

Tribute to Tara Ramoutar as a member of the Concerned Women for Progress 1981 to 1983

By Patricia Mohammed

Tara Ramoutar had grown up from childhood with a very progressive father in her family home in San Fernando, Trinidad. She recalls that he had the radio tuned in to political and world news and involved her in listening and discussing local politics or international news on conditions of the working masses as the workers struggles emerged for greater scrutiny by the left at this time. It was this consciousness that led her while still a school girl to ditch her uniform and join the Oilfield Workers Trade Union in a protest which led to a standoff with the police in south Trinidad in the 1960s. It was no surprise that she left her first job at Bata stores to join the Transport and Industrial Workers Union (TIWU) as an office worker. TIWU was then led by Joe Young and as a union had emerged in an effort to localize the bus industry. Tara's position at TIWU helped to shape her feminist politics further. This was the heyday of union organizing in the society and Tara was exposed to the way in which women constituted the majority of low paid workers in garment factories and unorganized industry and had little power of negotiation. Militant unions such as TIWU, OWTU and the Bank and General Worker's Union (BGWU) created women's arms and ensured that women who worked for these unions were educated and informed. As she puts this in a recorded interview with the Institute for Gender and Development Studies, she "came out of the bowels of the trade union movement" and developed her socialist ideals of feminism and gender justice through first hand exposure to the conditions of women in the workplace.

By 1979 a coalition between the Workers Revolutionary League, a small leftist organization and the People's Popular Movement that had its base in the Bank and General Worker's Union birthed the idea of an independent socialist second wave feminist movement for Trinidad and Tobago. By 1980 discussions were well on the way with the women who were part of the WRL/PPM group to spearhead a vanguard women's organization that would be called the Concerned Women for Progress (CWP). Among these women were Patricia Bynoe, Patricia Mohammed, Cathy Shepherd, Gaietry Pargass and Salisha Hosein. In January 1981, a Trinidad newspaper clipping (undated) announced a "New Women's Guard is Here" and described the CWP's aims as "to provide an organized forum for women to meet, discuss and confront the problems in their everyday lives ... to start a process of organizing women to be conscious of and able to defend their interests in their capacity as workers, housewives or students". The call went out to all interested women who were willing to work towards the goal of social and economic equality to join the CWP.

TIWU and BGWU, two unions with offices located not very far from each other on the Eastern Main Road in Laventille had very close ties and it was soon clear that from this call to arms, that the CWP had attracted as its core members women from the various trade unions, chief among them TIWU brought in two dedicated and experienced organizers into the fold. Thelma Henderson and Tara Ramoutar were the two diehard members of the TIWU who joined and supported all the activities hosted by the CWP for its entire existence. I remember Tara especially because of her always pleasant personality and her consistent willingness to help with the organizing of activities, a foot soldier who did not seek attention but who would ensure that she delivered on her promises, whether it was to ask her boss if we could book the TIWU hall for celebrating International Women's Day as we did in 1981 and 1982 at TIWU with a rally of gathered women after a march in Port of Spain or hold the next meeting at the premises. Early in 1981 the CWP attracted the attention of a range of press and suffered a lot of negative repartee from attendees as we picketed a beauty show held outside the Jean Pierre complex. It was the first time in the history of this society that a beauty show had been picketed and was a daring feat on the part of the CWP members, although none of us perhaps even considered this at the time. We were reinforcing one of the mantras of second wave feminism about women's claims to not be objectified or judged only on the basis of physical beauty. If you look at the newspaper clipping closely, Tara was very much there with us, the first on the left, holding a placard "Beauty fools".



The CWP continued a series of activities ranging from hosting the first public forum on rape where Carol Gobin, then a new lawyer and Lynette Seebarran would both publicly challenge the prevailing rules of evidence as it applied to rape. It is unfortunate that in these pre-digital days our photographs are more limited and there are few that help us summon up the memories of the many meetings that were held, the fundraisers that we underwrote to support various events. What I do recall very vividly however is that Tara was one of the key players behind the Consumer Protection movement that led us to attempt to curb the spending on Christmas one year – perhaps not one of our most successful ventures, as I hardly think we made a dent in anyone’s Christmas spending cheer. Nonetheless, it is the sisterhood and fellowship of women like Tara who made the CWP a founding movement for this society, She must be counted as one of our stalwart founding members in the dispatches of Caribbean feminism as sadly she joins the sisterhood of women who have passed into memory.

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