cut across class lines” (*Trinidad Guardian* June 1998). From our earliest days our membership was described as consisting “of professional middle-class women with its headquarters in Valsayn”. However, all Hindu women were encouraged to join. We have a small number of clerical workers among our members, a couple of factory workers as well as one or two store clerks. It is not always practical for them to attend meetings but they are always very helpful when their time permits. Despite the setbacks, our organisation has maintained close ties with these women who remain members and have manned our booths at exhibitions, assisted in formatting our publications and staging our exhibitions. There are others who have given wholehearted support to our involvement with other groups, assisted in our fund-raisers and who interact with members of our group intermittently. At some point, we carried out a mentorship programme which, although short-lived, benefited a few young women. Remedial classes for children in a depressed area were introduced by Kamla Tewarie, a former president. What is relevant here is that when three grassroots members were elected to the Executive in 2006, they served for a short while and then gradually lost interest. The reasons for their dropping out are unclear and the issue of class interaction within our organisation needs to be deliberated upon more fully.

The National Council of Indian Culture generously provided us with space to conduct our exhibitions during their annual Divali programmes and we have enjoyed the hospitality of the management of the Mid-Centre Mall in hosting a few exhibitions there in observance of Indian Arrival Day. In both venues, we freely distributed our pamphlets and booklets.

A wider distribution could have been officially organised through the temples but this was not possible since our efforts were not formally approved of by the temple authorities. Generally, distribution would take place by giving the reading material to individual temple members who would share the publications with other women. While the women were pleased to receive them, there was never any discussion between temple officials and ourselves. We would have the odd Pundit saying “you are doing good work” and we would obtain approval if we were to distribute schoolbooks and clothes for the underprivileged or flood victims. We were highly applauded when we staged a Blood Drive led by our President Henny Charran in June 2010, and we received coverage from Radio Jaagriti for this humanitarian effort (*Newsday* Section B, 16 June 2011). However, there has been little recognition of our work in the cause of Violence Against Women. Clearly, activism has never been on the agenda of the temple authorities for their female membership.

Victimisation of our Hindu women leaders

Examples of “a nurturing yet repressive and male-dominated Indo-Trinidadian community” (Kanhai 1999) abound but this paper will cite two examples of how our founding members were subjected to victimisation as they sought to address the unequal status of women in our community.

During the 1990’s, Amrika Tiwary, the legal adviser of the HWO, advocated for the increase of the legal age of marriage for Hindu women to 18 years (*Trinidad Guardian* 22 April 1987). According to the Hindu Marriage Act of 1945, parental consent is required for marriage under the age of 14 for females. The most prominent Hindu leader in Trinidad treated Tiwary with contempt in one of our weekly newspapers. This was a clear attempt at silencing her. The Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) had in 2000 established 18 years as the legal age for the marriage of females as marriage at an earlier age presents serious health consequences for girls. It should be noted that despite the fact that the government of Trinidad and Tobago had signed on to the Convention, both the Hindu and Muslim authorities rejected the idea, choosing instead to maintain the already existing statute. Rhoda Reddock raises the point that although marriage under the age of 18 rarely occurs, leaving the law as is represents a symbolic act (Reddock 2008). In her view, there is no other reason for its importance except as a symbol of patriarchal control over the women of those groups. On the other hand, Pandita Indrani Rampersad regards keeping the existing provisions in the Marriage Act as a safety net for protecting young girls who become pregnant from having babies out of wedlock. As she observes, common-law unions and children out of wedlock are not sanctioned by religious bodies. The rejection by Hindu and Muslim authorities to changing the law became part of a national dialogue in November 2011.

In the other case, intense pressure was brought to bear upon Indrani Rampersad, the first president of the HWO, as she pursued the spiritual path of becoming a Pandita in a ceremony organised by the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Trinidad in 1993. The debate raged for weeks despite the fact that Rampersad belonged to a sect which permits a female pundit. The Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, the largest Puranic-Hindu body in the country, objected vehemently to women being in the role of pundits (Rampersad 1999, 140-143).

Several religious leaders supported Rampersad's move citing the Vedas as their authority. It was stated that the Arya Samaj was founded in 1875 and was described as "the first to educate women and denounce superiority on the grounds of birth, race, gender and so on. Equality and mobility had to be achieved by actions". Ravi-ji, the leader of the Hindu Prachar Kendra, supported Rampersad's ordination as did Raveena Sarran-Persad, the president of HWO at that time (Hinduism Today).

While women are fully accepted as swamis and yogis, there are severe restrictions surrounding the performance of rites and rituals as they relate to the menstrual cycle. There is an added dimension to these attempts at the exclusion of women from performing priestly rites and rituals, since monetary compensation is given upon completion of these performances. Consequently, women are deprived not only the privilege of serving in the role of pundits but also of the remuneration that accompanies their service. It can be said that much ambivalence exists among male authoritative figures, for while women's success in education is applauded, limits beyond which they should not venture are determined by the hierarchy that governs their role in Hindu society in Trinidad.

Strong protest action in our early years

The Hindu Women's Organisation was formed in May 1987, an offshoot of the Second East Indian Conference held at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine. In what must have been an unprecedented event, at our organisation's initiative, "some twelve Hindu Organisations presented a joint position on what they call the growing incidents of 'Hindu bashing' in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean." Raveena Sarran-Persad (Public Relations Officer) stoutly defended our religion in response to the telecasting of a programme entitled "Caribbean Crossroads" that was aired on Trinidad and Tobago Television (TTT) in September 1990. "The controversial programme brought a wave of protests from Hindus and non-Hindus alike, causing the television station to immediately suspend further transmission" of this series (HWO 2001). Sarran-Persad said, "The Hindu community is still looked upon as one with strange and peculiar practices. People with limited knowledge of our scriptures...continue ridiculing our religion."

In a joint statement reflecting the consolidated position of the Hindu Community, Satnarine Maharaj, leader of the Maha Sabha, said, "In view of the very tense situation existing in the country as a result of the incidents occurring on July 27, 1990, it is imperative that we take all steps to foster a feeling of unity, brotherhood and patriotism. Secretary of the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), Pundit Sadanan Ramnarine, said that "the IRO denounced this type of insensitivity towards any religious organisation".

I now refer to an article which appeared in the *Trinidad Guardian* in September 1988, entitled "Hindu women protest cultural imbalance in Sunday Sports Aid". This article refers to a statement of protest by the HWO regarding the absence of Indian cultural items on the Sport Aid 88 programme which came off at the National Stadium (*Trinidad Guardian* 9 September 1988). Raveena Sarran-Persad, Public Relations Officer of the HWO, said that "750 million television viewers around the world got the impression that most Trinidadians are of African descent, and that no other type of culture exists other than calypso, steelband and Carnival."

Through letters to the Editor in the daily newspapers and sometimes through press releases, we protested against the degrading calypsos against women and the indignities meted out to our community. On a couple of occasions, the women's movement also took up this issue on our behalf. Many of our letters went unpublished.

The constant pursuit of equality, whether it is within the precincts of the mandir/temple, on national television or on the international stage, makes insurmountable demands on our time. Inasmuch as such activity cannot be anything but voluntary, there are severe limitations to what can be achieved. Often, because of time constraints, we find it necessary to engage in more practical matters instead of expending our energies on such long-term aspirations as equal space in the land of our birth.

The silence of Hindu and Muslim women during the national dialogue

Having presented a record of its Human Rights obligations to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in October 2011, the Trinidad Government agreed to provide a response to the Universal Periodic Bureau by March 2012. This commitment is in keeping with recommendations "that the government amends the national legislation to ensure that the minimum age for marriage is in line with its obligation under the Convention on the Rights of the Child" (*Daily Express* 7 November 2011). These include the right to health, the right to education and the right to freedom from abuse and exploitation. In the quest to fulfil this mandate, the Institute for Gender and Development Studies held a public forum at the University of the West Indies on 3 November 2011 while the Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development hosted a "Stakeholder Consultation on the Standardization of the Legal Age of Marriage" on the following day. Although several speakers presented, there was no official position put forward by either the Hindu or Muslim communities in which early marriage for young girls occur most frequently. The leader of the Maha Sabha, the most prominent Hindu organisation, simply pointed out that "Hindus and Muslims did not ask to change the law. It is you Christians that want to change it" (*Newsday* 6 November 2011).

Like the Muslim Women's Organisation, the Hindu Women's Organisation remained silent as the discussion reached its climax in the media in the early days of November 2011. I cannot say why there was no response from Muslim women but I turned down the request to be part of the panel organised by the IGDS as I was deeply involved in the development of two projects, their deadline being 25 November. It is noteworthy that the Hindu Women's Organisation was not invited to the Stakeholder's Consultation, especially since we were invited to and attended a Proposal Workshop a few weeks earlier. That is not to say that there would have been representation from the HWO.

The HWO makes a late intervention

An edited version of a discussion paper on the Marriage Act from the HWO appeared in the *Daily Express* on 16 November 2011, while the complete article was published in the *Sunday Guardian* on 27 November 2011.

In their efforts "to promote faith-based organisations' role in increasing awareness to change attitudes and influence behaviour amongst people from all walks of life", UN

Women funded the HWO to carry out two projects for the “16 Days of Activism”. We produced eight new Public Service Announcements for televiewing as well as a booklet entitled *Hinduism—An overview and rejecting violence against women* (HWO 2011). We used the opportunity to bring the Marriage Act into a community discussion in order to raise awareness about the issue.

The injurious effects of early and forced marriage were deliberated upon by using facts which became available from the International Planned Parenthood Federation and the Centre for Research on Women (See The Royal Commonwealth Society Briefing Paper, October 2011). The consequences of girls being involved in early sex and childbirth before they are mature physically were reported as they appeared in the *National Geographic Magazine* of June 2011.

The booklet was launched at the Divali Nagar, Chaguanas, in early December to a cross-section of Hindus and to other organisations representing the wider community. Subsequently, the Mayor of Chaguanas, Orlando Nagessar, kindly consented to host a public discussion on the topic of The Marriage Act 1945 on 29 February at the Auditorium of the Borough Hall, Chaguanas. The HWO invited members of the Christian, Muslim and Orisha faiths to participate in the public discussion which was held on 29 February 2012, at the Borough Hall, Chaguanas. Our panel comprised Dr. Pandita Indrani Rampersad, Anusha Ragbir, Rose Mohammed, Sarah Nabbie, Angela Brown and Ann Marie Sirju.

Here we expected to formulate a resolution for presentation to the Prime Minister and the Members of Parliament but one group expressed the need for further deliberation on the issue. During the discussion we were informed by Senator Lyndira Oudit that ratification of the Convention would take place in June. Consequently, it was decided to hold three monthly sessions which would explore the legal, medical and psychological implications of early marriage. The HWO will be partnering with the Trinidad and Tobago Medical Association and the National Council of Indian Culture to bring more of our citizens into the dialogue.

Accounting for Hindu women’s reluctance to confront social issues

From its very inception, it was not uncommon for Hindu women to shy away from what was perceived as an activist organisation which is what our vision articulated. Our women were very active in temple groups and our expectations were to network with Hindu groups throughout the country. Their lack of interest in joining an activist organisation indicated an almost ingrained indifference to social issues. The issue of class may also have been a deterrent. Despite this, we have had and continue to have some support through their attendance at functions and their assistance in our charitable work but with little input in addressing issues.

As documented by Basmat ShivPersad, it is the Afro-Guyanese women who have taken the lead in prioritising women’s rights in Guyana, while Indian women were comfortable with their participation in religious bodies and women’s arms of political parties (Shiv Persad 1999, 40-59). A similar situation exists in Trinidad where African women lead the drive towards gender equality. Although there is an increase in Indian—Christian, Hindu

and Muslim—participation in political leadership, their interest in issues which are primarily women’s issues is not a priority.

In her seminal work *Diasporic (Dis)locations*, Brinda Mehta contends that the objectives of a colonial education coincided with the goals of Hindu patriarchy in relegating women to the secondary role of wife and homemakers. Moral codes of the Victorian era were perpetuated by both Presbyterian and Catholic schools. Indian culture was rendered incompatible with Western education and was viewed as being primitive and backward (Mehta 2004, 43-45). It therefore becomes feasible to conclude that Indo-Caribbean women experienced feelings of inferiority and alterity which can account for their reticence. Even when so many of them have achieved tertiary levels of education it remains difficult to confront social issues which when pursued vigorously can result in controversy. In fact, there are several instances where our women were subjected to personal attacks when they dared to voice their opinions. One case that readily comes to mind is that of Rajnie Ramlakhan, a journalist from the *Trinidad Express* Newspapers who had the boldness to criticise the calypso “Bottom in de Road” in one of her columns. Ramlakhan had her body parts dissected in an article in the *TNT Mirror* of 5 December 1997.

When the observance of the 153rd Anniversary of Indian Arrival Day was organised by the Mere Desh Committee/Edinburgh Temple, as the Public Relations Officer of the HWO, I was invited to address the gathering. I recalled that when a Bill for the Incorporation of the Hindu Women’s Organisation was piloted by Senator Amrika Tiwary, objections were raised by a male member of our community (a Pundit) (*Hansard* Trinidad Parliament 1 October 1991). I further stated that “sentiments such as those expressed in the Senate reflected the serious misgivings which were harboured against the reality of an organisation of Hindu women which would be neither male-oriented nor male-dominated.” I observed that “a long time had passed before it became clear that it was not our aim to erode our traditional values but rather to raise our visibility and our voice in matters pertaining to women and on national issues” (*Trinidad Guardian*, June 1998).

To give the impression that all male leaders were against the advancement of women would be inaccurate. In an article entitled “Looking at the changing roles of Hindu Women” which appeared in the *Trinidad Guardian*, 31 May 1991, Pundit Ramesh Tewari’s view was that “the transformation of the Indian woman must not be viewed as a departure from tradition but rather as an evolution”. Suruj Rambachan, who was one of the organisers of the Second East Indian Conference, was very supportive of the formation of the HWO which was initiated by Indrani Rampersad. The National Council of Indian Culture has always supported activities undertaken by our organisation and the Hindu Prachar Kendra actively promotes the advancement of women in their leadership. Yet another disadvantage we faced was that the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs had no clear policy of equality in assisting all communities, so that the HWO suffered from lack of funding. While large amounts were being dispensed to various organisations, our organisation’s pleas resulted in the receipt of such small sums that after a while we decided that the returns on the energy expended were

just not worth it. Our hopes have since risen with the introduction of the new Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development.

When the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) was held in Trinidad in 2009, all NGO's were invited to participate. The experience of the HWO bears some relevance to the reluctance of our women to participate in national events. We were given a slot on 25 November 2009 along with the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) to make a presentation of our work. Our enthusiasm peaked when we realised our programme was being highlighted on 25 November, the Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women. Some of our members applied for leave in order to be present. We awaited our turn with much anticipation, only to be told at the last moment that we and the women from the YWCA had to give up a few minutes of our time because Prime Minister Manning was promoting his drive towards the Environmental Conference Commonwealth Summit which was to take place in Copenhagen shortly after the Commonwealth Summit here in Trinidad (HWO 2010). At the end of it all, we, along with the women of the YWCA, were completely excluded from the programme. What shoddy treatment of women and on 25 November too! When we, Hindu women, are rebuffed in this manner, almost as if we do not exist, how does this encourage our participation in national events?

Conclusion

Through their educational achievements, many Hindu women have broken barriers in the workplace; they make major decisions within the household, mainly because of their capacity to earn, and have made great strides in the political field. Others exercise their sexual freedom contrary to the expectations of parents and scriptural dictates. Still others confront the tribulations of domestic violence on a daily basis. It is here, within the family setting, a supposedly safe space, that our women and girls are most vulnerable.

As Chairperson of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2011, the Prime Minister, the Honourable Kamla Persad-Bissessar, proclaimed the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) 2005–2015. She fused the observance of International Women's Day 2011 with Commonwealth Day in Trinidad and Tobago, and at the Diplomatic Centre in March, made strong pronouncements on the advancement and protection of women and girls. Her address at the New York Meeting of Female Heads of Government in June 2011 rejected Violence Against Women in such a forceful manner that one could perceive an almost immediate softening of the Hindu authorities in working with our organisation. Dr Vidya Gyan Tota-Maharaj, our President at the time, was invited by Radio Jaagriti to discuss Violence Against Women on an hour-long radio programme. This did not, however, alter the position of the largest Hindu organisation, the Maha Sabha, in its stance on early marriage of young women and girls. Having articulated its dreadful consequences in our recently published booklet, we sought means by which we could engage our women more directly in expressing their views on this issue.

The public discussion planned for 29 February was one very tangible outcome of being funded—in this instance by UN Women in the Caribbean. The HWO recognises how important it is for women to study the issues that affect them in a dispassionate manner and to lobby for changes which will improve their status. Our invitation to Muslim,

Orisha and Christian women to collaborate with us was the first time the HWO engaged in such an initiative and we envision prospects for further collaboration.

Currently, the Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development is in the process of renewing discussions for the adoption of the National Gender Policy and will hold discussions with organisations in specific categories. Our participation in this exercise becomes imperative in our mission to maximise our role as an integral part of civil society. In evaluating the Ministry's outreach into our community, we estimate their involvement as being insufficient to address the plethora of ills which affect its constituents. Perhaps there should be more direct interaction with community organisations in order to evaluate their interventions within their communities. This may remove the systemic blockage of much needed funds to serious organisations that seek to address issues of abuse of women and children—and of men.

We need to educate our teachers on how to identify child abuse, how to report it and how to get swift action. We need to develop self-esteem in our youth—both boys and girls—and to sensitise them to the need to respect each other at an early age. Our organisation which survives only through voluntary work cannot adequately address such pressing needs when an enormous amount of energy needs to be spent on raising funds. Institutions must facilitate us with some portion of funding if we are to serve at our optimum.

The stereotype of Hindu/Indian women as passive, docile and subservient no longer applies. They have made the transition from the family unit into the public domain with small steps over many years. No longer are they confined to the rural areas, immersed in traditional values and apprehensive of venturing into the wider society. Nor are they content to live in the shadows of their husbands' successes, in the secondary role of wife/homemaker and helper in the informal sector. Mehta's interpretation of women's status in our male-oriented and male-dominated institutions and organisations is indisputable. She declares that "although women's participation in community building is actively solicited, their commensurate recognition in the form of equal citizenship and direct participation in communal policy making has been largely ignored" (Mehta 2004). Those of us who have claimed agency for changing our own lives need to reflect on our journey and recommit ourselves to the daunting task of eroding these inequalities within the very institutions which should be predisposed to our involvement in diffusing the prejudices and discrimination which our community faces on the national level. It will do our leaders well to deliberate upon the pronouncement of Ban Ki-Moon, the UN Secretary General: "When women are denied the opportunity to better themselves and their societies, we all lose. Let us work with renewed determination for a future of equal rights, equal opportunities and progress for all" (Ki-Moon 2010). For the sake of our women, our children and our men, the Hindu Women's Organisation should no longer be confined to its present peripheral role in serving its community.

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