



**Reformatting the role of women in the Caribbean  
from the twentieth century  
A Tribute to Nesta Patrick**

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On August 29<sup>th</sup> 2021, Nesta Bonaparte Patrick, a distinguished women's rights activist, best known as an educator and social worker, advocate for the recognition of the mentally challenged and the oldest surviving member of the T&T Association for the Hearing Impaired (TTAHI), celebrated her 99th birthday with a drive by opportunity for those of us who had known her and worked with her to bring greetings. In the midst of a Covid pandemic we could not meet and greet her but could leave tokens of our appreciation and recognize her longevity and staying power. On 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022, five months short

of her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday we bid farewell to one of the true path breakers in the women's movement in Trinidad and Tobago and in the Caribbean. She was a feminist long before it became unpopular to be one. She was radical in deeds rather than only words, consistently creating, joining, participating and leading in several organizations and professions that were all committed to the welfare and increased empowerment of women. Born in 1922, she has lived through and bridged two centuries of events that continue to transform the world including the World War II, the anti-colonial struggles and achievement of independence of this nation, and the growing acceptance of the causes that she had championed emotionally, intuitively, and presciently from girlhood. With her stolid staying power and unfazed by the challenges she forged ahead with the work that she deemed had to be done. In an essay entitled "My views on Women's Involvement in Organizations in Trinidad and Tobago and in the Caribbean" published in 1988 in one of the first academic readers in women's studies produced for the University of the West Indies *Gender in Caribbean Development*, edited by myself and Cathy Shepherd, she wrote with characteristic wit and understatement: "I went abroad in the 1950s on a scholarship and returned ready to work towards a committee to assist handicapped children, and area where women played an active role. I learned then, too, that only women were parents of handicapped children. I somehow never met the fathers".

In the above record Nesta recounts her early involvement first in the girl guides, then the Young Women's Christian Association (YMCA), the Coterie of Social Workers which had been started by Audrey Jeffers, The Federation of Women's Institutes that promoted public health through community efforts and was the foundation of the community development thrust later adopted by national programmes, The Women's Corona society, The League of Women Voters in 1950, becoming secretary, vice president, executive member then president for some time, and the Union of Women Citizens which was the forerunner of the Caribbean Women's Association. She went on to join the Business and Professional Women's Association in the 1960s becoming the first chair of the organizing committee and later the president. As testimony to her contributions, a number of facilities in Trinidad and Tobago and the region bear her name:

- The Wharton Patrick School for the Mentally Handicapped at St Ann's Hospital
- The Nesta Patrick Nursery School
- Patrick House, at St Ursula's primary school and
- The Nesta Patrick Day Nursery in Port au Prince, Haiti

The list of her social attachments are impressive and show a tireless engagement and energy devoted to a life of service. It is useful to place some of these on record here so that new acquaintances to her work will be aware of these.

- Founding member of The Association for the Deaf
  - Friends of the Girl Guides
  - Friends of the POS General Hospital
  - The Association for Retarded Children
  - The Child Welfare League of Trinidad and Tobago, of which she has been President for 15 years, and a Member for the last 57 years
  - The Caribbean Association on Mental Retardation
  - The Cancer Society of Trinidad and Tobago
  - The Coterie of Social Workers, of which she has been a member since she was 19. As 1 of 3 honorary life members of the Coterie, Nesta Patrick is one of the pioneers who lobbied for the establishment of the popular Breakfast Shed
  - The YWCA, which she joined at age 19, and subsequently became a Board Member and Chairman for both the Port of Spain and San Fernando branches.
  - Her continuing involvement in the Rape Crisis Center from 1985 onwards where she was recruited as the first Counsellor.
  - Nesta Patrick also broke the proverbial glass ceiling by becoming an Honorary Member of the Anglican Church's Men's Society.

She was prophetic of the new era for women and continued to change the traditional mold that was preset for women at the expense sometimes of upsetting her personal family life. She wrote in the essay cited above: "Men were never ready with sympathy or understanding of us attending meetings. If your husband did not ridicule you, he got advice from his friends about how to deal with you, and that can mean anything. There was a constant abuse from even calypsonians. I remember Lord Melody singing "I doh want meh woman to do this". In the early days going out with the League of Women Voters, we were jeered at and missiles thrown at us in addition to the vile abuse. ... I recall too we had slots put in our cinema screens with sayings like "your vote – use it wisely" or "your vote is your precious right" and coming out of Deluxe cinema one night a few young men walked up to me and really frightened me".

The freedoms we now have as women to seek education, found organizations, become professionals or militate on behalf of many causes were won by women like Nesta who tilled the soil for this enlightened growth among populations as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed. Again she recalls for us: "Men were not ready to accept us a partners who could then speak, they felt uneasy with a wife who was articulate. Many of us have stories of our spouses' anger and family discomforts because we were continued to be involved. I

remember, too, at one time I had to shed my top garment in the porch before I could enter the rest of the house because it was said that I would bring in germs into the family having met with all kinds of women. In addition, the entire society seemed prepared to put women in their place, very few women were working out of the home then, and trained women teachers were forced to resign when they got married. In other professions also when women got pregnant they had to give up their jobs” .

Nesta Patrick’s passion for social work and the development of people did not stop at channeling experience only but was grounded with her passion for informed study in these areas. She pursued certification in childcare, social development, policy planning and related disciplines better armed with university-level qualifications, to advocate for the changes she saw were needed in areas of life that were overlooked by policy makers and social planners.

I can’t recall when I first met Nesta Patrick although I knew about her before I actually met her. In 1985 when I was recruited by the Caribbean Conference of churches to set up and Coordinate the first Rape Crisis Centre in Trinidad and Tobago, I ran into Nesta at a conference event at the then Holiday Inn in Wrightson Road, Port of Spain. I had heard that she had just retired. I came up to her, and explained about the project of setting up the Rape Crisis Centre, the limited facilities and paltry sum that we could offer and would she be willing to come and work as the Counsellor at the Centre. She agreed readily and in a small room allocated to us in the Catholic Centre on Independence Square which could barely hold three desks and a few chairs, she joined me as the first inhouse Counsellor. Later were supported by Tina Johnson and a young rape survivor who we gave a stipend to serve as receptionist. Thus we formed a close attachment for many years, going in each day to work in this little room. We became friends and compatriots although I have always thought of her more as a mentor drawing on her life experience and training for dealing with the professional challenges of this position which again, as she had done, required opening up new conversations previously kept in closed cupboards in this society, speaking candidly to areas like incest and marital rape.

In 1986 when I directed the Regional Inaugural Seminar on Women’s Studies of the University of the West Indies, held in Mt St Benedict, Nesta Patrick was one of the key persons I turned to to ask her to speak personally about her lifetime involvement in women’s organizations, thus producing the priceless bird’s eye view of her history that we have on record. I knew from those days of visiting her in Mt Lambert and seeing her home office that, she was, like many pioneers, a natural archivist. Years later she would give these records she kept of her lifetime involvement to the joint project between the Institute for Gender and Development Studies and the University of the West Indies library for the Making of Feminisms Collection. This collection is available for all future researchers and students who

will continue to ensure that the contributions of women like Nesta are firmly embedded in the development history of this society.

I suspect that what made Nesta stand out most for me as an activist, educator and social worker was the pure convictions she had that drove her work – it seemed not to have been driven by the need for personal glory or fame – interestingly a trait I am also observing in Janet Jagan, wife of Cheddi Jagan and first female President of Guyana whose biography I am currently writing. Janet Jagan was also born in the same decade, in 1920 and similarly combined family commitments and detractors comments with the multitasking they had to do to get things done without fulminating at the conditions under which they had to operate. They simply got on with the job at hand. This trait of Nesta is well exhibited in this incident that she writes about, so she must have the last spoken word in this tribute.

“ I remember going into the first training programme for Social workers at The University of the West Indies. It was a residential programme and we were on government scholarship. I was quite sure I would not stay on the campus, so I stayed in my own home and used to go up to the campus on mornings – until one morning I was met by my Tutor, a Welshman, who said to me that I would no longer be able to continue on the course because it had been reported by other women that I did not stay on the campus. Well, at that time I was more outspoken than I can be in my old age today and I told him what to do, and further, that I was not staying on campus but was coming to the course and that was a fact and that was that. He realized he couldn't have further discussion with me, so he just allowed it to go on and nobody asked me questions and I got my certificate”.

I would hope that Nesta Bonaparte Patrick died with the knowledge that she was recognized and fully appreciated. She was the first recipient of the CARICOM Triennial Award for Women and received an Honorary Doctor of Laws (LLD) conferred on her by the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine in 2001. To be singled out as the first Caribbean woman to be honoured for outstanding contribution to the region is a testimony to her remarkable sphere of influence and impact on the lives of women and children throughout the Caribbean. We thank her family for sharing her with so many of those who have benefitted from her handiwork of a lifetime. May she rest in peace.

Photo - Nesta Patrick, Lucille Mathurin and Patricia Mohammed at the residential Inaugural Seminar, Women and Development Studies, University of the West Indies, 1986 Mount St Benedict, Trinidad