

TARA RAMOUTAR: CAFRA HEROINE

My main experience of 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 United States of America. This Tribute will focus on two “moments” when CAFRA’s future was at stake, and on Tara’s valuable insight, which, ignored, cost the network its life. Were these defeats? Not if we learn and apply the lessons as we build the future.

Starting in 2008 an effort was made to revive the regional CAFRA network, then declining in energy and focus, and hostage to differing levels of consciousness about what its internal values were.

There are two moments of this effort at ‘revitalisation’ which stay in my mind as opportunities lost because Tara’s vision did not prevail.

The first is a Regional meeting held in 2009 at which new leadership for CAFRA and charting a new road for the management of the organization were the main concerns. Addressing these issues should have been an opportunity to reaffirm the values and principles of the organization in terms all could understand. Unfortunately, despite the efforts to ensure it through the process and content of the meeting, the opportunity was missed in the period that followed.

At the meeting in 2009 the criteria for a new Chair for CAFRA were outlined and principles of engagement for CAFRA as a whole defined. Tara whispered her opposition to one of the nominated persons. Of the final list of 32 criteria for the Chairperson, none spoke directly to the integrity that would have addressed Tara’s concerns. However, the Principles of Engagement general to CAFRA, listed at the meeting, and binding on the Chair, included Honesty and Trustworthiness. Some insight made Tara distrust the nominee at such a basic level that the words of the stated criteria were not comforting.

As a result, at the last minute, Tara stood up and ran against a skilled and popular (in the context of the meeting) middle-class contender, in the name of principle. The Regional Committee voted, Tara lost, and in the aftermath the principled continuity the meeting sought to ensure has disappeared. CAFRA Trinidad and Tobago continued to be a vibrant actor and voice for change, supported persistently by Tara as Chair until her health made it impossible to continue.

Had Tara won, it is my view that CAFRA Regional would not only have survived, but it would have re-established itself on terms that were clearer and more generally understood by all the membership. It would have been strengthened to not only believe in gender equality and the rights of women and girls, but also to engage and act in a manner consistent with achieving it. But failures in history are replete with heroes and heroines. In that regard I think of Marcus Garvey whose

People's Political Party failed to gain the confidence of a race-divided Jamaica, but whose doctrine now undergirds the efforts of most Jamaicans for a better life at both the political and personal/private levels. I think of Adina Spencer and Amy Bailey and Mary Morris Knibb whose dreams of a social and political equality with women's concerns at the centre have not been realized to this day. However, it is their efforts, among others, on which the Jamaican women's rights movement of today can stand as a firm foundation and move forward. Tara Ramoutar's principles and contribution to Caribbean feminism through CAFRA, as well as the reasons for her various defeats, can inspire us to reflect on the underlying principles of our Caribbean 'feminist organising', perhaps in historical perspective, as the movement goes forward.

The second 'moment' that comes to mind relates to the valiant efforts to save and keep CAFRA House in Trinidad and Tobago, bought through the wisdom, sacrifice and voluntary contribution of members. For years Tara with CAFRA TT steered the premises through rental changes and re-organisation in the effort to keep it functioning for members. After the 2009 election, CAFRA House eventually became rental property purely for profit. This is a drastic change from what it was: a vibrant meeting place and welcoming 'home' for feminists from around the region, with a formidable library, and housing the offices of CAFRA Regional. Had Tara's vision and work defined the perspective, and efforts at sustainability, feminists in the region might still have this beacon of achievement and welcoming "home" today.

When CAFRA House, then unoccupied, was flooded, I visited Trinidad and Tobago and worked with members of CAFRA TT to rescue the place. Tara headed the TT mobilization, kept the notes, and was present at every working session, bailing out water, removing mud, and helping to save whatever paper records could be saved.

Tara has been a committed, principled, and ideologically clear, courageous and consistent member of CAFRA and the regional feminist movement. I never heard her theorise about organisation or feminism, but I know she has lived it, and lived it to the end. I add my voice to those of recognition and gratitude.

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