

Women in the Grenada Revolution, 1979–1983

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ABSTRACT

This article is an exposition of the lives, feelings, expressions and views of the Grenadian women who took part in the revolution, ranging from those who were in the highest echelon of the People's Revolutionary Government to the rank and file. It provides an analysis of the National Women's Organization (NWO) and the programmes of the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) that affected women; how they sought to address the needs of Grenadian women at the time; and whether the socialist revolution really empowered the women of this small Caribbean nation.

Labour riots set the stage for revolution

In Grenada, the year 1951 is synonymous with the words strike, riot and revolution. The strike action of February of that year led to the widespread burning of estates. The radicalism that had swept through the Caribbean in the 1930s had finally and belatedly exploded at home and was presided over by Eric Matthew Gairy. This period saw an increase in wages and an improvement in working conditions for agricultural workers, most of whom were women. It also saw the establishment of a number of women's groups, including the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Soroptomists, Lioness Club, Home Industries Association, Home Makers Association and the Grenada Women's League. These groups were mainly charitable organisations that catered to the needs of poor women, especially those in rural areas. For example, the YWCA and the Home Makers Association provided advice on domestic science and home management. With the exception of the Grenada Women's League these groups had no political affiliation. The Grenada Women's League was the women's arm of Gairy's Grenada United Labor Party (GULP). However, like the other women's groups, its vision was limited to charitable work.

The Gairy regime encouraged the movement of women into positions of power with his appointment of Dame Hilda Bynoe as the first female Governor of Grenada, and, incidentally, the first in

the British Commonwealth. He also appointed two female ambassadors. Three women won their parliamentary positions on a GULP ticket. One became a minister, the others parliamentary secretaries. The Gairy government also encouraged the establishment of a commission on the status of women, and Grenada hosted the regional seminar on women in 1970.

There were, however, those who were not happy with the Gairy regime. Some women joined and took an active role in the opposition parties, the Grenada National Party and the New Jewel Movement. These women felt that, despite Gairy's projection of an image of promoting and encouraging women, many of their demands were not being met. For example, few daycare centres had been built; scholarships for women were not extended; equal work for equal pay was not implemented; and women in positions of power within the Gairy regime (indeed, like the men) were not expected to oppose the decisions of his government. The women's groups in existence at the time had raised these issues, but they were not addressed satisfactorily.

On 13 March 1979, the New Jewel Movement staged a military coup that marked the beginning of a new political epoch for Grenada, and for the entire English-speaking Caribbean. At this point women who had supported the Gairy regime either continued to do so; supported the new People's Revolutionary Government; or remained indifferent. A second group of women, who had opposed the Gairy regime, did not follow the socialist line. A third group felt that the way forward was through the establishment of a women's organisation guided by Marxist ideology. It is this third group that I have focused my attention on.

The St. George's Progressive Women's Association embodied the ideals of the second group. It opposed the Gairy regime but did not view changes along socialist lines. Formed in early 1977, its aims and objectives included demands for better wages, improved working conditions for women, employment opportunities, proper housing, medical facilities and sanitation, as well as the extension of civil and other democratic rights (St George's PWA 1977). Membership was open to any woman residing in Grenada who accepted the goals of the organisation. Membership fees were EC (Eastern Caribbean) 50 cents a month, while unemployed women were given free membership. According to Dessima Williams (1987a), Grenada's representative to the Organization of American

States, 1979-1983, the PWA served as a small but effective urban forum for politicising and organising middle-class women, housewives, teachers, professionals, students and a core of the urban working class. Its unique advantage was that although it opposed the Gairy regime, it was allowed to operate without molestation. There is no evidence of the PWA being victimised by the Gairy regime. This was due in part to the prestige of the PWA's leadership (Williams 1987a, 55).

Between 15 and 17 June 1979, the PWA held a national conference for women. At the conference, supported by the newly formed People's Revolutionary Government, Prime Minister Maurice Bishop called for women to join men in solving their problems and that of the society as a whole. He noted:

The woman cannot do it by herself; the man cannot do it himself. It is by the combination of men and women together attempting to build a new process; to build a new society, to build a new civilization, attempting to produce more; attempting to find the new value systems, to identify ideas and new ways of pushing our country forward. It is only if we achieve this unity of the man and the woman that we would be able to move forward (Bishop 1983, 37).

Phyllis Coard, member of the Central Committee of the ruling NJM and President of the National Women's Organization, called on women "to remember that it's only our struggle that is going to win our revolution. We, the women, can bring women's rights and total liberation and justice for all our peoples" (Williams 1987a, 56). The conference drew up a number of resolutions to define further action: it recognised the deplorable state of the health service; the importance of political education for national development; and the existence of discrimination against women in education, employment and the law. It resolved that:

- A steering committee made up of representatives from every parish and women's organisation be formed to find solutions to the above problems and that women should take the lead in working towards changing the unjust societal conditions that they face.
- Women take an active part in carrying forward and consolidating the revolution. More centres were needed for pre- and post-natal care, immunisation and parental training for mothers.

- More educational and training opportunities were needed to meet the particular needs of the society, especially those of girls and women.
- There should be equal economic opportunity for women in all areas of the workforce, particularly in the development of agricultural production i.e. agro industries.
- A programme for political education for nationals and particularly for women should be adopted through the use of mass media.
- Antiquated and unfair laws, especially those pertaining to women, should be revised and that there ought to be a just legal code for the entire society (Porter 1986, 333).

The PWA dissolved soon after the conference, one of the reasons cited for its demise being that an autonomous organisation had no place within a one-party socialist state. Since members of NJM participated in the organisation and made decisions based on party discipline and solidarity, it was impossible for that organisation to operate autonomously. It was perhaps predictable that independent and articulate members would sooner or later be in a confrontational situation with NJM members. Indeed, directly following the conference, an emotional confrontation occurred between Alice McIntyre, the chairperson of the conference, and Phyllis Coard concerning the latter's failure to check with the committee before inviting some of the speakers. Prior to this there were differing views on the PWA's plans to establish a women's reading centre at Marryshow House, The University of the West Indies Centre in Grenada. Allegedly, Coard saw this as a threat to the revolution. In May 1979, to counter the PWA proposal, she suggested that the NJM political bureau immediately plan to start a bookshop for progressive books in order "to avoid opportunists and CIA elements bringing in revisionist Maoist and Trotskyite literature" (Coard 1979).

The People's Revolutionary Government was of the view that none of the women's groups in Grenada had, up to that time, effectively challenged the status quo, and therefore they could not hope to bring about any meaningful change in the lives and status of women in the wider society. They believed that the only way women could bring about change was when the state apparatus was made to facilitate such changes. Only a broad-based, well-

organised “revolutionary” women’s organisation capable of mobilising women—politicising and unifying them into a powerful revolutionary force—could achieve this. The New Jewel Movement’s National Women’s Organization (NWO) took up this challenge, operating from within the ruling party.

Early in 1979 several women’s groups in support of the revolution were formed. According to Claudette Pitt, an executive member of the NWO: “Women called in to say we want to form groups. They called and asked us to come and speak to them. We were bombarded by this.”¹ According to Phyllis Coard, this was where Cuba played a role. Isabel Jamoron, representative of Cuba’s Federacion de Mujeres, noted on a visit to Grenada in May 1981 that what was done in Cuba “was the establishment of a mass organization”. She noted that their Communist Party was small, plus there were problems of sectarianism. She further noted that this was “why Fidel Castro placed so much emphasis on building the mass organizations plus building the party” (Jamoron 1981).

The issue was discussed at the Central Committee and it was decided that the NWO should become a national group. In the words of Phyllis Coard, “It was a good idea for Grenada. We were building a government that was broad based and we needed a broad-based women’s group. It was a struggle at first to persuade NJM women to have Gairyite women join. There was such hostility previously between the two groups.”² In December 1980 the first general meeting took place, and a decision was reached to drop the New Jewel Movement from the group’s name and call it simply the National Women’s Organization. Phyllis Coard was elected president and Rita Joseph vice president. The executive included Claudette Pitt and Tessa Stroude. By that time (late 1980), the NWO comprised 1,500 members operating in forty-seven groups in all the parishes except Carriacou. By November 1982 membership stood at 6,500 women organised in 170 groups, with eleven groups in Carriacou and one in Petit Martinique (National Women’s Organization 1983, 5). The NWO followed a structure that resembled a hierarchy:

1 Claudette Pitt, executive member of the NWO, interview with author, Bathway, 27 February 1999.

2 Phyllis Coard, president of the NWO, interview with author, 16 February 1999.

Congress
National Executive and National Secretariat
National Council of Delegates
Parish coordinating teams
NWO groups

At the Congress, which was held every six years, the work of the organisation during the previous six years was thoroughly assessed; aims, objectives and overall direction of work in the coming six years were decided; an in-depth programme of work for the first two years was discussed and adopted; and a national executive body was elected (NWO 1983, 6). Each NWO group elected two delegates to serve on the National Council of Delegates and represent their group at the Congress. The National Executive was the highest body of the organisation when the Congress was not in session. The National Executive comprised the president, vice-president, and five other elected members—three delegates from St. Andrew and St. George, and two each from the other parishes. The National Executive appointed the National Secretariat which included the president, vice-president, a financial secretary and public relations officer, and a secretary. It ensured that decisions of the national executive were carried out and oversaw the day-to-day running of the organisation. The National Council of Delegates consisted of two delegates elected from each NWO group. The parish coordinating teams comprised the parish delegates to the National Council of Delegates and other members of each group within the parish. Each team was responsible for supervising and guiding the work of the NWO groups in its parish and ensuring that the current NWO programme was carried out. It also submitted monthly reports to the national executive outlining the work of all the NWO groups within the parish. It elected a chairperson, a secretary, and various committees on organisation, education, finance, publicity and employment.

Theoretically, the structure of the NWO was linked to the PRG's adoption of grassroots democracy (as an alternative to the Westminster model) to allow ordinary Grenadians to have a say in the development of their community. Tessa Stroude, a member of the NWO National Executive, gave a detailed description of how this process actually worked. She noted:

The (NWO) groups would identify what they wanted to do in their community. For the groups to function by themselves we (the National Executive) had a system of training . . . we could not ensure that the groups functioned properly because the women were not exposed. For example, they were not sure what was the role of a chairman or a secretary or treasurer. So we did a lot of training with the leaders of the groups to ensure that they functioned. We developed a work plan at a congress meeting. We could not have all the members there but say for example there are twelve groups in St. Patrick, each group would nominate four or three women and they would come with their ideas and we looked now at what could be the emphasis for the year . . .³

The main aim was to have programmes to cover the needs of women of all types—NJM, Gairyite, GNP, old, young and all classes.⁴

The Women's Desk was established in June 1979 and acted as an intermediary between the government and the NWO. Tessa Stroude and Rita Joseph were full-time workers at the Desk. Stroude explained how the Desk worked in collaboration with the NWO:

Although the Women's Desk was responsible on the government level, the NWO had workers in the field. They were the ones to identify people of need... We tried not to make it partisan, so it wouldn't really be people that belonged to us, NJM supporters, that would get the benefits but the people who really needed it. It was said that we (NJM supporters) did all the work but Gairy people getting all the benefits, but Gairy people were the poor people and they were the ones that needed it.⁵

The NWO, working alongside the Women's Desk, set its work plans for 1981. These were to:

- ◆ Ensure efficient and fair distribution of free milk, and the effective operation of the house repair programme.

3 Tessa Stroude, executive member of the NWO and Women's Desk, interview with author, 2 February 1999.

4 Phyllis Coard interview.

5 Stroude interview with author

- ◆ Ensure that health centres were repaired and epidemics were prevented through constant clean-ups of the communities.
- ◆ Ask the Ministry of Health to organise mass health and first aid education.
- ◆ Discuss with the Ministry of Communications and Works the areas that were most in need of water.
- ◆ Maintain an active interest in bringing electricity to rural areas.
- ◆ Ensure equal education for girls, to educate women on their legal rights.
- ◆ Organise the full participation of all women in the Community School Day Program.
- ◆ Mobilise women to step up their work in the CPE (Center for Popular Education) program.
- ◆ Encourage NWO members to play an active part on farmers' boards and trade unions (National Women's Organization 1981a, 1-2).

Despite the efforts of the NWO to expand the organisation into a mass movement, it can be reasonably argued that it remained a tool of the PRG. Every government agency or party arm, whether socialist or capitalist, tends to propagate the views of the regime in power. If the NWO remained to a large extent an arm of the PRG (as it did), it fulfilled its function as part of the ruling party. This reality does not diminish the accomplishments of the NWO, as discussed later on. In fact, the NWO sought to address one of the criticisms of the Gairy regime—its lack of accountability to the people. The PRG sought to rectify this by holding public meetings and explaining the programmes of the revolution to the people. The NWO groups met once a week and discussed matters of relevance to their individual communities. Once a month or once every two months a member of the NWO executive attended these groups and explained the programmes of the revolution.

An examination of the activities of the NWO, the Women's Desk, and the policies of the PRG as a whole gives some insight into the successes and failings of these work plans. The NWO was able to distribute approximately four thousand kilogrammes of free powder milk every month, as well as cooking oil to the needy (NWO 1981b). Through its efforts, cooperatives were established which provided employment to both women and men. For

example, Patsy Romain, an executive member of the NWO, remarked on the establishment of the Byelands Bakery Cooperative:

The government had a campaign going around to grow more food. It was the idle lands-for-idle-hands programme to help ease unemployment. When we looked around Byelands there were no idle lands . . . Then the suggestion came for a bakery. The National Cooperative Development Agency did a feasibility study. The bakery has helped to employ ten sisters from NWO in Byelands and four men" (Davis 1983, 158).

At Requin in St David, an agricultural cooperative was established which employed three women, one of whom became its president and a foundation member. According to her, the cooperative planned to put four and a half acres in pumpkin, and smaller plots in tomatoes, carrots and in cabbages (*The Free West Indian* 1980, 2). A dried fruit project was also established in Mount Rose.

The NWO, along with the Women's Desk, took an active role in voluntary projects like road repair, building of community centres, community clean-ups and island-wide beautification programmes, painting bridges and walls, clearing drains and overgrown shrubbery, and house rebuilding. By December 1982, one in every nine families had received house repair materials. These families would have been selected by field officers of the NWO from among the poorest families on the island (NWO 1983). With financial aid from the Women's Desk, a schoolbooks and uniforms programme got underway. Stroude explained the difficulty in implementing the programme since there was a majority of very poor families and most people were part-time wage earners. This presented a problem in identifying those who were most needy. In spite of this, it was one of the main social welfare programmes of the NWO. By 1981, the NWO was also responsible for the creation of six new pre-schools and a day nursery. Two of the former were in the island's largest parish, St. Andrew, in the villages of Byelands and Conference (*The Free West Indian* 1981b, 10; 1981d, 5).

The government provided training and salaries for the women who ran these schools.

The NWO sought to provide political education for women so that they could be aware of the problems that the country faced. Dessima Williams aptly explained this concept:

We spent time explaining the structure of the world economy to rural women so that when they produce bananas, carry them on their heads for long distances, sell them to the National Marketing Board and are paid the small prices that they are, they do not think the government is keeping back some of the money and paying them meager wages. We teach them that we, as one small country, do not control the price for bananas internationally (Williams 1987b, 24).

In addition, the PRG took measures to ensure that females had the opportunity to be educated to the same standard as males. These measures included:

- ◆ A mass literacy campaign, for example the Centre for Popular Education, which began in September 1980. A high proportion of students were women.
- ◆ First, the reduction of school fees from EC\$37 to \$12.50 per student and then free secondary education.
- ◆ The adoption of a policy of teaching technical subjects, for example agricultural science, carpentry, and metal work to both girls and boys.
- ◆ A greatly increased number of scholarships to universities and further education at institutions abroad (108 scholarships in 1979 as compared to 3 in 1978), 22 percent of which went to women (Joseph 1981).

The Centre for Popular Education (CPE) conducted a preliminary census in April 1980 that revealed an 8 to 10 percent illiteracy rate. In November 1980, the CPE registered 2,738 illiterates, 58 percent of whom were women (Cornwall 1981). However, more women than men volunteered to be teachers in the programme.

The national coordinator of the literacy programme was twenty-four-year-old Valerie Gordon (later Cornwall). A teacher by profession, she grasped the opportunity to serve her nation in its literacy drive. Her duties included coordinating the work of the CPE in all the parishes; fundraising for the National Technical Commission; planning programme design; developing methodology and pedagogy; and co-authoring the CPE books. She felt that the programme was very successful in teaching reading and writing, organisation building in the community and bridging the intergenerational gap within communities.⁹ It also served as a good learning experience for the nation. Grenadians learnt about their

communities and their culture and wrote their own textbooks, which was a major achievement in terms of the quality of the books. Minister of Education Jacqueline Creft declared that the “new education” was geared to educating “all people, not just a few, with the self-knowledge and self-confidence which would motivate them to make important decisions about and participate fully in their country’s development” (Creft 1982, 52).

In an attempt to further enhance education, the PRG implemented the National In-Service Teacher Education Program (NISTEP) and the Community School Day Program (CSDP). The programmes complemented each other. NISTEP ensured that a number of female and male teachers would attain their teacher’s certificate while they remained in the service. The teachers were to attend the NISTEP courses one day a week during the school year and for several weeks during the vacation. The day that was missed was filled in by volunteer teachers from the community, who taught a wide range of practical subjects like handicraft, agriculture, sewing, fishing, the island’s cultural heritage and its oral history. Most of the teachers of this Community School Day Program were women. While they were not highly paid, it offered a source of income and a sense of meaningful participation (*The Free West Indian* 1980, 7).

The NWO also encouraged women to take up the challenge of doing non-traditional jobs. According to Phyllis Coard, the NWO’s ideological stance embraced the dictum that “women were equal to men. They were equal in society”. She noted that women were registered for carpentry, welding and woodwork courses at the Technical and Vocational Institute. A project for women in motor mechanics was established at Queen’s Park in St. George’s. Women also registered at the True Blue Fisheries School in St. George’s. When the National Transport Service buses came on stream in 1980, it was decided at the parish council level that all the conductors should be female (*The Free West Indian* 1981a, 6).

Women also gave their assistance in the development of the youth through work in the National Youth Organization (NYO) and the Pioneers. Both groups aimed at organising the nation’s youth and beginning the process of instilling in them the necessary qualities of discipline, self-confidence, creativity, commitment, leadership and patriotism. Pioneer activities included talent searches, quizzes, drama exercises and debates. All these activities came to a

head at pioneer camp in 1981. Lorraine Felix, executive member of the NYO responsible for the pioneers, noted that the children were "encouraged to grow and be the new people and the new society, to study, work and play hard" (*The Free West Indian* 1981b, 8).

One of the NWO's most difficult tasks, according to Peggy Nesfield, a member of the St. George's NWO and Chief of Protocol, was the attempt to break through the patriarchal and macho attitude embedded in the fabric of Grenadian society. Within approximately four to five months of taking office, the PRG launched two significant initiatives for women, maternity leave (which was written into law in October 1980) and equal work for equal pay (*The Free West Indian* 1980a, 1). The Maternity Leave Law entitled women who had worked for more than eighteen months for the same employer to three months of maternity leave, with full pay for two months. It also guaranteed women the right to reemployment with the same employer after three months. Women had to work for at least forty percent of the work week or fortnight to qualify for the three-month maternity leave. The employers had to be notified by the worker at least three weeks before she chose to take her leave and she had to notify the employer that she intended to come back to work. Daily paid workers were entitled to one fifth of their annual pay, about two and a half months' pay. Before these initiatives were drawn up, the maternity leave proposal was sent to different organisations, including other women's groups like Lionesses, Soroptomists, the Presbyterian Women's Guild and the Women's League. The organisations gave their suggestions in areas that they thought should be amended. Road workers were among those who benefited from the call for equal work for equal pay. Prime Minister Maurice Bishop used threatening language to warn employers of the consequences they would face if they discriminated against women or demanded sexual favours in exchange for employment. Yet there were those, both female and male, who were against this form of empowerment for women. Some older teachers and nurses scoffed at the idea of maternity leave. Their view was that since they had not been given the privilege, it should not be extended to the younger generation. In May 1981 one female employer was fined EC\$500 for failing to comply with the Maternity Leave Law. (*The Free West Indian* 1981c, 3). Restaurant owner Evelyn Thompson fired her twenty-five-year-old waitress Jessica Williams because she was pregnant. Miss

Williams had been employed since May 1979 and worked from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. for six days a week for a salary of \$100. Miss Thompson admitted that she had dismissed Miss Williams due to her pregnancy and gave this response to Judge Lyle St. Paul. She stated, "I never got maternity leave in the days when I had my children."

Peggy Nesfield noted that this attitude extended into the personal and intimate lives of women. NWO activists, she noted, had a hard task educating women about the role that men should play in their homes. She noted that women complained of men shirking their responsibilities as fathers. Many single mothers were frustrated as they sought to keep their jobs and manage their homes. The NWO and Women's Desk had to deal with the problem of incest and offered sex education for women.⁶ But these attitudes were difficult to change and remained a thorn in the side of the NWO throughout the revolutionary period. In fact, male chauvinism in relation to women's work in the home reared its head at the highest level of power in the PRG, namely the Central Committee. The PRG passed the School Children's Immunization Law (or People's Law No. 41 of 1980). Under this law, 12,600 children were immunised against five infectious diseases (Aberdeen 1983, 61). A new maternity unit was constructed between 1981 and 1982. The X-ray unit and laboratory facilities at the St. George's General Hospital were refurbished. There was a reduction in the doctor-to-patient population ratio from 1:4,864 in 1977 to 1:2,816 in 1982. There was also a reduction in the dentist-to-patient population ratio from 1:53,706 in 1977 to 1:21,400 in 1982 (Aberdeen 1983, 61). In 1981, Dr. Annette Alexis became the first Grenadian female ophthalmologist to practise in Grenada.

In May 1979, the PRG passed the Trade Union Recognition Law (People's Law No. 9 of 1979). It made the recognition of trade unions compulsory for employers, after a poll had shown that the workers wanted one. The result was that the percentage of unionised workers jumped from 30 to 80 percent between May 1979 and May 1980.

Women dominated three of the largest trade unions at the membership level. Prior to this, trade unions were male-dominated.

6 Peggy Nesfield, who worked in the Ministry of Education and Foreign Affairs from 1979 to 1983, interview with author, 5 February 1999.

The Grenada Manual and Mental Workers Union, which spearheaded radical changes for workers, did have a number of female organisers at the village level, including Germaine Pope. However, there were no females on the executive of any of the unions until the mid-1970s. By 1975, there were females representing categories of workers in trade unions. For example, the Grenada Civil Service Association (now Public Workers Union) had females representing nurses and clerical workers. According to the records, J. Japal represented the nurses in 1975.⁷ Jeanette Dubois (1981-83) headed the Grenada Union of Teachers, one of the largest unions. More than 60 percent of its members were women. Dubois' leadership role in the trade union movement began in the late 1970s when she held the post of secretary, then vice-president, of the St. John's Branch. As president of the union she chaired executive meetings, and represented the union at regional and international conferences and meetings, collective bargaining sessions and dispute settlements. During her period in office, the health plan and credit union were started. The union fully supported the PRG's on-the-job training programme. Dubois' contribution to the union included the revival of branches in rural areas, for example, St. Andrew, St. Patrick and St. David. By 1983, she was president of the Trade Union Council.⁸

In the areas of decision- and policy-making, women were given more power. Between 1979 and 1982, Jacqueline Creft was minister of education, youth and social affairs, while Phyllis Coard was deputy minister of women's affairs, president of the National Women's Organization and a member of the Central Committee. Claudette Pitt was deputy minister for community development and Dessima Williams was Grenada's representative to the OAS. Marcella David was a cabinet secretary, Dorcas Braveboy was permanent secretary in the Ministry of Health; while Lew Bourne was her counterpart in the Ministry of Housing; Gloria Payne-Banfield in the Ministry of Planning; and Florence Rapier in the Ministry Legal Affairs. In programme planning women held key roles in education, telecommunications, health and agriculture. Valerie Gordon was national coordinator for the Centre for Popular

7 Madonna Harford, former President of the Grenada Union of Teachers, interview with author, 31 October 2006.

8 Jeanette Dubois, former president of the Grenada Union of Teachers, interview with author, 31 October 2006.

Education; Sharon Fletcher headed the Community School and Day Program; Candia Alleyne the Food and Nutrition Council; and Yvonne James was health planner in the Ministry of Health; while Jane Belfon was director of Tourism; Pamela Buxo secretary for Tourism; Joan Ross was programme director for Television Free Grenada; Regina Taylor was general secretary of the Agency for Rural Transformation; Angela Cape was deputy manager of the National Marketing Importing Board; and Bridget Horsford was manager of the Agro-Industries Plant. Monica Joseph became Grenada's first female judge in 1982. She acted as a diplomat, negotiating with James Mitchell's administration in St. Vincent on the issue of escaped prisoners (EPICA Task Force 1982, 99).⁹

The PRG and the NWO also encouraged women to join the militia and the army. And they did, with some learning to fight, while others joined as cooks, first aid attendants and news runners, who carried information in times of crises from one part of the island to the other without being caught. Albertina Alexander (seventy-three at the time she was interviewed) beamed with pride when she remembered her stint in the militia. She recalled,

There were three of us in the kitchen (army camp Fort Frederick). We cooked three separate set of food. We checked the men and the plates. The men use to say, "Ah want mammy Tina food". When it was ready, one of us would call out 'Come an' get it' and you would see them running coming down.¹⁰

By 1981, women constituted 35 percent of the militia corps. (*The Free West Indian* 1981d, 10). The majority of casualties of the 19 June 1980 bomb blast, which was probably intended to eliminate the leadership of the PRG, were women.¹¹ Far from intimidating women, the bomb blast catapulted them into a new consciousness and a new militancy. Slightly over 50 percent of all new militia volunteers after the tragedy were women. Of the ninety recruits in the Grand Roy militia, thirty-four were women. Prior to this there were only five women out of the twenty-seven members (Lewis

9 Monica Joseph interview with author, 17 March 1999.

10 Albertina Alexander, domestic worker from the village of Morne Jaloux, St. George's, interview with author, 9 February 1999.

11 A bomb was set off at Queen's Park at a rally on 19 June 1980. It was probably intended to wipe out the leadership of the PRG. Instead, three women died – Bernadette Bailey, Laurice Humprey and Lauren Phillip.

1980, 1,193). An 18-year-old woman recovering from injuries after the blast epitomised the defiance of women in the face of threats on their lives: "That still can't stop me from going to rallies. For as long as I have strength, I going" (Hodge 1980).

Women avidly expressed their support for the militia and the revolution in poetry, song and interviews in the local newspapers. The revolution saw a burst of cultural expression from the Grenadian people, and women were by no means excluded. Merle Collins and Christine David (poets/writers) made their mark on the world stage during this era. For the first time in Grenada's history a female, Lady Cinty, won the National Calypso monarch in 1983. An example of this creative explosion is the poem of a young teacher from the parish of St. David, Helena Joseph. She made her poem famous by frequent public readings around the nation. She wrote:

I Militia
 I conscious militia
 You Mr. Exploiter....
 You spread propaganda
 About Grenada
 Through the media

I Militia say
 I conscious Militia say
 You can't leave us to suffer
 Is the heavy roller for you Mr. Exploiter
 Ah pick up me AK oppressor
 To fight you counter
 To free the worker
 To build Grenada
 I Militia will never surrender (Searle 1983, 109-110).

In the face of regional and international pressure spearheaded by the United States, women pledged their support and willingness to defend their revolution. US President Ronald Reagan had repeatedly commented that the new Grenada airport was being used as a military base. Susan Lake (pseudonym) of St. George's noted: "We must always be on the alert. We must defend our revolution, the free milk, free health care, free education, the road projects, and so on" (*New Jewel* 1983, 5). Aletta May* of the Prime Minister's Ministry called on the people to "Stand firm. We should

encourage other comrades to be alert and be vigilant. Comrades should be prepared to defend the revolution, to look out for all counter-revolutionaries and be on our guard. I am prepared to defend the revolution" (*New Jewel* 1983, 5).

Claire Steeples* gave her testimony about being in the People's Revolutionary Army (PRA) and receiving the first scholarship of the revolution. She said she had not been discriminated against because of her gender: "They [commanders] put us [she and her sister] in front during training sessions, to do as much as the guys did."²² She noticed that a number of soldiers had entered the army with literacy problems and decided to become involved in remedial education within the army. Courses were offered for those doing the School Leaving Certificate and O-Level exams. Even though she taught and worked in the armed forces, her education was not neglected. She proudly stated that she received the first scholarship of the revolution. The army funded her A-level education at the Institute for Further Education. She was responsible for counter-intelligence in the army. She gathered information on what was happening in the country and possible threats against the revolution. Her daily routine was to "change from school to army uniform, teaching, sentry duties and [participating in military] training as well".¹²

As a women's group, the NWO was always questioned on its stance on feminism. The organisation took the orthodox Marxist line and stated that "the NWO is not a feminist organization. We have taken the egalitarian approach. Women make up at least 50% of our people; they therefore make up half of Grenada's potential for development."¹³ They saw men as partners in the struggle, working side by side to overcome the forces that kept their society oppressed — poverty, illiteracy, dependency, underdevelopment and neo-colonialism. They sought to show that advancement could be attained through women's active participation and leadership in the revolution as a whole.

Women derived substantial benefits from the work of the NWO, the Women's Desk and the PRG. Phyllis Coard gave a

12 Claire Steeples (pseudonym), interview with author, St. George's, Grenada, 10 February 1999.

13 Ibid.

detailed account of what she saw as the most important benefits of the revolution to Grenadian women:

I would like to emphasise that the main benefit which the revolution in general and the NWO brought to women was a psychological one. It was the giving to women of respect from their society which led to a tremendous rise in self-respect among women The leaders of the revolution, especially Comrade Bishop, spoke frequently of values, about the respect to be accorded to women, then they backed it up with actions—the Maternity Leave law, the CPE, the primary health care, the distribution of free milk and the insistence by Comrade Austin that members of the People's Revolutionary Army support their children. In how many Caribbean countries would you find hundreds of women with no more than primary education confidently leading group meetings, as well as organising cultural activities, fundraising, field trips and many other activities? . . . This is why I said that the tremendous rise in self-respect, self-confidence and leadership skills were the main success of the NWO; though of course they were equally the successes of the revolution itself with regard to women.¹⁴

Rita Joseph, Claudette Pitt, Tessa Stroude and other women of the NWO executive shared Phyllis Coard's view. But what was the view of the ordinary women? How did they feel about the NWO and the work of revolution as it affected them? A seventy-two-year-old great-grandmother of Birchgrove had this to say: "I am with the revolution and the government one thousand and nine per cent. After the revolution we formed our women's group here in Birchgrove. Progress gave me new energy. I wanted to fight on for my grandchildren because I saw in it some future. Woman is real, real out now—we feeling more confident. We heart open now" (Hodge and Searle 1981, 48-49).

Twenty-two-year-old Catherine Mapp of L'Esterre village in Carriacou reported: "Above almost everything, the revolution has been a revolution for women. Women definitely see it as a change in their direction, something which they could benefit from directly. Free secondary education, free milk distribution, electricity at last in our village and the maternity leave law. These are the things which affect their daily life and make a real difference to them" (Searle

14 Rita Joseph, interview with author, 9 February 1999.

1982, 108). Anti-PRG views were not recorded in Grenada during the period of the revolution.

The NWO could boast of a number of achievements during the period 1979-1983. However, like all groups formed as an arm of a political party, the collapse of the party usually leads to the group's own as well. The NWO was no exception and as such failed to continue after 1983. The group had its shortcomings, and the PRG was hardly above criticism in its relations with women. There were Grenadian women who vehemently opposed the revolution and others opposed aspects of the process. The NWO itself noted its own shortcomings in its work plan for 1983-1989, which included political education, organisational and leadership training, community news boards and the NWO newsletter. It noted there were few members at the executive level able to effectively deal with political education and leadership training. Sufficient supervision at the national level was lacking, as was transport to take women to meetings, especially on the west coast, St. Patrick and St. Mark (NWO 1983, 8-9). The organisation also faced the problem of women not attending meetings since they had no one to take care of their children. There were programmes to develop daycare facilities, however, childcare was not provided during meetings and women were expected to come to meetings without their children. While the NWO was involved in vital work, it did not address other important areas like sports, legal reform and research into women's problems.

The NWO has been criticised for encouraging women to enter the field of male-dominated jobs, yet failing to re-evaluate the female-dominated fields. The NWO, it has been argued, should have given similar encouragement to boys and men to enter these fields e.g. home economics, early childhood education and secretarial studies. The organisation has also been criticised for not measuring up to its claim to be a mass organisation. It has been pointed out that it did not involve middle-class women's groups. It made no attempt to ally with the existing women's groups or encourage their participation, whether or not they had been supportive of the revolution. The older organisations went dormant during the PRG, losing their younger members and craft and nutrition teachers to the NWO. The only exception was the Airport Development Committee, which was organised and led by women (Porter 1986, 349). In answer to this criticism, Phyllis Coard noted:

I am not certain whether a women's organisation could have been built including all classes of women, without the upper middle-class women dominating the groups, simply because of their higher educational level and much greater self-confidence. Given that the revolution was a revolution of and for the working people, the NWO had to be an organisation in which the majority—working-class, peasant and lower middle class-women—led and benefitted the most. However, what I think the failure was not even to be aware that this would be a problem, and would cause serious hurt feelings and a sense of being excluded among the upper middle-class women who were, after all, part of the society too. Had I been aware of the problem at more than a superficial level, I would then have taken some form of action to reach out to them. As it was, I let my total preoccupation with building an organisation that could develop working-class women blind me to the fact that another section of women of the upper middle class largely felt marginalised. As president of the NWO from 1979 to 1983 I have to take responsibility for that.¹⁵

The NWO has been charged with being too aggressive in its rhetoric and proposing radical ideas such as marriage being outdated. Furthermore, certain crucial laws affecting women were not dealt with. For example, the sentence for rape remained at a maximum of three years, and restrictive laws against illegitimate children remained up to 1983.¹⁶ The organisation was further criticised for not confronting the issue of abuse of power and violence within the revolution. The NWO gave support to the involvement of women and youth in the armed forces (Antrobus 1984, 3). The revolution as whole has been criticised by women both inside and outside Grenada for the extension of violence in the society, the breaking up of families and the reduction of regular church-going during the period. Mary Jane* noted that the community clean-up was held on Sundays, but some of the older folks preferred to go to church, and they were "reported" by their own children. Older persons, who did not understand the revolutionary process or were opposed to it, were seen as being subversive. Mary Jane* also complained of children handling guns

15 Phyllis Coard interview with author, 16 February 1999.

16 Phyllis Coard interview.

such as AK-47s from an early age. She recalled seeing boys between eight and ten years blindfolded and putting guns together in the Grenville car park in St. Andrew.¹⁷ Mary Jane also claimed that, prior to the revolution, pregnancy outside of marriage was seen as shameful. During the revolution young girls were encouraged to have children, especially those who joined the militia and army. They were reportedly told they would produce the flowers of the revolution.¹⁸ She had risked imprisonment in the mid-1970s to sell the *New Jewel* newspaper; yet by 1983 she had reservations. She noted: "I was turned off when on the first anniversary of the revolution Daniel Ortega gave Maurice Bishop a gun from the freedom-loving people of Nicaragua to the freedom-loving people of Grenada. Guns meant death and destruction. I just stopped."¹⁹

Lucy Lace* complained of a lack of freedom of speech: "You could not say anything with a semblance of disagreement. You had to be careful what you said."²⁰ One woman noted that she did not get involved in the revolution because "It was a coup and it was not as popular as they tried to make it."²¹ Another claimed that "a Russian" viewed the St. George's harbour from her home. She claimed that the plan was for "the Russians to take over the area overlooking the harbour". She believed that the proposed international airport was really "a jumping-off point for the Russians to take over South America".²² This fell in line with the theory floated by some writers that Grenada was to be used by the Russians.

The NISTEP and corresponding CSDP faced problems, including not attracting enough volunteers willing to take over classes when the teachers went off to their training. Often at the Methodist school in St Andrew only three teachers were left to handle the children.²³

17 Beverley Steele, former resident tutor of the UWI Centre, Grenada, interview with author, 19 February 1999.

18 Mary Jane (pseudonym), interview with author, 22 February 1999.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Lucy Lace (pseudonym), interview with author, 24 February 1999.

22 Mary Theresa (pseudonym), 9 March 1999.

23 Mary Annie (pseudonym), interview with author, 26 March 1999.

While the PRG did take the placement of women in areas of decision-making further than the previous regime, it has still been criticised for not taking the process far enough. For example, there were no female majors, lieutenants or colonels in the army. Bernard Coard (Deputy Prime Minister of the People's Revolutionary Government and a member of the Central Committee) gives an explanation as to why this was the case. He noted that the under-representation of women in positions of power in the military was a global issue, since the army has "always been conceived of traditionally as a male preserve."²⁴ However, in relation to Grenada, he recalled that there was one woman in the armed wing of the NJM, the National Liberation Army (NLA), which had been in existence since 1973. He said: "She received exactly the same military training as the men. She was on par with them militarily in terms of skill and training. However, when the revolution came she branched out into other areas of work, non-military areas of work. Had she stayed in the military, she would have been one of the top commanders."²⁵ He further noted that the men who filled the positions as commanders in the PRA were members of the National Liberation Army. They had proved themselves through the years and attained senior positions in the army. He was of the opinion that over time some women would have risen to the top; but by 1983 none of them had.

The women who did hold decision-making posts in the PRG had the serious problem of balancing their work with their home life. In May 1982, Phyllis Coard, as chair of the Women's Committee of the NJM, noted the complaints of her colleagues and wrote a letter to the Political Bureau. The main problems identified were as follows:

The special problems of women with children are rarely if ever considered when fixing hours of study classes and committee or PCB (Parish Coordinating Bodies) meetings. When some women members raised the problems of having no one to leave their babies with at 5.00 a.m. or no one to get the children breakfast or ready for school, the attitude of many heads of the PCBs, committees and study groups has frequently been that "you just have to solve that problem". As a result, some women

24 Mary Jane interview.

25 Bernard Coard, interview with author, 17 August 2000.

members have been deemed “indisciplined” for missing meetings, others have taken serious risks with their children like leaving babies in the care of young children of ten or twelve years. Some have faced criticisms from the masses for “neglecting” their children.

The maternity leave law must be respected by the party. The experience over the past two years shows us that even some senior party comrades expect that women members will continue political work almost until she gives birth and will take on work again shortly afterwards. Furthermore, women with babies or young children should always be consulted before being directed to go abroad for the party, to ensure that arrangements can be made to look after their children.

The party should seek actively to change the attitude of party men to the questions of babysitting, child care, housework and should ensure that all fathers support their children equally, both financially and psychologically. The party should make male party members understand that it is their duty to spend equal time looking after their children, whether or not they live in the same house as the mother. Party men are *pressing* sisters to have babies for them. Yet, afterwards, they take little or no responsibility for them. All party men and women must share housework and baby care equally in order that both should have an equal opportunity to develop as party cadres. Otherwise, women party cadres will always be held back in their development . . . relative to what they are capable of (Phyllis Coard 1982).

At a meeting on 22 September 1982 the political bureau answered these complaints. It concluded that there was a lack of daycare centres and pre-primary schools. Men had shown a lack of concern and support for the women, and the women had developed an attitude of laziness and ill-discipline (People’s Revolutionary Government 1982). By July 1983 the matter reached the Central Committee, yet little was done to assist the women—and the chauvinistic attitude of the men remained unchallenged and unchanged. According to the Central Committee, the work of the Women’s Committee was weak, due to “deep petty bourgeois trends” in some of the members. However, concrete attempts were being made to solve the problems faced by women through the provision of daycare centres, kindergartens, pre-primary facilities,

and skills training. The Central Committee further noted, following standard Marxist rhetoric, that it “would not encourage weakness, or breed cynicism or put the party in the position of a privileged clique or encourage disunity between men and women in the party’s rank and file.” (Central Committee of the PRG 1983a).

It has been alleged that one of the flaws of the Revolution was that men within the PRG and NJM used their positions of power to elicit sexual favours from women. Byron Campbell, Chairman of the National Transport Service (NTS), claimed that some women were penalised for not acquiescing. He presented evidence of at least one woman who was accepted to study in Bulgaria, but was refused permission because she refused the sexual advances of a member of the PRG. He admitted: “We accuse the Gairy regime, but we have to be honest with ourselves. This happened to some extent during the revolution. It may not have been widespread, but there were incidences of it happening.”²⁶

In general, Marxist ideology does not deal with gender relations. Sheila Rowbotham noted that: “Marx’s thought could be applied by women to reveal and illuminate aspects of their oppression, but in his work, women’s relations to men and women’s capacity to shape society and culture are extrinsic. Although Marx was formally committed to the legal emancipation of women and to their right to work, his intellectual passion was not directed towards the relations between men and women, but towards class” (Rowbotham 1992, 141).

Frederick Engels, in his seminal Marxist work *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, did not shed much light on the issue either. While he saw women’s subordination as being linked to certain social processes, along with biological differences, he did not address relations between men and women. He stated that women’s emancipation could only take place when their participation in social production had increased, and domestic work claimed only an insignificant amount of their time. He did not say whether they could obtain this with the support of men. Within the Grenadian context, the Central Committee followed orthodox Marxist doctrine, which did not provide them with a blueprint for more equitable gender relations. In spite of the attempts of the Political Bureau and the Central Committee to sweep the problem

26 Byron Campbell, NTS chairman (1979-1983), interview with author, 30 June 2000.

under the carpet, it was a very real one and remained a thorn in the side of the regime until its collapse. Two of the women in positions of power explained how they coped. Tessa Stroude noted:

Every day of the week there was something to do (NWO meeting, militia, selling of party papers, community work and party meetings). You hardly had enough time to yourself. We were doing it because we were committed to a cause and we were doing what was best for a cause and we were doing what was best for the country. You found ways and means to continue family life but it was difficult.²⁷

She recalled taking the children with her to do party work:

I used to take the children with me. As NWO organiser I used to do spot checks. I would go up to the country and I took the children in the back of the car with me . . . As party members we had (herself and her husband, Lt. Chris Stroude) to sell the party paper on Saturdays. We would make it a family thing. We would sell the paper together and take the children with us for the walk. On Sunday morning, also compulsory for us was to go to a community and do community work. We took the children. The children enjoyed it. They had fun, they could play and it was good for them too, to understand the concept of community. In the evening (Sunday) we took the children to the beach.²⁸

Another such couple, the Pitts, called in babysitters: "They did the work of mother and father for us."²⁹ Claudette Pitt recalled the "serious debates" in the party on the issue, and that the men took it "chauvinistically".

The end of the revolution

The remainder of this paper will examine the role of women in the collapse of the revolution. Some of the women within the PRG and NJM agreed to the proposal for joint leadership, which led to the demise of the Revolution. These discussions were held in mid-September 1983. The proposal for joint leadership was the culmination of a year's worth of discussions on methods to enhance the "application of a Leninist standard of discipline, consistency,

27 Stroude interview.

28 Ibid.

29 Claudette Pitt interview, 27 February 1999.

and seriousness" within the Party and the Government. The members of the Central Committee who proposed joint leadership were of the opinion that little or nothing had been done towards the "consolidation of a Leninist vanguard". Joint leadership was an attempt to combine Bishop's and Coard's strengths. Bishop would concentrate on working among the masses, with a focus on propaganda, production, and the organs of democracy; militia mobilisation; and regional and international affairs; while Coard would concentrate on party organisational development, strategy and tactics (Central Committee of the PRG 1983b).

The Central Committee was divided on the issue; while the majority agreed, George Louison, Unison Whiteman and Fitzroy Bain disagreed. Bishop felt it was a vote of no confidence against him. Phyllis Coard, as the only female on the Central Committee, agreed with the idea "not only for a short term, but on the long term basis". In retrospect, she says:

I had mixed feelings. On one hand it was necessary with the amount of work the revolution had undertaken. Maurice became exhausted; he had too much on his plate. It was done based on their strengths. Bernard was not on the Central Committee at the time. It was embarrassing for me. I did not wish to be seen as pushing my husband. It was a difficult situation for me. I represented the women in the party. I had to take the position of what the other women would have wanted, not a personal position. They wanted joint leadership. They were totally frustrated. Women spoke of resigning from the party. Therefore I voted for joint leadership on the 16th September.³⁰

While the Central Committee had agreed to joint leadership, the issue was taken before the General Meeting of the NJM on 25 September 1983 for a final decision. Here, some party women voiced their opinions. It can be seen from their responses that the failure to resolve their problems was intricately tied to what was viewed as the weakness of the party as a whole. It was disappointing to them, that by 25 September 1983, Bishop was still hesitant in implementing joint leadership, the sole strategy in their view to deal with the problems of the Party and to push the revolution forward. Edlyn Lambert expressed her shock and

30 Phyllis Coard interview, 16 February 1999.

disappointment at Bishop's attitude to the decisions of the CC and to "democratic centralism and free, frank and honest criticism". She reminded Bishop that in May 1983 he had called on every party member to walk the extra mile. She then asked, "How can we walk the extra mile if you don't set the pace for us?" She asked him to think of the many lives that would be lost if the party did not come out of the crisis so the revolution would move forward.

Claudette Pitt reminded Bishop that, in a weekend party seminar, he had said that democratic centralism was a norm of party life. She expressed her shock to hear his position and his unwillingness in practice to accept the Central Committee's decision on joint leadership, and reminded him that in the years before the revolution, he had always singled out Coard for praise for his hard work, energy and foresight. Loraine Lewis noted that the NJM's main weakness was its members' failure to be firm. Faye Thompson noted that Bishop's behaviour was unexpected and rude. Maureen St. Bernard noted that Bishop's problem was that he did not mingle with the rank and file of the party and that was why he could not understand the changes that were taking place within it. Murie Francois called on Bishop to accept the criticism (New Jewel Movement 1983).

Bishop agreed to joint leadership after this meeting on 25 September 1983. On his return from a trip to Eastern Europe, however, he reconsidered. He allegedly spread a rumour that Phyllis and Bernard Coard were trying to kill him, and was placed under house arrest. There is a continuing argument about whether or not Bishop actually spread the rumour. It has been argued that he did it to discredit the Coards in the eyes of the Grenadian public. By so doing he would neutralise the effectiveness of any perceived threat from Coard to his leadership. It has also been argued that the Coards used the rumour as a pretext to have Bishop arrested and make it easier for them to seize leadership of the government. While negotiations were still being held between Bishop and the Central Committee, the Grenadian public took matters into their own hands and staged demonstrations in St. George's and Grenville. They had gotten wind of the conflict brewing in the government. They had heard disjointed bits of information about the proposed joint leadership, the alleged threats to kill Bishop, and his house arrest. The demonstrators demanded that the government give a statement

on the precise nature of the disagreement. Members of the public eventually stormed Bishop's House (Mount Wheldale) and took him to Fort Rupert, where he and a number of colleagues were killed. One woman from St. Andrew described her involvement in the demonstrations. She said she made placards in the back of her shop. On 18 October 1983 the demonstrators blocked the runway of Pearls Airport "with barrels and stones". As early as two o'clock on the Wednesday morning (19 October) people left Grenville, and commandeered every vehicle they could find to take them to St. George's to free their "Comrade Leader" (Bishop).³¹

Phyllis Coard was convinced that Bishop had spread the rumour and it made her realise how strongly opposed he was to joint leadership. She said she and her husband felt threatened on 19 October. On freeing Bishop from his house, which was in close proximity to the Coards', the angry crowd had threatened: "We coming back for you all." She sent her children to Mt. Mortiz and she and Bernard went to Fort Frederick. She said that they felt that the best thing to do was to leave the island until everything had simmered down.³²

Claudette Pitt, in retrospect, mused that perhaps joint leadership had been the wrong approach to solving the issues in the party. However, she claimed that those who instilled the fear of losing power in Maurice Bishop were the ones responsible for his death. She argued:

Maurice did not have the qualities to be leader. Decisions had to be made and you could not please everybody. Maurice tried to do that. Bernard was the party organiser. Most of the projects of the revolution were created and started by him....Any problem anyone had, you went to Bernard. If you went to Maurice, he would say, Go to Bernard. Dynamism and charisma are not the only qualities for leadership. This goes back to cultism. There were some who created confusion in his [Maurice's] mind. I blame those who did so for his death.³³

While she was vehemently opposed to the killing of Bishop, Claudette Pitt tried to analyse why it happened, and the possible thoughts in the minds of his killers. She explained: "They were so

31 Mary Jane interview, 27 February 1999.

32 Phyllis Coard interview.

33 Ibid.

mad, disappointed and confused. They had no life. Their whole life was dedicated to the revolution. They felt totally disappointed by October 19. Maurice had betrayed them."³⁴

Faye Thompson further described the mood of some party members on hearing of Bishop's failure to comply with joint leadership. She noted:

That was the utmost betrayal as a party member. That was what incensed people . . . Coming out of the September 25 meeting, everyone that was present was on such a high, because you thought that you had thrashed it out. People had spoken frankly . . . and now for the first time we are on the same wavelength, we are on the same page, reading the same book and we could move forward.³⁵

Thompson felt that Fort Rupert, as a military installation, should not have been overrun by civilians. Yet, she noted, there was absolutely no justification for the killings. She did give an idea of the mood on the fort on that fateful day and from her recollections it seemed as though the battle lines had been drawn. She recalled:

It was after the release of Maurice we took the decision to put the guns in the tunnel (safe spot on Fort Rupert). We spent most of the morning doing that, up until the point when the masses arrived. That was when the soldiers in charge of the fort were arrested and caged. It shows you, then, that the party lines were drawn. As party members, there were nineteen of us. We were told: "Wait there and we will deal with you." From there [the room into which they were ordered], we saw people moving with guns that had been retrieved from the tunnel. Vincent Noel was down on the bottom landing saying, "All those with militia training, come forward and arm yourself because we have some hooligans to deal with on Fort Frederick [where Coard, Austin and other members of the PRG had congregated]."³⁶

Nancy Lou* was with Maurice Bishop and Jacqueline Creft in their last hour and witnessed the carnage at Fort Rupert. She recalled:

34 Faye Thompson, interview with author, 24 August 2000.

35 Ibid.

36 Nancy Lou (pseudonym), interview with author, 12 March 1999.

I was making cups of coffee. I gave the first to Maurice but he said, "Give it to St Paul." Matron Grant, Senator, Norris Bain's wife, Marcelle Belmar's mother, Merle Hodge, Chris Stroude, Porgie Cherubim, Avis and Jackie were in the room. Jackie said, "I don't like this. I am scared. I know these guys go do something stupid." Avis said, "I never see so much people in one place." Then there was a loud explosion. Something pushed me against a wall, physically lifted me. When I looked, Avis was totally dismantled. There were fatty tissues floating in blood and body fluid. Where I was, heavy gunfire was hitting the wall. If I got up to run I would get hit. I decided to stay right there. Matron Grant was praying, "Stop the hands of the slaughterers, Jesus." Maurice said, "See where the firing is coming from." I lost it. I said to myself, If I have to die, let me die with no pain. I was about to stand up; Senator threw himself at me and locked my neck. Porgie said, "I will try to see if there is anything I could do." He called out, "Languaigne, hold your fire, there are many injured people in here." We heard the reply: "Drop your fu****g guns and come out with your hands in the air." Porgie said: "There is no one with guns in here." The threat was repeated. Maurice said, "Let the women and children go." I was covered in blood. I could not lift my right hand; a bullet had hit me. I felt like sticks were poking me in my side. Jackie Creft held on to my pants, what was left of my jeans. Gemma Belmar was still breathing even though there was a bullet straight through her head. Vincent Noel was lying in the veranda. He said, "Sister Ann, help me, help me." I proceeded to go down the steps. Jackie held on to my sleeve. Someone said, "Look at Jackie Creft. Don't let the mother %\$#& get away." I got to the hospital gate.³⁷

Maurice Bishop, Jacqueline Creft, Unison Whiteman and five others (trade union leaders and supporters of the revolution) were marched to the parade square at the upper level of the fort and executed. Within a week, on 25 October 1983, United States and Caribbean forces invaded Grenada to try to restore order and return the island to a democratic system of government.

The testimonies of three women shed some light on what happened in the aftermath of the killings. Lady Esmail Scoon, wife of the Governor General, Paul Scoon, recounted her night of horror at Government House:

37 Lady Esmail Scoon, interview with author, 17 March 1999.

They [PRA] were shooting at the building (Government House). It was coming from Richmond Hill. We were lying on the dining room floor. There were US soldiers on the compound of Government House. PRA armoured cars were coming through the gate from St Paul's side during the night about 8.00 p.m. A helicopter flew over and blew it up. That was frightening. I wept bitterly. At eight the next morning sixty marines walked with us to Queen's Park. We passed the back way, Mt. Royal to River Road, down the steps. There were shots coming from down the steps. I felt I would get one of the bullets. When we got to River Road, the people said, "Sir Paul, we behind you. God bless you."³⁸

Mary Louise*, a former NWO executive member, recalled her experience of 19 October 1983:

I had lost everything. All I had was the clothes on my back . . . At Point Salines we used the bathroom at night. It was open and you had to climb up to it. To bathe, a pipe ran overhead with a hose. Four of us had to bathe together, the soldier said, "Wet" and he opened the water, then he closed it and said, "Soap", then "Rinse". . . . In prison, Lana McPhail's parents found out where we were and sent us three panties and a toothbrush. We shared the panties and this one toothbrush. . . . Phyllis and the men were kept in small box-like cells and every morning at about 4 a.m. the soldiers would beat the cells with pieces of wood and iron.³⁹

Claire Steeples*, the third informant, recalled her experience in the military, defending her country in the wake of the foreign invasion:

At home, I dressed in my uniform and took my gold chain and my school ring, the only two pieces of jewellery I had, and gave them to my mother and said if anything happens to me, Take care of my boys and give each of them these. [She has twin boys]. When I remember this, I get very emotional because I was willing my children to my parents.⁴⁰

She recalled the disappointment they had felt that Cuba had not come to the rescue. She said:

38 Mary Louise (pseudonym), interview with author, 9 February 1999.

39 Claire Steeples (pseudonym) interview, 10 February 1999.

40 Ibid.

Being in St. George's cemetery, according to military training, our formation was poor and disorganised. We could easily get killed. I was lying on a Syrian grave and I felt a oneness with that grave. On the Park Bridge there was absolutely no cover. We saw F16s and we thought that they were MIGs. We were disappointed. We expected help from Cuba. We would fight for some time and they would come and assist us. The other female soldiers were freaking out and crying and when I looked around after a while, I was the only female—the rest had gone home.⁴¹

She recalled the brutishness of military training and the effect it had on the psyche: "As a soldier, one learned who the enemy is and they become not a person who has ideas and thoughts and could reason, but a mere ant that could be crushed. During the invasion, I wanted so much to kill a Yankee soldier, to slit his throat and feel the knife cutting into his flesh. It is amazing what war can do to you."⁴² She was interrogated by US soldiers and then set free.

In the aftermath of the US invasion, eighteen people, including Phyllis Coard, were accused of the murder of Maurice Bishop, his cabinet ministers and others. A trial later ensued in which, among others, seven female witnesses, including the wife of Norris Bain and the mother of Gemma Belmar, who died, gave evidence about when they last saw their loved ones. Anne Bain recalled: "Norris was flat on the floor in front of me. I was clutching his belt and praying . . . As we were leaving, I looked back and saw Norris for the last time. He was in a line of people coming from the room with their hands up" (*The Grenada Newsletter* 1986, 2). Sylvia Belmar, mother of Gemma, recalled going from the Fort to the hospital, where her daughter had been taken by schoolmates. There she saw Gemma bleeding from a wound to her head and her school uniform and sneakers soaked in blood.⁴³

Seventeen of the accused were convicted, including Phyllis Coard, and were sentenced to be hanged. In 1992, a mercy committee met to decide on their fate and they were granted life imprisonment. Between 1992 and 2009 they filed several motions with the High Court, the Court of Appeal and the Privy Council. In

41 Ibid.

42 "Maurice Bishop Murder Trial", *The Grenada Newsletter*, 17 May 1986, p.2.

43 Tessa Stroude interview.

2001, Phyllis Coard was released for medical reasons. All the other detainees were released between June 2007 and September 2009.

How did the women whose husbands were in jail cope in the immediate post-revolution era? Tessa Stroude, wife of Lieutenant Chris Stroude, noted:

I think what helped us wives is that we stuck together through everything. We used to go out together. We used to organise surprise birthday parties for each other. We were always together discussing each other's problems.⁴⁴

As far as keeping her family together, she continued:

Chris, as father, was always in contact with his children. He wrote them every month. He was the one that explained puberty to them. I didn't have to do those things. I do not make any decisions about the children without consulting him.⁴⁵

Valerie Gordon, who would become the wife of Major Leon Cornwall, said that time was extremely difficult. She had been married less than five years and her husband was "violently extracted without notice". She had to support her husband and two children, aged just three and one, financially and emotionally. She said what kept her going was "a deep faith in God, and the sisterhood" helped her to make it through.⁴⁶

Most Grenadians have been close-mouthed about the events surrounding 19-25 October 1983. These women have chosen to let their voices be heard. It is a significant breakthrough in the prolonged silence.

The majority of women in the higher echelons of power in the People's Revolutionary Government were in favour of joint leadership as a means of solving the problems of the government, as were their male counterparts. These women would have viewed Maurice Bishop's failure to adhere to this policy as a betrayal of the wishes of the Central Committee and the membership of the party (NJM). Despite this betrayal, they would not have been in favour of his assassination and that of other colleagues.

44 Ibid.

45

The events of October 19 would have plunged Grenada into a malaise of fear, uncertainty and skepticism. Yet, some women chose to defend their country against invasion by a super power—the United States. They held the belief that Grenada’s situation, as grim as it was, could have been settled internally and there was no need for the intervention of an external power that was profoundly anti-revolutionary.

Empowerment during the revolution

Were Grenadian women “empowered” in the period 1979 to 1983? Did the revolutionary process transform their lives? Under the Eric Gairy regime, some women were placed in positions of power within the government. The PRG took the process further. However, how much further the process was taken can be questioned. Grenada was on par with Barbados in this period in terms of the number of women in the highest echelon of power (O’Brien and Duncan 1983, 50-52). There were four women in the senate between 1976 and 1981. Three served on the Barbados House of Assembly between 1976 and 1983. There were two ministers between 1976 and 1981. However, Dominica and Montserrat fell behind (Honeychurch 1984; Shepherd 1999, 183-184). Between 1979 and 1983 there were two women in the highest echelon of power in Dominica – the prime minister and a minister of government. Between 1979 and 1983 Montserrat had one female minister of government. With regard to the number of permanent secretaries in government ministries, Grenada ranked among the best in the region. Yet it can be argued that in spite of its socialist revolution, the positions of power held by women in Grenada were of the “kitchen cabinet” type. Grenadian women were allowed to head ministries like education and women’s affairs. So while the revolution may have increased the number of women in positions of power, the type of portfolios they held remained unchanged. The woman as minister was limited to her traditional role as social worker and teacher.

Although the PRG passed legislation mandating equal pay for equal work, evidence from estates such as Douglaston and Westerhall showed that up to 1983, men were still paid more than women. The PRG issued the Maternity Leave Law in 1980. Oral evidence has established that rank-and-file Grenadian women benefitted. However, Phyllis Coard noted that women in the party

were expected to work immediately after delivering their babies. When confronted with the contradictions, the Central Committee took a doctrinaire stance that did not deal with the issue at hand.

The shortcomings of the policies of the PRG and the work of the NWO and the Women's Desk beg the question whether Marxist ideology, in its strictest sense, superimposed onto a Grenadian context, had worked. Could Marxist ideas of a classless society work in Grenada or any Caribbean territory with its inherent chauvinist and machismo influences? Marxist ideology did not advocate the equality of women as a priority. If Grenadian women had demanded it, would it have been given to them in this relatively short period (1979 to 1983)? Grenadian women would have had to experience a revolution within a revolution to address their needs.

The argument rages on as to whether or not socialism, rather than capitalism, was instrumental in enhancing the conditions of women. According to Sheila Rowbotham:

Marx was primarily concerned with the social consequences of class antagonism, not conflict between men and women. By the time he wrote *Capital* he concentrated on exploitation and alienation of the worker who sells his or her capacity to labor to the owner of capital, who gives only part back in the form of wages. Though this covers the situation of the working-class women as a wage earner, it does not explore the position of women working in the family, the sexual relations between men and women, our relationships to our bodies. In *Capital* Marx takes for granted the necessity of women's labour in maintaining and reproducing wage earners, but he does not examine this in any detail or discuss its implications for women's consciousness (Rowbotham 1974, xxiv).

The failure of Marxism to deal with this issue manifested itself, in the Grenadian context, in strained relations between men and women in the PRG and the NJM. The problems included the responsibility for childcare and household chores devolving largely on women when both sexes had to attend meetings or functions. Also, women within the party were not expected to take maternity leave. The concern of the revolutionary leadership to end women's confinement to traditional roles too often seemed limited to making their labour available to the regime. Women became as free as men

to work outside the home, while men remained free from work within it (MacKinnon 1982, 523).

The revolution of 1979 attained victories for women in the areas of education, health, housing and representation in government. Yet there were shortcomings, such as limited equal work for equal pay, problems of implementation of maternity leave for NJM members, and the absence of females in positions of power in the army. It would be fair to say that the transformation was not complete.

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Las Mujeres en la Revolución de Granada, 1979-1983

Nicole Phillip-Dowe

Este artículo expone las vidas, los sentimientos, las expresiones y los puntos de vista de las mujeres granadinas que participaron en la Revolución, desde las que ocupaban el nivel más alto en el Gobierno Revolucionario del Pueblo hasta las que formaban las tropas. Analiza la Organización Nacional de la Mujer y los programas del Gobierno Revolucionario del Pueblo pertinentes a las mujeres, la forma en que trataron de responder a las necesidades de las mujeres granadinas en ese momento, y examina si la revolución socialista realmente empoderó a las mujeres de esta pequeña nación caribeña.

Les Femmes dans la Révolution Grenadienne, 1979-1983

Cet article est une exposition de la vie, les sentiments, les expressions et les opinions des femmes grenadiennes qui ont participé à la Révolution, allant de celles qui étaient aux plus hautes sphères du Gouvernement révolutionnaire populaire aux simples membres. L'article fournit une analyse de l'Organisation nationale des femmes et des programmes du Gouvernement révolutionnaire populaire qui concernaient les femmes. Aussi, il considère comment on a cherché à répondre aux besoins des femmes grenadiennes à l'époque; et si la révolution socialiste a vraiment valorisé les femmes de cette petite nation des Caraïbes.

political accountability, as well as reparations for slavery, Native American extermination, and the Armenian genocide.

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