

Tribute to Tara Ramoutar (1953–2020)

By

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

Yes, it is Bread we fight for

But we fight for Roses, too

(James Oppenheim, 1911)



Tara Ramoutar was a Trinidad and Tobago-born labour and feminist activist. Since her passing on September 19, 2020, after a long battle with cancer, tributes have been pouring in from CAFRA members in Trinidad and Tobago and around the region, and the wider movement for women's rights, gender equality and social justice.

The Early Years: TIWU and CWP (1970s–1983)

Tara's route to feminism was through the trade union movement. Rhoda Reddock first met her in the mid-1970s when she used to visit the Transport and Industrial Workers' Union (TIWU), to attend meetings of the Trinidad and Tobago – Cuba Friendship Society, and the Puerto Rican Solidarity Association. Patricia Mohammed observed that, "Tara's work with TIWU helped to shape her feminist politics, having been exposed to the way in which women constituted the majority of low-paid workers in garment factories and unorganised industry, and had little power of negotiation."

In January 1981, Tara represented TIWU at a meeting of women's rights activists convened by the People's Popular Movement, at which the Concerned Women for Progress (CWP) was born. An independent, socialist, second wave feminist organisation, it was the first of its kind in Trinidad and Tobago. Members included Patricia Bynoe, Thelma Henderson, Salisha Hosein, Cheryl King, Patricia Mohammed, Gaietry Pargass, Tara Ramoutar, Rhoda Reddock and Cathy Shepherd.



Tara (centre) at a CWP fundraiser in 1982

Cathy Shepherd recalled that during CWP's short-lived existence (1981–1983), members picketed a beauty pageant organised by Janelle Commissiong (May 1981); conducted an anti-consumerist, poster and T-shirt campaign (December 1981); advocated for equal pay for work of equal value, and women's health and reproductive rights; and organised public forums on rape and women's legal rights.

Through Tara's connection with TIWU, it became the venue for CWP's International Women's Day activities, and the assembly point for the journey to Fyzabad for Labour Day celebrations. In the

words of Patricia Mohammed, “It is the sisterhood and fellowship of women like Tara who made the CWP a founding movement in this society. She must be counted as one of our stalwart founding members in the dispatches of Caribbean feminism.”

The CAFRA Years: CAFRA Secretariat (1993–2001)

Tara joined the regional secretariat of the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) in 1993, becoming a valuable member of the team. During her nine-year stint, she attended CAFRA’s Third General Meeting in Guyana; mourned the unexpected death of a colleague; participated in the preparations for and follow-up of the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995); and worked with UNIFEM on a one-year regional campaign on Violence against Women.

Rawwida Baksh, CAFRA founding member and first co-ordinator affirmed that, “Tara’s experience in the labour and socialist feminist movements, as well as her background in organisational administration provided her with the knowledge, commitment and skills to join the CAFRA Secretariat team, and contribute to building the Caribbean regional feminist movement.”



Tara at work at the CAFRA Secretariat in 1996

Charmaine Sinkia-Diaz, Secretariat colleague, praised Tara as: “A valuable member of the team. She was always willing and helpful, which was important as we had a small staff and very busy days. Her typing speed was amazing to watch. Having no children of her own, she mothered the office children with love and hugs.”

Colleagues, Julieta Alfonso and Jacquie Burgess said that, “she was ever seeking to improve herself.” And the then CAFRA co-ordinator, Nelcia Robinson, described her as “a star shining above the hills and mountain tops.”

The CAFRA Years: CAFRA TT National Representative (2003–2014)

In April 2003, Tara was elected as National Representative of CAFRA’s Trinidad and Tobago chapter (CAFRA TT). In this capacity, she led CAFRA TT for over a decade (2003–2014).



CAFRA TT Executive, 2010 (From L to R: Crystal Brizan, Shaffira Khan, Tara and Michelle Seeraj)

Highlights of her tenure as National Representative included: “Stop the Violence: Protect Women’s Health”, a seminar held in collaboration with the CAFRA Secretariat (November 2006); A Walk Against Domestic Violence, held in Chaguanas (November 2008); “A Wellness Seminar for Women”, held in association with the Institute of Gender and Development Studies (June 2010); and a seminar on “Domestic Violence and Pregnancy” (November 2012).

Charmaine Sinkia-Diaz testified that, “She blossomed into the strong feminist we knew, after taking the reins as National Representative. She worked hard to bring her ideas into fruition, organising meetings and events, trying her best to keep the membership interested and active. One of her fundraising initiatives to keep the CAFRA TT office operational, was an annual International Women’s Day tea party. She used the platform of the traditional tea party to engage a wider audience with feminist ideas, and created a warm and caring environment for members, friends and colleagues to gather.”

“Tara was steadfast in her commitment to the work of CAFRA”, said Roberta Clarke. “Not only the ‘what’ of the work, but also the ‘how’. With integrity and honesty, she mobilised members and was accountable.”



CAFRA TT Women's Wellness Seminar, 2010

Gaietry Pargass remarked, “Many salutes to her for holding CAFRA TT together during a very lean period. She never failed to call meetings, and I marvelled at how she found the rent for the office, some of it coming from CAFRA TT’s tea parties.”

Crystal Brizan, current CAFRA TT National Representative shared, “I have known Tara for over a decade, and during that time she was the chief cook and bottle washer at CAFRA T&T, and kept us all in line with her sharp tongue and quick wit. I'm lucky to have known her. “Her passing is a loss not only for us at CAFRA TT and the national women's movement, but will reverberate regionally as well.”

Yolanda Simon concurred: “For over a decade, Tara single-handedly steered the CAFRA TT ship. She was the National Representative, administrator, fundraiser, tea party organizer, and chief cook and bottlerwasher! Tara was the face and saving grace of CAFRA.”

Rhoda Reddock concluded, “Thanks, Tara. Your contribution will motivate us to continue the struggle to create a more just, equitable and sustainable society.”

National and Regional Impact

As CAFRA TT’s National Representative, Tara served on the Regional Committee, the organisation’s pivotal decision-making body.

Joan French, CAFRA founding member (Jamaica) recalled: “My main experience with Tara is at the regional level of CAFRA, which was then a vibrant network of feminists and feminist groups around the Caribbean – most from former and current colonies of Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain, and the USA.... Tara was a committed, principled, ideologically clear, courageous and consistent member of CAFRA and the regional feminist movement. I never heard her theorise about feminism or organisation, but I know she lived it to the end. I add my voice in recognition and gratitude.”

Michelle Golding-Hylton (Jamaica) affirmed that, “Tara was a constant voice in CAFRA’s Regional Committee to expand the membership to include other countries. She was also was a very strong voice on feminism and what it meant for the movement. We lost touch over the last years, but she was my friend, my go-to person regarding matters of the Secretariat.”

Josephine Dublin-Prince (Dominica) offered: “Please extend condolences to the family and friends of Tara from the former members of CAFRA. I remembered her very much involved in activities related to the feminist movement and CAFRA in particular. May her memory live on.”



Tara (at right) and CAFRA TT members at a meeting in 2015

Sandra Clenem (Suriname) wrote, “Tara was a fighter, a true feminist. I keep her and her loved ones in my prayers. My deepest sympathy to you all.”

Margaret Gill (Barbados) observed that, “Tara was of a time when we worked to reconcile divisions.”

Several civil society organisations (CSOs) have lauded Tara's contribution to women's and workers' rights:

Brenda Gopeesingh (HWO, and CAFRA TT member): "Tara's legacy, as a stalwart not only of the women's movement but also the trade union movement, can inspire young women to align themselves to activist organizations like CAFRA as they seek advancement for all the citizens of T&T."

Diana M. Wyatt (Caribbean Centre for Human Rights): "Tara was a great woman who worked hard to protect women and to support women's rights in T&T. Her struggles with cancer were heroic. She shall long be on our list of women of honour."



Tara in January 2012

Folade Mutota (WINAD): "The Women's Institute for Alternative Development (WINAD) salutes Tara Ramoutar, a leader in the T&T women's movement."

The Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago (FPATT) stated on its Facebook page: "It is a tribute to Tara's passionate determination that so many of us, particularly in civil society, feel such a deep sense of loss at her passing."

Gabrielle Hosein (IGDS, UWI): "The Institute for Gender and Development Studies, UWI, St. Augustine honours the life and labour of Tara Ramoutar, and her contribution to advancing the rights of workers and women. May her memory live on in our collective work to create justice, and may her spirit of sisterhood continue to inspire Caribbean feminists of future generations."

Tara also inspired a new generation of feminists. Liz Lloyd said, "I recall my days at the CAFRA Secretariat, fresh out of university, and the way Tara took me under her wing, showing me the ropes and explaining so much about the feminist world." Samantha Rattan related that, "Tara introduced me to the world of activism. Being able to blend academia and action was a truly empowering experience for an 18-year-old. I was inspired then and remain inspired now. I value her contributions tremendously and salute her efforts towards advancing women's rights. She was a trailblazer, an icon." And Renelle White echoed that, "Tara was the face of CAFRA for me. She invited us from Support for Change to give the feature address at the IWD tea party. We remember her strength and commitment to women's issues."

Tara Ramoutar – The Woman

Tributes from Tara’s fellow activists and friends paint an indelible portrait of the woman behind the name.

Crystal Brizan described Tara as “a pint-sized powerhouse.” And Gaietry Pargass observed that, “Her diminutive stature belied her strength, stridency, organizing skills, and commitment to the women’s movement.”

Margaret Gill (Barbados), on the other hand, remembers her as “a peaceful soul, possessing a light laughing voice and strength of purpose.” To Samantha Rattan, she was “warm and kind, with a powerful determination towards her activist pursuits.” Judith Laird praised her “gentleness and efficiency.” “Her kind ways, ready smile and generous nature,” are etched in Roberta Clarke’s memory. And David Abdulah described her as, “a wonderful person and activist.”



Tara with Nirmala Chatar in March 2012

Tara’s close friends, Nirmala Chatar and Brenda Gopeesingh described her as “strong” and “humble, unassuming and elegant,” respectively. She was “helpful and always there” for Nicole Hendrickson; and “one in a million” to Paula Obe.

Tara, we are grateful for your dedication and service to national and regional movement building in the promotion of workers’ rights, gender equality, and economic and social justice. We will remember your strength and commitment, and you will live on in our hearts. In honour of the years of love, commitment and leadership you gave, we re-dedicate ourselves to continuing this important work. Walk good, Sistah!

CAFRA TT
September 24, 2020