

Tribute to Hazel Brown

by

**The Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action, Trinidad and Tobago
Chapter (CAFRA TT)**

CAFRA T and T mourns the passing of activist and advocate Hazel Brown and offers sincere condolences to her family, friends, allies and members of her beloved Network of NGOs of Trinidad and Tobago for the Advancement of Women, which she led for three decades. We also celebrate her life and politics, and the legacy she left for us to continue.

Hazel seemed to live and breathe social justice. She often spoke of her early conscientization from sitting in City Council meetings when she was ten years old, waiting for the Mayor to sign her report card as she had received a scholarship from the City Corporation. She said she learned that the state had power and that people had power to make state decisions work for them. This sense of possibility fed decades of her work to advance women's participation in and leadership of politics, and her passion for local government.

In the 1970s, she was one of the women who founded the Housewives Association of Trinidad and Tobago, and would talk about how many women knew nothing about the families of their domestic workers. HATT set out to find out who these women were, the names of their children, their needs and stories. This commitment to the labour rights of domestic workers again defined decades of her work. For example she was one of the few to critique the act making workplaces smoke-free when homes, which are the workplaces of domestic workers, remained far from the regulation of law, creating conditions of inequality for these working women.

She experimented with whatever might work to give women power, running as an independent candidate for election and being one of the founding members of the NAR. Many would remember her campaigning for the election of our first woman Prime Minister, and continuing to believe in the idea that women would be transformational leaders in party politics and the state. Through her own leadership of the Caribbean Institute for Women in Leadership and the agendas she organised around throughout the years – from the Women's Manifesto to the Put a Woman in the House project to the 50/50 campaign – she remained committed to women's equal right to be elected representatives and their responsibility to attend to women's rights once they won. She was an optimist that information, education, community and support were crucial to enable women to play those roles. She refused to be disillusioned.

The regional and national community would remember Hazel for the range of issues she took on. She was deeply passionate about consumer rights, standardized weights and prices for flour, affordable food and utilities, school book exchanges, home gardens and solar cooking. She was committed to the breastfeeding movement and early awareness-raising about baby formula in the decades of women's resistance to Nestle. She had no tolerance for sexual harassment, treating it as a women's and workers' issue around which silences had to be

broken. Over decades, she spoke out about domestic violence, urgently finding beds or clothes if a woman called in need, becoming a recognised voice in media as she pressed against the slowness of change.

She was considered an angel to those who came to Trinidad for cancer treatment, who she would meet at the airport, providing places they could stay, transportation and friendship. She survived cancer three times, too determined to continue working to be defeated by it. To the end, she was champion of civil society, and believed it had a necessary role in maintaining democracy, good governance, equality, environmental conservation and human rights.

Hazel held on to the dream of an approved National Gender Policy for four decades, telling anyone who would listen about the first draft of a national women's policy in the 1980s which the women's movement had to rewrite. From about 2004, she consistently called for a gender policy, collaborating with feminist, youth and LGBT groups to make her vision for such state commitment become real. Up to this year, she continued to speak of the significance of a Women's Commission, highlighting the decades over which this had been conceptualised and why it remained relevant to advancing state accountability. She was unapologetically an advocate for women and girls, for equality and empowerment, for justice and inclusion.

Hazel could not be remembered without mentioning her love for babydoll mas. At the International Women's Day marches held before the pandemic, Hazel would come dressed in her costume, with her placard, ready to give a speech, ready to represent, ready to make a statement. She was even passionate about Diego Martin where she lived, believing in neighbourhood decision-making and community independence. She was prepared to deface signs as much as she was prepared to lecture politicians as much as she was prepared to occupy the house of the Mayor and to protest in the streets. She enjoyed radical, grassroots politics, seeming to be most alive when her fighting spirit was bustling about the Network's office or to the Parliament or at the front of a march.

Indeed, it was the Network under Hazel which reignited the International Women's Day march in the 1990s through her close collaboration with Minister Joan Yuille-Williams, who would bring police women, nurses and the military to march alongside women for International Women's Day. The last International Women's Day marches around the Savannah, held before the pandemic, were inspired by those years, and the space they provided for women to chant, chip and sing about whatever their heart and politics desired through Port of Spain

Hazel was a fighter, prepared to disagree with anyone who stood in her way or who could not be trusted or who didn't want to put in the time and work that came before status and recognition. Hers was not to give applause because she considered that their responsibilities were not completed until the whole work was done. She wasn't easy, but she was really full of love and care. She could be fierce and unrelenting, but was not someone you could really

be vex with. Her heart was way too large not to be recognized in all weathers and at any distance.

Hazel will also be remembered across the world, from Nairobi to Beijing to London to India. She was a former Secretary General of the Commonwealth Women's Network, linking women in 52 commonwealth countries. She attended every Commonwealth People's Forum since 1991 and, in 2018, was recognised as an elder 'stateswoman' of the Forum, its longest attendee, a foremother of its own feminist unfolding. On stage, with her walking stick, she looked a little frail, but you could not miss that sharpness and fire in her eyes. She was pleased to be recognised even as she remained sceptical of too much self-congratulation. Hazel coordinated the Trinidad and Tobago NGO participation in several UN Conferences, including World Summit for Social Development and the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women and the 1996 Habitat Conference in Istanbul, Turkey.

Still, anyone who visited the Network's office would see her painstaking documentation of the organisation's decades of work, her folders with pamphlets, her records from international meetings, her newspaper columns, her copies of manuals and toolkits and concept papers and clippings. She was an avid documentalist which enabled her collection to become one of the first of the Making of Feminisms in the Caribbean, established by the IGDS in the UWI Alma Jordan Library. Her records remain as a part of her legacy.

Wherever you saw her, Hazel was focused on the next step. She was both hard to impress and immensely encouraging, particularly to young women. She will be remembered for her reserves of courage and determination to act, stand up and speak out, but always doing so through the mobilization of the collective, acting in solidarity on common causes. In doing this work she has built institutions, movements that represent and give voice to those marginalized by unequal power dynamics.

Over time, the nation came to take for granted that Hazel would be there, holding the placard, making press statements, and seeking meetings with the decision makers to push our common agenda. And when troubles erupted, when misogyny and sexism reared yet again, people would say "Where is Hazel Brown?" Her voice mattered. She made a fearless woman's voice matter.

There is so much to be said about Hazel. She is one of those, a kind of person who lived to make change. She arose everyday determined to use her voice and all her energies for dismantling structures of power that oppressed. She was the embodiment of resistance and she understood the interconnectedness of things. Rest well Hazel. You will continue to occupy that space in our minds which tells us, "wake up, there is work to do".

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