

The Participation of Guyanese Women in Politics and Parliament during the Administration of the People's National Congress

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Introduction

On December 7, 1964, after two years of ethnic conflicts, British Guiana held its fourth general election after the attainment of universal adult suffrage in 1952 under the system of Proportional Representation (PR). The incumbent People's Progressive Party (PPP) had won, by sizeable majorities, all three previous elections which had been held under the First Past the Post system. However, as a result of the 1964 PR elections, the PPP failed to win a majority. It won only 45.8% of the votes while the opposition parties, the People's National Congress (PNC) and the United Force (UF) received 40.5% and 12.4% respectively.¹ The opposition parties formed a coalition with the PNC as the majority party. The PNC was to remain in power for the next 28 years under the leadership of Forbes Burnham until his death in 1985, and then under Desmond Hoyte until the party's defeat in 1992. Four general elections were held under the PNC's administration during which women participated in increasing numbers, with a few becoming parliamentarians and cabinet ministers. The paper will focus on the participation of women in the hierarchy of the PNC, the percentages of women on the parties' lists, in parliament as ministers of government and the factors which influenced those activities during those twenty eight years. It must, however, be stated that because of the difficulty in accessing data on the opposition political parties many of the references are to the PNC.

Parliamentarians

Guyanese women became seriously involved in politics more than two decades before the PNC came to power in 1964, and several attained the status of parliamentarians. In 1946, the Women's Political and Economic Organisation (WPEO) was jointly established by Janet Jagan and Winifred Gaskin "to ensure the political organization and education of the women of British Guiana in order to promote their economic welfare and political and social emancipation and betterment" (Kilkenny1991). Janet Jagan went on to be co-founder, with her husband Cheddi Jagan, of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) which won the 1953, 1957 and 1961 elections, and she was several times a parliamentarian, a cabinet minister, and she eventually elevated to Executive President in 1997. Winifred Gaskin became Chairman of the PNC's 1964 General Council, parliamentarian and cabinet minister.

But how do women become parliamentarians? Vicki Randall (1987) posited that voting, active participating in the decision-making process, holding leadership positions in their political parties and being named as a candidate on the party's list for general elections are the main routes through which women become parliamentarians. As in political parties elsewhere in the world, before, during and after the period under discussion, a relatively small number of women held leadership positions in the hierarchy of the PNC. Additionally, very few were named on the parties' lists for elections, and consequently very few became parliamentarians and cabinet

ministers. On May 26, 1966 British Guiana gained political independence from Britain and was renamed Guyana. Elections were held a little over two years later.

In the December 16, 1968 elections, there were 212 names on the lists of the four political parties which had 23 women (10.08% of the parties' lists). Six of the names on the list of three parties namely the Guyana United Muslim Party, PNC and UF were women (accounting for 11.3% of the 53 names on each of their lists). The fourth, the PPP had five women (accounting for 9.4% of the 53 names on their list).² In the Second Parliament,³ three (10%) of the PNC's 30 parliamentarians and two (10.5%) of the opposition PPP's 19 parliamentarians were women while there were no women among the four UF parliamentarians. The four women who became cabinet members were Sylvia Talbot, Minister of Health; Cecilene Baird, Minister of Education (1971); Margaret Ackman, Parliamentary Secretary (Junior Minister) and Shirley Patterson who succeeded Winifred Gaskin as Minister of Education (1969). Shirley Patterson had three other ministerial appointments.⁴

On February 23, 1970, Guyana became a Republic under the rubric of "Cooperative Socialism." It must be noted that the main opposition party, the PPP also espoused a socialist philosophy and although there was a tendency in socialist countries towards greater political participation by women, this proved not to be the case with these two parties. Four political parties contested the July 16, 1973 elections. On this occasion, 26 of the 212 names on the lists (12.2%) were women. Janet Jagan was the only woman on the PPP's list of 53 candidates and was the only woman among the 14 PPP parliamentarians. Seventeen names equal to 32% of the 53 names on the list of the newest party, the People's Democratic Movement were women.⁵ In the Third Parliament, ministerial positions increased over 400% from 7 to 29 but only three went to women, Shirley Field-Ridley, Minister of Information; Cecilene Baird, Minister of Education and Margaret Ackman, Parliamentary Secretary.⁶

The next elections were held ten months after Guyana promulgated its Peoples' Constitution. Only the PPP, PNC and UF participated in the December 15, 1980 elections. Under the new constitution, the numbers of parliamentarians increased from 53 to 65. The numbers of women on the parties' lists increased about 3%, from 26 to 30⁷, but the number of women in parliament increased from 7 to 19, that is, by almost 300%. However, this represented only 20% of the total number (81) of parliamentarians. Since the last elections, four new cabinet positions, in the form of four Vice Presidents were added to the previous 29 bringing the number of cabinet positions to 33. Therefore, although the number of women in the cabinet increased from three to six, it was not significant.⁸ In keeping with the World Plan of Action, a Woman's Affairs Bureau was established in 1981 as the national mechanism for coordinating, monitoring and implementing gender equity programmes at both the national and regional levels (Patrice La Fleur n.d.).

The results of the 1980 elections should be considered in light of the fact that in 1980 Guyana ratified CEDAW whose Article 2 proposed the elimination of discrimination against women. However, in assessing article 29 (1) of the 1980 constitution which enshrined the principle of equality and prohibition of discrimination in all spheres against the undertakings of Article 2 of CEDAW, Whitehead (1991) showed that Article 29 was merely cosmetic as the necessary legal mechanisms had not been put in place to bring it into force. Moreover, in 1980, at 8.1%, Guyana recorded the lowest level of female participation in government in the region (Mondesire and Dunn 1995: 103). The 14 member coalition Cabinet of 1965 included one

woman as a minister while in Burnham's December 1984 cabinet the 15 ministers were all men (Fenty, ed. 1984: 261,262).

Elections were again held, December 9, 1985. This was four months after Hoyte became President after the death of Forbes Burnham on August 5, 1985. The Working People's Alliance (WPA) which had been established in 1974 contested elections for the first time. There were 60 women on the lists of the five parties which contested the elections, double the numbers from the last elections. Twenty-two (22) of 65 (33.8%) of the PNC's list were women, only 6 of 65 (9.23%) of the PPP's list were women, 11 of 65 (16.9%) of the WPA's list were women, 13 of 65 (20%) of the UF were women and 8 of 52 (15.3%) of the National Democratic Front were women.⁹ The percentage of women parliamentarians increased from 20% to 30%. However, the number of cabinet positions held by women remained virtually the same. There was only one woman among the four Vice Presidents, Viola Burnham, widow of Forbes Burnham and Chairman of the Women's Revolutionary Socialist Movement (WRSM). The other women were, Yvonne Harewood-Benn, one of seven Senior Ministers; Urmia Johnson, one of four Ministers and Faith Harding one of four Ministers of State. Two of the three Parliamentary Secretaries were women. Janet Jagan was the only woman among the eleven opposition parliamentarians.¹⁰ Despite their overall percentage increase, it was still small compared with the percentage of women in the total population and was contrary to the principle of equality envisioned in the 1980 Guyana constitution. The problem in respect of Article 29 was dealt with through the passing of the 1990 Equal Rights Act.

Four years after becoming President, Hoyte de-emphasized "Cooperative Socialism." Both an International Monetary Fund (IMF)-supported Economic Recovery Programme (ERP) and a Social Impact Amelioration Programme were introduced to help cushion the shock of Structural Adjustment on the most vulnerable in the society, mainly women. This came under the purview of VP, Viola Burnham.

The above discussion has sought to demonstrate that during the period under discussion, like women worldwide, parliamentary representation in Guyana was influenced by the number of women on the parties' lists. From 1975-1989, there was a general improvement in these numbers nationally, regionally and internationally (UNITED NATIONS 1991, 2000). In 1985, at 22.2%, Guyana had one of the highest numbers of women parliamentarians the region (Mondesire and Dunn 1995:102).

Performance of Female Parliamentarians

But how did they perform in parliament? Generally, the women parliamentarians, including those from the opposition, spoke on issues that followed the agenda set by the male dominated cabinet or opposition party, and these were not always issues that were of major concern to the majority of women. There were not enough women parliamentarians to force gender issues to the front burner.

With respect to ministerial positions, while these also generally increased, it was more quantitative than qualitative. As in the rest of the world, women tended to be appointed to "Social Ministries" relating to health, welfare, education, culture, sports and women's affairs. These Ministries dealt with traditional feminine concerns but had little clout. Winifred Gaskin became the first woman to be given a ministerial appointment by the PNC administration and it

was that of Education. Even when a woman became Vice President, her portfolio was that of Education and Social Development. In addition, Guyanese women ministers had little say in the allocation of resources for programmes in support of women since they were often designated as ministers within a ministry. Urmia Johnson, who served as a minister of state within a ministry, stated that women in that situation were never treated in a manner deserving of their position by the Permanent Secretary (Jackson 1995). Johnson also observed that she never had full authority, nor power commensurate with her designation. This meant that the final decision on resource allocation was done by the Minister, usually a man who often had little sensitivity for gender issues.

Politics and Political Parties

Breines, Gierycz and Reardon (1999: 22-23) posited that women's participation in parliament could be correlated with their participation in political parties. An examination of women's participation in the PNC, especially in the party's hierarchy, is instructive. In 1964, when the PNC took office, four of the party's 24 member General Council were women. Of this number, one, Winifred Gaskin was Chairman and one, Hyacinth Godette, Treasurer. In 1971, Hyacinth Godette was again Treasurer of the General Council and she was the only woman. Urmia Johnson held the position of Assistant General Secretary from 1977-1992.¹¹ No woman has ever held the position of General Secretary, Deputy Leader or Leader of the PNC. In 1991, the year before the party's electoral defeat, there were two women on the Central Executive Committee (CEC) one more than there had been 20 years earlier.

In August 1975, during his address at the first Biennial Congress of the PNC, Political Leader and President Forbes Burnham admitted to gender inequity in the party's hierarchy and indicated that his party pledged to fight discrimination in all its forms. He further observed that they had shown an active sympathy for the disadvantaged but had not done enough to end discrimination against women and that one of the party's objectives was to ensure equality of opportunity in the political, economic and social life of the country.

In the State Paper on Equality for Women that he presented to the National Assembly, January 1976, Burnham spelt out some of the reasons for the discrimination against women:

“...The Peoples National Congress Government has since taking office in 1964, been pursuing a policy of equality for women, in particular, has been concerned to secure the eradication from our society of the manifold ways, some subtle, some not so subtle, in which women are discriminated against. As in the case of the world at large, the underlying assumption of primeval male superiority has bequeathed to Guyana a number of attitudes, prejudices, myths and beliefs which, partly by accident and partly by design, all lead to the common consequence of inferior treatment of women, particularly in economic and social matters...”

In February 1976, in his address to the First Biennial Congress of the WRSM Burnham elaborated on not only the male perception of women but also women's perception of themselves which may have affected their positions in the party, as parliamentarians and in government:

“...The Women's Auxiliary members have been carrying out those tasks and duties which in our hitherto benighted society, was tended to associate exclusively with women

and thought that women were exclusively fitted for...our women in the Peoples' National Congress are not going to be banished for all time to the kitchen, are not going to be relegated to looking after the needs of men at every level... We have been wasting good talent, we have been ignoring the energies and the resources which have been latent in women, in our organization of our Party and the organization of our State and country.”¹²

He further admitted to the under-representation of women in many spheres and opined that:

“Some may say that the male chauvinists in our society, like male chauvinists in other societies, have suppressed the women and not encouraged them to play the sort of role for which they are fitted, that is, the role of being active participants in carrying out the affairs of the country...Yet others may say, women as a whole in Guyana, as in other parts of the world, have consciously or subconsciously accepted an inferior position in society, having been contented to be the pretty dolls or decorations on which we men may gaze...Whichever is the explanation...it is time now...that women play their part.”¹³

The above sentiments are in sync with those that have been espoused by feminist writers (Brill 1995, Freeman 1989, Randall 1987, Sapiro 1986) with respect to the factors that have constrained the participation of women in politics, parliament and the government.

Despite Burnham's recognition of the barriers to political participation faced by Guyanese women and his fulsome promises to eradicate those barriers, the status quo had not changed much at the time of his death. According to Whitehead (1991), the Burnham government's "ambivalent attitude towards legislating equality for women" made hollow the promises of the 1980 constitution. That ambivalence may well have resulted from the fact that his wife, Chairman of the WRSM, revealed that he did not always believe that women were ready for leadership (Jackson 1995:19). Moreover, Urmia Johnson opined (Ibid. 12) that one of the institutional barriers to women's participation in politics was that "within the PNC men see women as a threat..."

Burnham, in the foregoing speech to the WRSM Congress, admitted that more women than men attended the Biennial Congress. However, given the continued male dominance of the party's hierarchy, it is evident that the women never used their voting strength to change the leadership structure but simply voted for the slate of candidates as presented according to one former male member of the CEC.¹⁴ This attitude suggests a lack of self confidence and the socialisation of women into accepting that leadership positions, especially in the public sphere, should be the preserve of men (Randall 1988). No doubt, the engendered division of labour, which confined most of the women at Congress to the kitchen, also contributed to these attitudes.

The lack of child care facilities, the timing of meetings (that better facilitated men rather than women), the lack of training of women to manage political campaigns all contributed to this gender inequality (UNITED NATIONS 2000, Mondesire and Dunn 1995). In Guyana, the lack of access to post-primary education especially by Amerindian women, ethnic polarization, and the confrontational nature of local politics served to deter many women. Additionally, the continuous economic decline which led to systemic poverty in the population as a whole (Danns 1997) - with women bearing the brunt of structural adjustment policies - made the financial resources needed for female involvement in political activity even more difficult to come by.

Conclusion

It can therefore be concluded that Guyanese women, like women elsewhere, firstly, had representation in parliament in correlation to their parties' list numbers. Secondly, their representation in government was determined by the number of seats the party won in the election. The incremental increase in the number of women over the years was small, and the government's socialist ideology and the promise of equality in the 1980 constitution hardly changed the status quo. Also, like women elsewhere, Guyanese women faced the same constraints to political participation, exacerbated by Guyana's dire economic circumstances and confrontational political culture.

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Endnotes

¹ *Guyana Graphic*, December, 10, 1964

² *Guyana Graphic* November 10, 1968

³ At independence, the House of Assembly became The National Assembly of the First Parliament of Guyana

⁴ Parliamentary Records 1968-1973

⁵ *Guyana Graphic*, June 16, 1973

⁶ Parliamentary Records, 1973. In order of priority there were now 7 Senior Ministers, 5 Ministers, 9 Ministers of State and 8 Parliamentary Secretaries (Junior Ministers)

⁷ Compiled from figures in the *Daily Chronicle*, November 12, 1980

⁸ Compiled from Parliamentary Records 1980. None of the four Vice Presidents, 10 Senior Ministers or 3 Ministers of State were women. All three Junior Ministers, and 3 Of the 13 Ministers were women

⁹ *Guyana Chronicle*, November 8, 1985

¹⁰ Parliamentary Records, 1985

¹¹ Souvenir Programmes of the Annual Delegates and Biennial Congress of the PNC 1964, 1967, 1971, 1971, 1977-1992

¹² *The New Nation*, February 22, 1976

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Interview with Vincent Alexander, October, 2002